Running Up That Hill

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Running Up That Hill

by TheHatterTheory

Summary

In the wake of a destroyed life, Kagome must find a way to pick up the pieces and carry on.
An Open Prison

Chapter Notes

READ THIS: I've given this the highest rating for a reason. This story contains ultra violence and graphic depictions and ideas. There are triggers such as rape, although for all of our sakes, I'm not going into minute details about it. However, this is not going to start as a happy fanfiction, all happiness comes much, much later. I'm torturing the characters emotionally (and in some cases, physically). If this bothers you, please do not continue reading. If writers are God, I would not blame the characters for becoming atheists. Or satanic. (This is a serious statement, take it as such.)

That being said (Disclaimer), this is all Placebo's fault. I do not own Placebo or their song/lyrics. I do not own Inu Yasha or the characters borrowed from it.

It had taken one instant for the world to turn upside down and for everything she loved to be warped and destroyed. Naraku had finally found a way to take her part of the jewel from her, in the guise of the dying Kagura.

She should have known, but the wind witch had been keening in pain, unaware even then what her part to play in the tragedy was. And as Kagome had knelt beside her, hoping to give her some sort of aid after the wind witch had sacrificed herself to protect them from her pseudo brother. Quicker than she could blink, Naraku had emerged from her, the dying body of the witch morphing to his own. He had been dazzled by his own ingenuity when boasting of it later, putting a piece of himself in her as he filled her with miasma. Just enough to make her a clone and destroy any physical trace of her existence after making her suffer.

He had snatched the vial, snapping the fragile chain that held two shards. It had been almost anticlimactic. No big battle, no declarations. Just the form zipping into the sky, his mocking laughter lingering in their ears. Shock from the loss of the jewel and the sacrilegious use of the dying woman's body had numbed her for days.

Then darkness had descended on her homeland, stretching forth it's poisonous claws with a quickness that frightened her. Nothing withstood the taint that gripped the land. Humans were slaughtered, and youkai destroyed.

She tried not to think about Inu Yasha being so completely obliterated, stolen from the land of the living. The ferocity and joy in Naraku's eyes as he had pulled the hanyou apart had broken something in Kagome. Her will gone, she felt like a twitching, hunted rabbit, marked as nothing more than prey.

She had no illusions. Naraku had let her live for a reason, let her run from him with an express purpose in his sickened madness. To torture her. After all, he hated her more than anyone, except maybe Kikyo. And letting her live, knowing the image of the murdered hanyou would never erase itself, could there be any worse punishment for fighting him?

He had done the same for Sango. Miroku lived in a cage in his fortress, his hands, once the cause for so much mischief, were now shattered and broken. Kohaku lived in a worse state, one that didn't bear contemplating. Once he had found he couldn't taint the boy's shard, or touch it for that matter,
he had decided to torture the boy into tainting it himself. When it hadn't worked, he had only doubled his efforts.

Shippou alone had escaped, running when Kagome had commanded him to. She only hoped he had obeyed her command and managed to find the youkai she had sent him to. She hoped Kirara had found him and helped keep him safe. Hoped he was alive. She clutched Tessaiga to her chest, her knuckles white. She wasn't even sure she could let go of it anymore, her grip tightening just when she thought she couldn't press the wood any deeper into her palms.

She and Sango were only marginally safer in the world than they had been in Naraku's compound. Youkai were being hunted now, as well as humans. Youkai generally left them alone, recognizing them for what they were. A gifted miko and a taijiya. But from the human men, there was no such recognition.

Bandits and rogue samurai took advantage of the chaos to pillage and rape and burn everything to the ground. What Naraku didn't destroy, they did. Unfortunately, while they could physically fight the men, their talents did little to help them. And it was a laughable attempt against so many. Even Sango's weapons proved ineffective.

Shuddering, she tried not to vomit at the memory of being held by one band of bandits before she and Sango had escaped, although neither had emerged from that camp unscathed. The hope of seeing Shippou pushed her forward. Of the only youkai she knew could help. She prayed to every god she knew, hoped for her land to find it's way out of this season of death.

Night turned to day, pausing only for water and to eat the smoked meat they had stolen from the bandit camp as they snuck away. Her split lip still bled when she moved her mouth to eat or drink water. Pushing on, they didn't even pause for rest, both determined to reach their goal. Covering miles in the day, they paused twice more for water, and at night they ate once more, only to carry on. Sleep would be impossible anyway. Neither dared to risk nightmares of their loved ones being tortured, or the still close memory of the foul smelling men they had been forced under.

Three days passed in this manner, pushing themselves harder and harder. Neither commented as their supply of smoked meat dwindled and their minds grew more brittle from lack of sleep. It was an unspoken agreement to ignore one another's stilted movements instead of inquiring. Both knew what had caused them. Words of encouragement and comfort also went unvoiced, if they were even thought at all. Both were incapable of speech.

On the third day, Kagome stopped and turned, staring around wildly when she heard Shippou's voice calling out to her, crying. Seeing nothing, she feared her emotions had finally gotten the better of her, or perhaps her lack of sleep was making her mind play tricks on her. She knew they were close to his home. She could feel the energy thrumming through the land, one of the few pure energies left, although the thought of his energy being pure would have been laughable before.

But a cloud and the firecat descended, and Shippou jumped the last several feet to the ground and ran to Kagome, crying as he took in her ragged form. Sango's face was a mass of bruising, and she knew her own wasn't any better. Their bodies were in even worse shape, and she was grateful their clothing hid the reminders of their ordeal from the kit.

"Momma, what happened?" Shippou cried, his arms tight around her legs as he buried his face in her torn and bloodied hakama. She barely felt it as he agitated the half healed scrapes or the myriad bruises covering her skin. The feel of his arms was enough to assure her that her mind hadn't broken and the keening sobs coming from his throat enough to confirm it was not a dream.

She looked up into the face of the daiyoukai of the west. He said nothing, and his gaze was as cold
and impassive as she had ever seen it. There was no warmth in his eyes, but no censure either.

"Naraku has won." She presented the sword to him, her actions telling him all he needed to know of his brother. Her stilted movements and the scents clinging to her told him even more. She forcibly relaxed her fingers, hearing them pop as her grip loosened and the digits uncurled from around the handle and scabbard.

"Foolish," He rumbled, taking the sword and adding it to the it's twin on his belt. Sango collapsed, the modicum of relief at seeing Kirara and Shippou enough to trip her mind enough to give into the exhaustion. The firecat made plaintive noises as she nudged her owner, crimson eyes filled with worry.

Kagome had no such luxury. She trembled as the youkai lord studied her.

"Naraku did not do this," he stated simply.

"Bandits," She intoned, her voice devoid in inflection.

"How many days have you traveled?"

"Three, nonstop from the east. Bandits have taken over the area, razing everything to the ground."

"Kit," Sesshoumaru ordered sharply. Shippou ceased his sobbing and looked to the youkai, eyes wide in fear, wondering if the daiyoukai would leave them.

"Help your mother." He moved to Sango and touched her only long enough to throw her over the firecat, who seemed none too pleased by his rough treatment, but too grateful to be bearing his mistress to complain. Shippou helped her onto the cloud and bounced into her lap, ignorant of the pain he was inflicting on her abused form as he clutched at her, sobbing noisily.

And like that, they were heading to his home, one of the few untouched places in a world gone awry.

The kit's arrival on a firecat had been unexpected, one that had been the beginning of many such events that upset the balance of his world. A harbinger of the things to come, the pup had explained the loss of the jewel and the capture of the adults he traveled with. After a nights rest, they had set out in search of his mother and her friends well over a moon before.

He had not expected to find them so close to his lands. After a week he had not expected to find them alive. But he knew the woman's aura, would not forget the unique energy she seemed to emit wherever she went. And when he felt it tugging at his senses in the east, he had followed.

Nothing but burning and pillaging had met him. But her trail continued, looping back to the west, moving into his lands.

To find her and the slayer in such a state... Naraku's scent was just barely there beneath the stench of a dozen unwashed bodies, not to mention the pervasive sense of shame and hopelessness the two women exuded from every pore.

He looked to the kit and his mother and while the kit sobbed into her stomach, holding onto her as if she'd disappear, the miko was flat. Blank. He remembered their previous meetings. She had been animated. Happy, angry, determined, but always overly emotional. Hollow eyes gazed at nothing, and her face never twitched, though he supposed the bruising was partially to blame.
It was not unexpected. The stench of her abuse tore at him, and though he had grown used to the mephitis of battle, the fetid odor of rape still pressed at him, tearing at his control. Her own exhaustion was more than evident, and she looked ready to shatter beneath the least force. She had traveled for three days, nonstop, and he believed her.

Thinking it a kindness, with a move so quick the kitsune could barely comprehend, he clipped her on the back of her skull, watching her slump forward onto the kit.

"Why'd you do that?" The red haired child demanded angrily through tears, sharp little teeth bared at the daiyoukai in anger.

"Her body is in great pain, so much so that her own mind has blocked it. She needs sleep or she will harm herself further." It was half of the truth anyway. The kit had seen much in his young years. Despite his normal apathy, he felt the boy should be spared the whole of it. In all honesty, the pervasive shame clinging to her was spiking along his senses and provoking his temper, and he refused to relinquish control to his instincts. Now that she was unconscious, the scents dulled, although they did not disappear completely.

They made it to the citadel by nightfall, and Sesshoumaru left the two women in the hands of the healers. Their bodies could be healed, although it was not beyond possibility that there could be permanent damage. Their minds however...

Kagome and Sango had both escaped Naraku's lair. They knew the layout, at least he hoped. They knew Naraku. And despite their currently broken bodies and minds, if their spirits could be roused from the pits they currently resided in, he was sure both could be a weapon. Especially the miko. She could sense the jewel, which made her the ideal tracker for the hanyou. But more than that, despite the blankness in her eyes and the shame and despair that twisted her scent into something oppressive, he could practically taste the power still emanating from within her.

When Kagome finally woke, she blinked against the too bright light filtering into the room. Confused, she began to move, panicking when she didn't recognize the room she had been sleeping in. Then pain lanced through every muscle in her body, and she remembered that she was no longer with the bandits. Although where she was remained a question.

"You have awakened," A voice confirmed gently. Kagome jerked back as if physically struck, finally seeing the youkai sitting next to her. Concerned brown eyes stared down at her from a smooth round face framed by unruly, dark curls. Only the tips of pointed ears peeking through the curls and his aura gave him away as youkai.

"Have no fear, I cannot harm you," He intoned. Again he cursed his lord. A female healer would have been much better suited for this situation. But Sesshoumaru had commanded him, in no uncertain terms, that he could and would do it.

"Who-where?" She trembled so viciously the words seemed to the chatter from between her teeth.

"I am Tenka, Lady Kagome. And I am one of the mujin," He said, his voice still gentle, still quiet, as if speaking to an injured animal. Fear spiked the scents in the room, and he began to worry that she would re-injure herself, undoing all of the work he had done to try and heal her.

"Mu-mujin?" She croaked, confused.

"I am a kangan."

It took several moments for the word to register. A eunuch. Unmanned.
And the reasons why one would be punished in such a manner made her crawl back from him, pushing herself further from the bed. He stayed still as he watched her, making no move to reach for her or stop her retreat.

"I was once a healer, and simply that. But in times of war, one does what one must. I carried messages for a man that had earned my respect. When I was caught, I lost it to torture," He explained, his tone never changing despite the personal turmoil he felt at admitting such a thing to a stranger.

It was the nicest way he could think to say something so awful. But when the miko had been brought to him, she had been a mess. He knew the marks of rape, and there was no mistaking the girl had been used brutally and in every way possible. Bruises in the shape of hands had layered over one another, and the torn flesh had almost been too much to bear. She had been used. And not just for rape. The miko had been beaten in ways he had been afraid were beyond healing. It was only by some miracle that her body was responding so readily to the combined techniques of the healers within the citadel.

Perhaps his own story would not seem so frightening or sad in the face of her recent trials.

"Lady Kagome, do you know where you are?"

Her head shook and she brought the blanket around her tightly.

"You are in Lord Sesshoumaru's home. These are the healing quarters. The woman brought with you woke yesterday. Your son has been anxious to see you, but under the circumstances-" He didn't even finish the sentence. Even with sleeping draught that would have given the strongest of youkai dreamless sleep, her pain had burned through and nightmares had made themselves known in the tang of tears and screams.

Only an older healer, one gifted in mind magics, had been able to mitigate even a fraction of the pain. And the old woman had cried as she tried to force Kagome into a deeper sleep.

"How long?" She finally croaked. Her split lip had healed, by her throat and lips felt dry, and her tongue felt as if had swollen to three times it's normal size.

"Nine days. Part of it was induced, so your body would have more time to heal. After your escape, you pushed it too hard. We had to keep you sedated," He answered.

Kagome nodded.

"Water?" She rasped, suddenly self conscious. Despite the man's admission, he knew everything about her. Could probably make a time line of what had been done to her by the wounds he had been forced to heal.

"Yes, and there's some broth as well. Lord Sesshoumaru would like to speak to you, when you're feeling up to it."

The mention of the daiyoukai made Kagome's already weak hands tremble even more violently as she accepted the cup of cool water. Half of it splashed on the blanket before it even made it to her lips. Sudden overwhelming panic made it hard to swallow, even though she knew it would help.

"It doesn't have to be today Lady Kagome," Tenka assured her. "But your companion and your son would both like to see you, if that is alright."

"Yes, I would like that, very much," Kagome whispered, her voice incapable of anything louder. He
nodded and spooned her broth gently, his heart breaking as her eyes became vacant once more, receding back into the sightless gaze he had come to see too often as of late.

"She needs time to adjust," Tenka reported to his lord. Sesshoumaru would look haggard if he were capable of it. As it was, he wasn't. But he felt it. Small wonder.

The kit's arrival had been a portent of things to come. The miko's sudden appearance had been the first ill wind of a coming storm.

Youkai and humans alike were fleeing to his borders, begging sanctuary. And he granted it, even to the humans. Old hatreds were set aside as common fears and losses united them. But even as asylum was being granted, he was trying to organize resources to be sent to new camps that sprung up to give shelter to the weak and frightened. Men with families came to him, volunteering themselves for whatever position in his guard in exchange for their loved one's safety. The strong and weak enlisted, hoping to fight for honor and glory or to just find a temporary home until the undeclared war was over. Still, it was not enough.

Nothing seemed able to stave off the chaos that pushed closer to his lands every day.

"We don't have time," Sesshoumaru began, staring down the maimed youkai.

"If you push her, she will break. Sona saw what she went through. Have you ever known that old woman to cry? She was practically catatonic for a week!" Tenka snarled, losing his patience.

"And if we don't hurry there will be hundreds, if not thousands just like her. She's not broken, even you must be able to sense that," He stated calmly, refusing to give into the rage surging through him at the healer's breach of protocol.

"What do you propose we do then?"

"Have Sona block the memories."

If Sesshoumaru had not known the youkai better, he would have done more than maim him for the sudden rage the beat at his senses. And for the look of incredulity aimed squarely in his direction.

"Have you lost your mind?" Tenka whispered furiously. "Do you have any idea what kind of monster you sound like?"

"War is destroying this land!" Sesshoumaru snapped, the fraying of his control given way to the pure, cold rage that had begged to be freed. Inhaling deeply, he began again, knowing he had to have the healers on his side to do such a deed. "We must all make choices that are difficult. Have you heard any of the reports of what's going on just outside our borders? Have you seen the people fleeing here? Humans are so desperate they seek sanctuary in my lands. Near my citadel. If this isn't stopped soon, it will consume the whole of the island."

"What of her son and her friend?"

"Her son will stay here, in the citadel with my ward. We can block the slayer's memories as well."

"It never lasts, you know that," Tenka reasoned, voice laced with resignation.

"It need only last long enough to do what is needed. And when it comes back, they may bring their wrath on this Sesshoumaru. I can handle it."
"She watched your brother torn apart while he was still alive. Do you think she will forgive you for making her forget?" The plump healer snapped in frustration while running a hand through curly, riotous hair.

"No, she may keep that memory. Just the bandit's actions need to be blocked. The stronger her hatred for Naraku, the hotter it burns, the better for us."

"You are manipulating people just like that foul thing across our borders," Tenka ground out, still in disbelief at his lord's command.

"If you can come up with something better, you have until their bodies fully heal to do it," The daiyoukai said, his voice cold and cutting. Tenka knew it was the only concession he was going to get.

Once alone, Sesshoumaru stared and the scrolls rolled out onto the table. The largest was a map, dominating most of the space. On it markers showed the lands Naraku had so far conquered.

Of the four high daiyoukai, only he remained. How had it come to this? He had always thought the others too involved with politicking and their own importance, but surely they should have been strong enough to endure? And yet news came in every day, carried by the refugees from those lands. The three houses had fallen, and those holding lands that had not fled had died or were barely holding their own.

Tenka's accusation gnawed at him as he stared blankly at the maps. His believed in honor above all else. His duty was to his people, to his lands, and now, to destroy this darkness. Was his plan so awful in the face of the war that raged around him? Or was he giving in to the easiest option, using others and manipulating them so cruelly as to be like the very being he loathed above all others?

But time was too short to try and heal the miko. She had to be able to stand against the hanyou if they had any hope of destroying him. Only she could take and purify the jewel. Without that, the hanyou would be able to survive whatever was done and slither into darkness to gather his strength once again.

And there was too much at stake to lose.

The kangan knocked and entered before Sesshoumaru could answer. Staring down the man who had saved him from more torture and possibly death, his expression was grim.

"There might be a way, but it will only work with the miko."

"Explain."

Over an hour later, he left, the door closing softly behind him.

Silence reigned as Sesshoumaru tried to digest just what the other youkai had explained.

Every thing he knew, every fact and rumor screamed a denial in the face of his suggestion. But Sesshoumaru's instincts latched onto it. At least he hoped it was his instincts, because if it was hope and need, then he could not only destroy himself, but anyone within the walls of his home as well.

"Miko," A voice intoned from the door. Kagome turned her sightless eyes to the form gliding to her. His expression was as impassive as her own, but his eyes were not. Kagome felt herself drawn up from the darkness. His eyes never expressed anything. But now, they seemed torn.
"Miko."

She merely nodded to acknowledge that she had heard him at all.

"What would you do, if you could defeat Naraku and end the suffering in this land?"

It was as if she watched him from underwater, and he saw her clearly, but his words were muffled and his image vague and wavering. Trapped beneath the surface, there was no part of her that held hope.

But something pricked her through the water, shocking her with cold. Her face turned down to see his hand, so large compared to her own, clamped tightly around her wrist. Her mind registered pain in a peripheral sort of way.

What happened next stunned anyone within the shiro.

One energy, pure and beautiful and frightening swelled, like a bubble, growing bigger and bigger, seemingly ready to pop and unleash its attack at any second. But the second, a massive surge of youki rose to weave into it and around it.

It suppressed it, pulling it back into the northern wing of the structure. Most could feel the two energies twining around one another, trying to get loose but only becoming more tangled in the process. Those who could not felt their hair stand on end from the suddenly oppressive silence.

The epicenter of the energies was physically still. Nothing moved. But the taiyoukai and the miko stared into one another's eyes, gazes locked and unblinking. His grip on her wrist did not tighten, but it showed no signs of relaxing either. Her wrist itself looked tiny in his large hand, almost on the verge of breaking, but she never made a sound.

He pulled the energy back, closer and closer to the source. Eyes bled to red as he tried to force her growing energy into submission. Gradually it shrank back to the onna, and he used everything he had at his disposal to find the very heart of the source.

Her energy began to give in, slipping inward more quickly. But his own refused to relent in its hold. Lifeless eyes didn't even flicker as he let his energy be drawn into her, into the fissure where her own energy tried to escape to. Along the connection of their energies, he let his mind drift, gaining access to the core of her being without ever having to breach her walls.

Tenka's idea had worked.

Now what?

He was within her core of her being. A strange place that he felt he walked in, yet knew he did not. Being and not being. Substantial and ephemeral. Whether that meant her soul or her mind, he wasn't sure. It wasn't what he had expected, if nothing else. Despite her experiences, the woman had once been a light, and though it was banked, nothing could account for the darkness surrounding him. It was a curious blankness were he could see himself easily, but everything around him was just black, suspended in space. He was standing, and yet he saw nothing physical to hold up his form. The strange disconnect from any kind of reality was enough to make him very ill at ease with his current predicament.

"Miko?" He called out.

His call echoed into the darkness. Nothing answered.
"Miko," He tried again. Again, nothing.

Tenka had said he might be required to find her. Deciding on moving forward, he walked deeper into the blackness, disoriented by the utter lack of light and scent and sound. With nothing to guide him, he prayed he had made the right decision. What if this had been a mistake after all?

A small eternity passed before he saw a strange light in the distance, breaking the unsettling monotony of the dark. Black grew to grey, then colors began to emerge, as if painted as he walked further in.

And suddenly he was on a cliff, overlooking the sea, as if he had been walking on an ocean path the entire time.

It smelled of the sea. The wind was salty with the tang of brine. Grey skies were dominated with clouds, and he started when he felt rain begin to fall. The waters below were black and choppy, dashing themselves against the cliff face angrily, growing higher with impossible speed.

Could a tsunami within her mind kill him? Or worse, keep him from returning to his own body? Tenka hadn't mentioned anything like this.

Her scent was as strong here as it was in the real world, perhaps more so. Feet pounded against the unforgiving stone, coming closer with each step. He turned, watched the figure in miko garb running toward him, her eyes only focused on the cliff edge just behind him.

"What is she doing?" He wondered.

His answer followed her shortly from the darkness at the edge of the ocean scene. Shadow forms seemed to slip over the edges of the rocks, slithering and tainting everything they touched. They were determined to catch the miko, that much he could discern. Tendrils that resembled straining, eager arms stretched forth over the landscape, constantly reaching for her as they advanced.

Cursing Tenka again, Sesshoumaru stepped into her path, to dissuade her from what he knew was coming. Her eyes widened in panic and she shouted at him to move, to get away. Desperation and fear clung to her, made her eyes fever bright. A foot away from him, she darted to his right. His arm shot out, trying to stop her as his claws dug into her flesh, but the miko was determined, and here, surprisingly, she was as strong as he.

He had a split second to let go of her. He didn't.

They both fell over the edge, spiraling into the choppy dark water. The sound of their joined forms breaking the surface was lost in the roar of the angry sea.

Sesshoumaru found that even in a dream world such as this one, the water was freezing and the current deadly, sucking them down into the darkness. Barely able to see in the inky depths, he felt around him, trying to find the miko. When his hand found cloth, he began kicking strongly for the surface.

When they surfaced, she hammered her small fists against his chest.

"Let me go!" She screamed.

Better she scream than lay lifeless as her body did.

"No! What are you doing?" He snarled, trying to hold onto her while kicking his way to shore.
"They can't get me here! I'm safe in the water," She sobbed, trying to push away from him. His grip on her tightened and his determination only grew as they got closer to shore. The pummeling of his chest gave way to weak, halfhearted attempts to push him away.

"I will protect you from them." Not what he had wanted to say, but Tenka had been clear on that, at least. He would have to make the miko feel safe enough to emerge. Not that the current scenario had been what he was expecting in the least.

"No one can protect me from them," She sobbed, tears mixing with the saltwater dripping from her hair as he dropped her on the beach unceremoniously, wishing he was free of the briny saltwater weighting his hair and clothing down. Annoyed by her self pity and frustrated by her determination to wallow, he inhaled sharply and clenched his fist, glad the kimono sleeve hid the only outward indication of his anger.

"Woman, look at me," He bit out. For several minutes he thought she'd never stop crying, sand clinging to her wet, limp form as she stayed curled on her side. He knelt, wondering again if this was worth it.

"Miko, look at this Sesshoumaru," He commanded gently, trying to keep his voice even despite the overwhelming urge to snap at her. That would be as detrimental as the shadow beings chasing her. He forced her chin up and her eyes, a deep blue gray, let him see how wounded she truly was.

"This Sesshoumaru vows to protect you, from the shadows here and in the world." Floundering, struggling for the right words to convince her to come back from this place, he was easily out of his depth. He didn't know how to be comforting. How to reassuring was beyond his grasp. He was a warrior. A lord. A tactician. A hunter. Not a being that instilled warmth in any capacity. And Tenka had told him that was what the miko would need.

But was it, really? Did the woman need warmth when she knew that it would be a lie? Especially from he, who had tried to kill her and had never shown her anything but contempt? Who could experience what she had and still believe in the light?

He gambled.

"I need an ally like you to defeat Naraku. I will protect you from him and from others that would bring you harm. But only you can help me now."

"He won," She whispered, her voice ragged, as if she had been swallowing glass.

"I am alive. An army is amassing in my lands. His taint is held at bay. Speak truly, would you have sent the kit to me if you did not believe this Sesshoumaru could stop him?"

"I thought Inuy-" She didn't finish the statement.

Being in her own soul made him privy to her every thought, and the image of his half brother being quartered was enough to sicken even him. He pushed on, trying to banish the image from his mind.

"This Sesshoumaru is stronger, and will not be caught unaware. There is still a chance to save those you call your own," He began, knowing it was a low blow, but necessary. Her flinch told him his aim had been true. "But only you are capable of dealing with the shikon without being tainted."

Not completely true. He knew he could handle it, but he could not purify it. And he had no idea how to go about getting it from the hanyou. She could sense it, and by default, find Naraku in that way. Both would be a boon.
"I can't anymore, not after-" She began, then stopped. Sobs were constricting her chest painfully as she tried to hold them in.

"Miko-" He started.

But like that, she was off, running from him. Had that path been there before? Was the landscape conforming to her wishes? If it was, why couldn't she banish the shadow creatures that hunted her?

Less than pleased, he began to follow, beginning to lose patience with her world and it's skewed rules, especially since the path seemed to vanish halfway up the cliff and he had to use his claws to scale the walls, finding he had almost none of his natural abilities in the prison of her being.

It felt like days had passed, but the sky remained the same, cloudy gray. If time moved for her in this place, it didn't show in any way he could tell. Her aura tugged at his awareness and he followed it, seeking to end the chase. There was no time for this foolishness!

Her scream rent the air, forcing his pace into a flat run. Terror choked the landscape, and had he taken notice, he would have noticed the blur of shapes becoming less and less like the seaside and more like a valley of tall, spiraling mountains. Monoliths that stretched at the sky in jagged spikes. Darkness began to descend, as if night was finally falling.

Another shriek, louder and more desperate than the last goaded him further. Despite his boots hard soles, jagged rocks stabbed into the soles of his feet, and he let out a snarl as he realized that even his superior speed had been denied to him.

He almost fell over the precipice the came from nowhere, backpedaling as the edge seemed to crumble beneath his feet.

Another scream, and below him was the source. Once he regained sure footing, he looked down, only to reel back, wanting to vomit from the stench that assaulted him. Emotions were always easy to smell for him. It was why he schooled his own so diligently. But these were so powerful they carried taste.

Rank and foul, like a battlefield littered with bloated corpses left to rot in the sun.

She was pinned by several men, all faceless, but making noises only monsters from stories could make, laughter that was twisted into something dark. The sound of it interspersed with her screams sent chills skittering down his spine. War he could handle without flinching. But this was not war.

Determined to keep his word, starting here in her mind, where it would have the most effect, he made the jump to the crater floor, stirring what seemed like volcanic ash as he landed. He had no swords, no whip, or poison, even his true form was denied to him. But he had his claws. Ripping through the men's forms, he was only mildly surprised to see them rend like shadows, the remains becoming nothing but wisps that dimmed and faded into nothingness.

It was over in only a few seconds, but it was enough for her to begin her escape from the crater. And from him.

Determined to get through to her this time, he caught her, rage fueling his speed. Her terror ground on his senses as he held her arm fast. Every ounce of self control he possessed went into holding her, even though her fear of him made him want to push her away and get a million miles of land between them. That fear, so obvious, so ripping, whispered. Nothing in her mind was closed to him while in this place. And her fear was that he would harm her as the others had.
"Woman, cease this! If you stay here they will always come after you, always chase you. Eventually they will have you. And it will happen again and again and again," He ground out as calmly as he could. "Let this Sesshoumaru protect you. You can still purify, your powers reacted to mine outside of this place. You are still capable. Will you help your pack," He demanded, amber eyes boring down into her frightened blue ones. "Or will you rot in this place, let this rip you apart?"

She stared at him, her eyes holding a terror he couldn't begin to fathom. He had always been in control. Had always been able. Never had he experienced anything close to what she had. And he tried to understand. But he needed her free of this place and functioning.

"You are a mother, and you have the chance to save your child from the darkness you witnessed," He thought, trying to find more to persuade her. "And my ward. A human girl with even less skill in defending herself than you. Would you linger here when you have a chance to save her from the very things you endured?"

"No!" Kagome cried, rage suffusing her features. "How could you even-"

He gave her no time to finish. Tenka had told him to wait for any sign of something besides fear. Fury worked for him. More than worked. Without a word he pulled her to him and tried to ignore the sudden spike of panic at his sudden proximity.

The world began to recede, the blackness swimming over it, covering it, till even the point of light was gone. He followed the feel of his power back to the fissure he had come through. He didn't bring her all the way out though. To do so would have drawn her into him, and that was a possibility he would not allow. He threw her wrist from his hand and stepped away, putting much needed distance between them.

"You bastard," She snarled quietly from the bed.

"It was the only way this Sesshoumaru could get to you," He told her quietly, suddenly feeling very tired, although he refused to show any sign of it.

"You used Rin-"

"This Sesshoumaru spoke the truth. Without you almost all of our plans will do nothing but buy time. Naraku's forces have grown exponentially. This Sesshoumaru cannot hold the jewel, cannot purify it. As long as the tainted thing stays within his grasp, there is no chance of winning. And if this Sesshoumaru's lands fall to Naraku, what happened to you will only be the beginning of what happens to my ward."

He stalked from the room, snarling in his own mind, cursing his own tired body for his emotional outburst. Blamed the miko for the fear she sent spiking through the room. Blamed that hellish place her own heart had become for tossing him about through her own emotional upheavals, like a ragdoll tossed in the ocean.

Lingering traces of that world clung to him, refusing to leave. The smell and tastes still pervaded reality, and he retreated to the bath house to try and rid himself of the lingering remnants of his journey, phantom salt and brine clinging to his skin and in his hair from a nonexistent ocean.

It was only later, when he informed Tenka of the woman's mental return, the he found out he had been in that place for three days.

The stench ghosted by, the memories still too vivid to bear thinking on.
"How is Sango?" Kagome asked the next day. Tenka stared at the miko thoughtfully. She had not drawn back into herself, had made no motion to. He knew it would be up to time, but he wondered how Sesshoumaru had succeeded in convincing her to stay firmly within this world. When asked, Kagome had told him it was none of his business.

"She is angry," He answered. "Her lover and brother are still with Naraku, and it is enough for now to keep her moving. She is determined to find a way to help them."

"Then we had better start planning. This needs to be done, and quickly."

"This Sesshoumaru is glad you agree," The inu cut in as he stepped into the room.

Kagome glared at the daiyoukai, but said nothing. He knew, without any doubt, that she hated him. Hated that he had used her own pack, and even a member of his own, against her. And maybe for saving her from the manifestations of her own demons instead of letting them destroy her.

"You can still purify, your powers still react defensively. Can you still use them offensively?"

He was pushed back into the wall, heard wood splinter and crack more than he felt it. It was only because of his superior strength and her current condition that he hadn't gone through the wall itself. Not that he would admit such a thing out loud. But her strength pleased him immeasurably. Contrary to the teachings of ningen mystics, she had lost none of her power once her maidenhead had been pierced.

"I think, perhaps, the Lady Kagome would like to eat and see her son," Tenka suggested delicately. "And perhaps rest."

If she had been any other woman, and the situation had been any other, he would have killed her on the spot.

But she wasn't, and it wasn't. So he refrained. Barely.

"No. If she can so easily do that to this Sesshoumaru, then she is ready to come to the council chambers."

It was petty, but he took no small amount of pleasure from her suddenly pale face.

"But they're all-" Tenka began.

"Miko, you can use your powers, you have proven it. The only worry you have from this point on will be humans, who are immune to your magics. They are not immune to this Sesshoumaru's blade."

"But-" Tenka began again, trying to protest.

"She is not defenseless, do not treat her as such. There will be only one human besides her at the council meeting, and it is her companion. Considering the strength of her ki, if she feels the need to defend herself, which this Sesshoumaru doubts, she will be more than able to handle it. Have her ready for a meeting within the hour."

Kagome knew she had no choice. But he was right. She had pushed him through the wall, even though she had only intended to push him back. She could defend herself against youkai.

Now if only she could trust him to live up to his word and protect her from humans.
An hour later she felt the stares of over a dozen youkai bearing down on her. The only link to sanity she had was Sango's hand clasping her own tightly beneath the table. The almost bone crushing grip lent her strength as she endured the hostile glares and acrimonious muttering.

"She was the one who lost the jewel in the first place. You trust her to help you regain it?" A feline youkai demanded incredulously. Kagome hated the muttering, felt them agreeing with the outspoken demon.

"She was aided by a hanyou at the time. This Sesshoumaru is not so weak."

"But she is a human!" Another interjected.

Comments about her abilities began to fly around her, all acting as if she wasn't even there.

She wanted to go back to the cliff, wanted to dive into the ocean and just sink beneath the surface and be safe. But Rin, crying in pain, and Shippou wandering, broken without her, kept her hold on sanity and quieted any thoughts of retreat. The voices around her weren't loud to begin with, youkai had no need to shout. But she tried to drown them out. Struggled not to hear each insult. Endeavored to emulate the icy daiyoukai that had brought her into the middle of this whole thing.

And she failed.

The power was rising from her before she could stop it, at first a sort of bubble around her. Desperately she tried to change it's intent. The energy was reacting to her distress, rushing forth, ignoring her conscious attempts to force it down. While all but one stared at her in dawning horror, she tried to reel it back in, knowing their insults did not warrant their purification.

Air whooshed from her lungs when she hit the wall, Sesshoumaru's hand on her chest, just below her throat. Claws pricked into her skin warningly. Trying to do anything to avert a crisis, she frantically tore through her mental cupboards for an idea despite the panic at his sudden proximity.

"Your ki," She struggled, trying to remember the tangle of their energies. Understanding lit his features, and Sango and the other youkai watched in fascination as his energy wrapped into hers, bending it forcefully, giving it no option but to tangle with it's opposition.

He could not force it into submission, not now that she was aware, but he focused it, kept it from touching the youkai that watched, stunned. That was the time she needed to pull it back into herself. When the last traces of it vanished, Sesshoumaru pulled his own ki back, let it settle into him like a bright mantle before disappearing completely. His hand dropped from her chest and he stepped back, imperious, but his eyes glinting in satisfaction. Kagome wondered why.

"It seems the miko might be stronger than we thought," The feline conceded, staring at the woman, awed and disconcerted.

She realized what her outburst had done, and why Sesshoumaru bore an air of the cat that had got the canary.

"And aided by Lord Sesshoumaru, surely she will be successful," Another volunteered in an overly forceful tone that did little to hide it's fear.

Kagome sat back at the table, noting in a weary sort of satisfaction that they gave both the taijiya and herself wide berth, they eyes still skittering over her when they thought she wasn't looking, appraising her silently.

"Now, to the matter at hand. Do either of you remember anything about Naraku's fortress?"
"He let us escape on purpose. If we go back and he's even remotely aware of it, he'll knows we'll use that way to get back in," Sango replied.

"On purpose? Why would he let you escape on purpose?" One youkai asked.

"He has my brother and my husband-to-be trapped there, both of them have been tortured grievously. And he killed Inu Yasha."

No one seemed to understand except Sesshoumaru, who knew the hanyou's tastes from past experiences.

"He wants us to suffer. We fought against him. Sango was one of the few to battle his will and break through his lies. And I-" Kagome found it hard to continue. That secret still burned her from within, scorching anything it touched. If Sango knew, she would hate her forever. "He aims to destroy everything pure. Everything must bear the taint of his mark."

"It will be his downfall," Sesshoumaru said quietly. "Do you know where he keeps the jewel?"

"It's still in three pieces," Kagome said. "At least, I think it is. I can only sense one part, but I know it's not the whole jewel. It could be in more."

"Why would he keep the pieces separate?"

"Because he holds them. With this much power he doesn't need to make his wish until he's ready. Only when everything is in his hands will he use the jewel," Kagome murmured, knowing it to be true even as she said it.

"What more could he wish for?" Sesshoumaru asked, eyes boring into the girl. His path was one of conquest. If the pseudo hanyou wanted that, why not wish for it? The daiyoukai knew the hanyou was no stranger to shortcuts, unlike himself. What else was there besides conquest?

"He'll wish Kikyo back to life, at least I'm pretty sure he will. She's the reason he was created in the first place."

"But Kagome, if he does that-" Sango gasped, eyes wide with terror.

"I know."

"What do you mean?" The feline asked, obviously the most curious and least fearful.

"I am Kikyo's reincarnation. By bringing her back to life, he'll kill me. But we have time. He'll want me there when he does it, instead of just wishing for it to happen. He's the sort that will want to see it all happen for himself."

"I'm finding the more I know of this creature, the more curious I am how he rose to power," An older youkai said, scratching his beard thoughtfully. Kagome tried to discern his race by physical features, but he could have been anything, a cat, dog, even a bear. "You are obviously very strong in your own powers, and you were with him for at time."

Kagome let the insult slide, knowing it did look like she had done nothing.

"My powers are hard to control," She admitted. "I haven't been trained." And that was only the half of it. Ever since her arrival at the shiro, it seemed that her powers had grown, doing more than she had thought possible. Throwing Sesshoumaru almost through a wall was easily the best example of her newfound strength. The sudden, unwanted burst of ki was another.
"What is your proposed plan of action Sesshoumaru?"

Sesshoumaru seemed to be thinking very hard.

"He's always preferred to be the one pulling the strings. He uses puppets and his children, extensions of himself. If we can find him, draw them away, we can get to him."

"But that was before-" Another started.

"I don't think it'll change until his wish is made, maybe not even then. He's a coward, a hold over from his days as a bandit," She spat the last word with venom. "I don't know if he'll still be at the fortress. I believe he will be, it's too choice a stronghold to give up." Sango added to Kagome's thoughts. "If we can find distractions for the children and his puppets, we can get to him."

"What of the jewel?"

"I might be too far away to feel anything but the one piece, but the one I feel-" She paused, her eyes flashing in reaction the taint she felt pulsing through the broken orb. "It's definitely his."

"That settles locating him then. But what of distractions?"

Sango thought for a hard minute, then looked at her friend, staring deep into her eyes, as if in apology.

"Make the bandit problem work for you," The taijiya said, lowering her eyes to the table.

They were so focused on her strange statement that they didn't notice Kagome flinch. But Sesshoumaru did. As Sango told them her idea, he watched Kagome grow paler and paler. He had to admit though, the idea of turning bandits into mercenaries was a good one. And if they happened across the band that had captured the miko and taijiya, so much the better. Sesshoumaru did not often indulge in thoughts of vengeance. But seeing the miko's memories, feeling her terror had provoked those baser instincts.

But then, it felt more like a form of justice.

There were many ways to make a man one of the kagan after all.

"Are you okay?" Sango asked a few hours later as she and Kagome moved for the inner gardens, searching for the children.

"The bandit thing startled me, but it was a good idea. I hope it works."

"Greed will drive all of them, that a chance to be set up as proper lords. Although to be fair, most of them, if not all, will die in the attempts."

"Real soldiers are going too though. They're the ones I'm worried about."

"They knew the risks when they became soldiers, it can't be helped."

Kagome wondered about the change in her friend. It felt as if Sango was sliding back into the dark place she had been entrenched in when Kagome had first met her. But this time she had no idea how to fix it. Had she brought Sango to this, by encouraging her feelings for Miroku before the battle was over and Naraku was gone?

"Do you think it'll work?" Kagome asked, referring to the plan.
"Sesshoumaru is the strongest youkai I've ever seen. And your powers are growing. As strange as it sounds, if you two can actually work together, I'm not sure anything can stop you. Although getting a miko and a daiyoukai to work together would be harder than herding cats."

"We don't have a choice," Kagome finished the dark conversation and forced a smile to her face as Rin and Shippou both ran to her. There were still aches in her body, but these were small compared to when she had been found. Tenka had done his level best to make sure they as physically sound as possible.

Her smile grew from forced to genuine as she allowed herself the simple pleasure of just listening to her son and his new friend.
"Sesshoumaru?" A quiet voice asked. Sesshoumaru looked up for barely a moment, acknowledging the human's presence in his study. After several more moments of silence, he rolled the scroll closed and gave her his full attention. When she seemed to shrink back, he sighed and waited patiently. When she finally came forward, he was pleased to note she moved with barely any issue, and the bruises on her face had almost completely faded, only traces of yellow remaining.

"You wished to speak to this Sesshoumaru?" He prompted after several more minutes.

"Never mind, it was a stupid idea," Kagome said, beginning to turn away.

"Sit miko. This Sesshoumaru has found your insight useful. I would hear your thoughts." He intoned, motioning for her to sit.

Once he had commanded her, Kagome actually felt less nervous. Perhaps having the choice taken from her helped. Kneeling, she looked for the words to explain her thought process.

"Is it possible to combine the soryuha with anything?" She asked suddenly, blurting it out. His intense focus on her was making her nervous, and her carefully worded question flew out the window, replaced by the blunt statement.

"I don't understand your meaning," He told her, his expression, rather his lack thereof, never wavering. His gold eyes pinned her down, unnerving her and almost succeeding in tying her tongue in a knot.

"I could add my power to some of Tessaiga's attacks," Kagome began explaining. "Sango said something today about a miko and a youkai working together and it just reminded me. It was probably a stupid idea, forgive me," She said, beginning to stand again. She was lucky he didn't kill her, after all, Inu Yasha had been half human, and probably hadn't found insult in the offer of help. Sesshoumaru would be a completely different story, and she berated herself for not thinking of that sooner.

"Stay. This Sesshoumaru wonders if it possible. Inu Yasha was a half breed. Perhaps his human blood enabled such attacks. But this Sesshoumaru finds the possibility worth looking into. If it can be done, it would be a boon to our plan. Explain how it was done before."

He noticed she avoided using Inu Yasha's name, instead focusing on using 'Tessaiga'. Despite this, he found her to be intelligent, if lacking understanding of her own powers. When he was done questioning her, an hour had passed.

She didn't look tired at all. And he knew he wasn't.

"You do not require much sleep, correct?" Sesshoumaru asked. Kagome stilled, then nodded.

"Follow this Sesshoumaru. We will begin practicing now."

"But-"

"There is little time, and this Sesshoumaru would have this mastered before it is needed."
She followed, noting that the two swords were once again tucked in his sash. Would he be able to use tessaiga? Silence enveloped the shiro, and it was eerie after seeing it so busy during the day. He paused by the dojo only long enough to grab a bow and a quiver filled with arrows before he headed to the center of the building itself. When they arrived in the inner gardens, a cloud seemed to appear from nothingness. Kagome looked at him in askance.

"Such practice would disturb those within the citadel."

She climbed on and sat, knees hugged to her chest as he stepped on. Immediately the cloud began to lift and move forward, almost throwing Kagome back in it's speed. She clutched the quiver and bow to her, hugging them tightly as they sped through the night. She hoped that maybe she could expend enough energy to sleep. Knowing the perfection the daiyoukai expected of himself, there was a strong possibility of that coming true.

When they touched down in an empty field surrounded by the forest, Kagome stared into the night sky. For a moment it looked so much like the ocean she wanted to jump into it, to forget everything real and just float aimlessly.

"Miko, there is little time."

He pulled the tenseiga from it's sheath and looked at her expectantly. She notched her arrow and pulled at the teasing threads of energy. When she felt the arrow absorb the energy, she pulled the bowstring back and fired. Winds gathered around it, buffeting Kagome as Sesshoumaru threw the Soryuha at it.

She had expected them to not sync up. That would have made sense. She had expected them to possibly repel one another. That would have also made sense.

She did not expect them to join as seamlessly as her and Inu Yasha's attacks had. Nor had she expected the nuclear bomb like explosion that resulted in the entire night sky to seem as day. Briefly she wondered if the people in Hiroshima and Nagasaki had felt as she had, seeing the brilliant light for the first time.

"That was – unexpected," Sesshoumaru admitted after the light had faded.

Still shocked, she could only nod dumbly. The land had a deep furrow, almost a small ravine, racing down it, stretching into the forest beyond, splitting the wooded area in two.

"It takes overlong for you to summon your energy into the arrow. Is there no other way you can release it to combine with the attack?"

Of course the explosion they had just summoned wouldn't be enough. She should have known better.

The next four hours were spent trying to time their attacks, especially since Kagome found it harder to just release the purifying energy without anything to focus it onto. By the time they were done, they had just barely begun to sync their attacks, and nothing like the initial blast had occurred. Mostly because the energy she summoned seemed to fizzle before they could truly join. She was tired and sweaty and felt every ache that had been subdued before almost full blast once again.

When the sky began to lighten in false dawn, he did something unexpected. He sheathed his sword and lunged at her without any warning.

Fear rose in her as bile tried to force it's way up her throat.
"What are you doing?" She screamed, jumping back from him. Hadn't he promised to protect her? What happened? She knew he was impatient and frustrated with her, but he didn't have to try and kill her!

Any time for thought was lost in the next moment when he came at her again. And again. And again. She dodged and jumped and rolled trying to avoid his mass slamming into her, his claws held threateningly, his intent clear.

"Sesshoumaru, stop!" She cried out, panic beginning to overtake her senses.

"Fight back!" He commanded, coming at her again.

'So I can die faster?'

True dawn began to sweep away the blue tint over the field, and Kagome tried to execute a quick turn but fell into a pit left by one of their attempts at combining their powers. She cried out in pain and flailed as she fell back into the hole. Blindingly white in the rising sun, his form came at her, eyes filled with deadly intent.

"Stop!" She screamed, throwing her hands over her face.

Power erupted from the pit, trying to throw him back. He persevered, wove his own youki in with her reiki and with an iron will threw his arms up and directed it all into the sky.

The explosion was like a supernova. He had to shield his eyes from it as the light flared within the pit like a small sun shining directly above them. Kagome blinked against the brightness and when it finally faded, looked up at him, fury suffusing her expression.

"You could have just asked!"

For some reason, her anger pleased him more than the apathy that had carried her through the night. This was the miko as he had known her. The only difference he noted, as he had during their first attempt, was that her power had grown exponentially since their last encounter, and he wondered if it was her fear or emotional instability drawing that much to the surface.

"Now we know that it can be done." Her shoulders sagged at the claim, as if it had banished the anger in her and replaced it with resignation.

"But the soryuha," She began to protest weakly..

"We will practice. But now you know you can do it miko."

The sun was shining. The field was silent. Anything with self preservation instincts had fled long ago. Such unnatural silence bothered her more than she cared to admit. She stood, brushed the dirt away, and glared at him when he jumped from the pit as if it was merely a step. The edge was easily three feet above her head and out of reach. Lacking his abilities, she stared reproachfully and waited.

"Not all of us can bounce like a pogo stick," She muttered, knowing he could hear.

"A what?"

"Can I get a hand?" She demanded, the stopped, remembering Sesshoumaru only had one hand. And what had happened to the other. Flushing in spite of herself, she mumbled an apology.

A cloud appeared in the pit and she plopped down on it unceremoniously, her exhaustion finally
beginning to get the better of her. Her stomach rumbled, startling her. She hadn't felt hungry in over two months. Not since the jewel had been taken. Sure, she'd eaten, knowing she had to keep up her strength, but never out of a desire to.

She ignored the sky and the sun and just curled up into a ball on the fluffy mass, intending to just close her eyes for a moment and then ask Sesshoumaru when they would practice next. And when they would be leaving. Instead, her eyes closed, and almost immediately she was asleep.

Lost in thought, he barely registered the change in the onna's sleeping patterns, focusing on the potential he had discovered in the night, silently sorting through possibilities.

It was obvious the miko was still afraid, and still hesitant to attack. Something had to be done about that. He was unused to working with anyone that was afraid to defend themselves. It proved a unique puzzle. One he stowed away for later. Another revelation was the power of the attack itself. If just a mere unleashing of power could cause such catastrophe, what would focusing do? Raw power was all well and good for those who wanted to lie in an early grave. He was not so careless.

Trying to remember the estimates for time before he and the two onna would leave for Naraku's fortress, he cursed himself. The offers that would turn bandits to his hired mercenaries would take at least two or three weeks, despite the swiftness of his youkai soldiers.

Then there would be a period of time where the bandits would stir up trouble for him. There was a certain grudging respect for the taijiya that had thought of that. It was not as if his own stores of wealth lacked, but good men were another thing altogether, and not something he wanted to risk while luring out Naraku's children.

So at least two months.

He hoped their distractions were enough to move Naraku back from his borders. More and more people were seeking out his lands for refuge from a war that escalated every day. Some had come with nothing, their villages burned to the ground. Others had exercised caution and came with their possessions, desperate to avoid losing their family.

Two months. Could he train her in two months? He needed to know she could throw a focused attack without hesitation. Both of their lives would be at risk.

Thoughts were cut short when he landed in the inner gardens. A servant bowed respectfully and opened the door for him.

"Make sure the miko eats before she is allowed to sleep. And send for Tenka. He will be eating with me this morning."

Eyes wide, the servant took Kagome's form into his arms and rushed off, eager to be away from the cold daiyoukai.

"I'm fairly certain I misheard you. Could you please repeat yourself?" Tenka asked. He wasn't being sarcastic. He had either misheard his employer or he was losing his mind.

"We were able to successfully combine attacks twice."

"You made her attack you? After everything else you've put her through, you forced her to attack you?" The kagan choked, wondering why the daiyoukai was pushing his former patient so hard and when he would be treating her again. Despite the other male being his superior, he felt the daiyoukai was behaving childishy and without thought to the possibilities of what could happen.
"This Sesshoumaru was in control the whole time," The daiyoukai said with a small frown, as if displeased with his vassal's lack of faith.

"May I speak to you as a friend, instead of a subject?"

"Proceed."

"She's not at full strength. After being awake for a day she managed to push you back. Now she's helping you with attacks that sound like they could level the citadel, and she's still not at full strength. What happens when you push her too far and she's at peak performance, hmm? This mission is giving her purpose, same as the taijiya. And with you giving her a way to use her powers more offensively, you're also opening yourself up to attack from her."

"She is a human," Sesshoumaru began.

"That tangled with you after being bedridden for over a week."

Tenka knew the daiyoukai would ignore his words, but had to try. Once, when his life had been nothing but misery, his very manhood cut from him, he had asked the daiyoukai for freedom from life. And had been refused. Instead, the daiyoukai had brought him to the citadel, even going so far as to keep his secret. Though they had never progressed to anything like true friendship, the daiyoukai valued his honesty, something that was in short supply in any court.

"It will not be a problem."

"Just think about it. Although the taijiya has been asking if there's any way she can get lessons in hand to hand combat from one of our instructors. And she wants the miko to learn as well."

And Sesshoumaru had an idea.

"That is all. This Sesshoumaru will see to the request personally."

Tenka paled considerably at the almost eager way the inu had informed him.

"You wish to learn how to protect yourself from men, correct?"

"We do."

"You have no skill in this as a taijiya?" It was a low blow, but one Sango was expecting.

"I want to learn how to do the most damage I can when being attacked by multiple men. Kagome does as well."

"It may not prevent another attack."

"At least we'll be able to try," Kagome snapped, angry with how he was treating them. She had been forced to eat before being allowed to savor dreamless sleep for all of four hours. Then she had been roughly awakened by a servant, told she was required within the dojo.

"Taijiya, you will be training with Kotaeru. I will train the miko."

"Now wait just a minute-" Kagome began.

"Kagome, Sesshoumaru is offering to teach you how to protect yourself. If you learn enough from him, no man will touch you ever again," Sango told her, encouraging her to the daiyoukai. She
wasn't eager to learn under the oppressive weight of his stare herself, and she understood. Sesshoumaru would teach her to act, and that was what the miko needed to learn most. Otherwise, everything else would be useless.

Kagome stared at her friend, wondering where her back up had gone. Before being given a chance to try and refute the decision again, she was drug from the dojo only to see another cloud waiting for her.

"You're not going to teach me to protect myself, are you?" Kagome asked sadly.

"Incorrect. I'm going to teach you everything a human is capable of." The steel in his tone only made the words that much more solid to her. Snago's thoughts had been correct. He would teach her how to protect herself by first teaching her to act instead of react.

"What's the catch?" She finally asked.

"We devote time during the night, every night, to finding a way to combine our focused attacks."

"I thought we were doing that anyway," She shrugged.

"Think of this as incentive."

Panic welled up in her, her powers rising to the surface in response to her natural distress.

"No powers," He commanded, his arm strong across her throat. "Powers will not affect a human male." Tree bark bit into her back despite the layers of clothing she wore. She struggled, trying to draw in a deeper breath. When she had agreed to Sango's decree, she had not thought learning to defend herself would be like this.

He hand wriggled, slipping the small dagger from the sheath.

"Faster. He'd have you by now if it really took you this long."

With that dispassionate revelation slapping her in the face, Kagome's temper broke free and the dagger sliced at his side. He jumped back, dodging it easily, but satisfied.

"Run."

"What?"

"Run. Your first defense is to run, always. You will be tired, must learn to control your breathing so you don't give away your position. Run, and find a place to hide."

"I can't outrun you and I certainly can't hide from you," She protested.

"But you can if being pursued by ningen. Now run. I will give you one minute, then I will come for you. Now."

Knowing that tone brooked no argument, for he'd used it several times with her already, she took off, kicking off her sandals along the way, then heading in another direction entirely, determined to try and find a good place to hide.

A tree hollow provided the perfect cover, and she curled up into it, making sure she had plenty of room to spring out if need be. Forcing her breath into a steady, light pattern, she waited.
And waited.

"Where is he?" She asked, not daring to peek outside of her hiding spot. It would be just like him to explain to her that a hiding place was called that for a reason. And she was done with being treated like a five year old by the youkai.

"I wasn't aware you wanted him to find you," A voice said kindly.

"Aiiee!" Kagome screamed, darting from the hollow.

"Miko, what did I tell you-" Sesshoumaru's voice started, then stopped. The woman was holding a dagger, charged with energy, and from the looks of it she was ready to let it fly into the tree at any moment. Had it been a normal tree, he would have been amused. As it was, he still found the situation comedic.

"I see you have met Bokusenou."

"You-he, it TALKED!" She shouted, eyes wide.

"So that is why I couldn't find you. Bokusenou, this Sesshoumaru is attempting to teach the miko how to defend herself."

"By hiding in trees?" The face asked. Kagome stood, fear forgotten and curiosity beginning to peek through her embarrassment. She hadn't even felt any youki from the thing!

"She wishes to be safe from mortal men."

"Ah, that makes sense. Human males often inspire that sort of reaction."

"I'm sorry if I disturbed you. I didn't realize you were-" Was he a youkai? A nature spirit? Or something possessing the tree?

"A spirit. I sleep deeply child, enough to blend in with the other trees easily. There was no harm done."

Kagome was able to place him then, from old stories her grandfather had told her. Koboku no kai. The spirits of very old trees. She'd never been aware that they could actually manifest faces though, and despite liking the wizened features that appeared in the bark, it was unsettling to see it moving so fluidly as he spoke.

"The sheath of Tessaiga is resonating with these old limbs of mine. How did you come into possession of it?" Bokusenou asked, as if genuinely curious. Kagome tried not to let her breathing hitch. Instead, her chest constricted painfully.

"I'll go practice drawing my blade," She stated abruptly, walking away. Once she was a safe distance away, he turned back to the tree, keeping track of her through the reiki spiking in agitation.

"She felt for the half-breed. He died, and she gave it to me."

"Have you tried to use it?"

"This Sesshoumaru has not."

The spirit knew he was lying. Instead, he changed the topic abruptly. "Why are you teaching a miko of that magnitude to protect herself from men? She had that dagger charged before she was out of the hollow. Seems to me she'd be able to use it in a more mundane manner."
"Bandits attacked her on her way to give me the sword." The tree considered what the daiyoukai said. And what he didn't have to say.

"When there is time, bring her to me. I wish to speak to her more."

"I do not think-"

"I am very old, you know that pup. And though I have never moved from this forest, I have seen much. You will bring her to me soon, and you will leave her with me for a time."

"Your concept of time is much different than ours."

"Disrespectful as always. You can leave her with me after training two days from now, and return for her at sunset."

"Why two days?"

"I have my own way of gathering information," The spirit answered enigmatically, his face fading back into the bark of the tree. Sesshoumaru didn't bother refusing. The tree had been a close friend of his father's, and was one of the wisest beings Sesshoumaru knew. Refusal wasn't really an option.

Following the miko's aura, he noted she had retrieved her sandals. He found her, practicing the movement of removing the dagger from the sheath on her wrist. It was still awkward for her, but he noted she was beginning to go through the movement more quickly. Deciding a test was in order, he waited until she had slipped it in again.

And then he was on her, pushing her into the ground. The scent of her panic slammed into him, and he felt her hand struggling to remove the knife. He caught her wrist, and the surprise evident in her eyes was laced with betrayal. And then she did something he didn't expect.

The glob of saliva stunned him enough for her to pull the knife and dig the handle into his side. If it had been the point of the blade, she was have gotten a gut wound. The daggers she carried were also laced with poison. If she got a lucky cut on him, which he doubted, it would not be an issue. Nor would it for most youkai. But humans were another matter entirely.

"You're learning," He told her, standing and wiping his cheek. "But do not repeat that particular action on me, and remember that it may not always work. Men that would stoop to rape are used to being spat upon."

"Was he mad?" Kagome asked, choosing to ignore his words.

"No. He wants me to bring you to him in two days time. And Bokusenou is one I would not deny."

"You mean there's actually someone out there you defer to? Now I really want to talk to him," Kagome said, wiping sweat from her brow. He stared down at her archly, wondering just what she was insinuating.

"This Sesshoumaru defers to no one. But he is worth this Sesshoumaru's respect."

"Why do you do that?" Kagome asked him, screwing up her nose. He continued staring at her, prompting her to be more specific. "You know, referring to yourself in the third person. Sometimes you do, well most of the time actually. And sometimes you don't, like during training."

"It is protocol."
"And?"

"Protocol does not apply during training. If it did, this Sesshoumaru would be within his rights to kill you for your insult."

"I see, I think," She accepted easily enough. "It's still weird though. Rin does it too. I guess she picked it up from you."

"We will train again tonight. Be ready." And with that, they were off.

"This is never going to work," Kagome told him, sitting down on the grass. The field looked like an earthquake had torn it apart.

"You charged the dagger earlier without even thinking," He rebuked. So far any attempt at a focused attack had fallen flat. The only damage being done by his own blasts of youki channeled through his sword.

"Yeah, but it's a thing, a focal point. You're not giving me anything to work with," She snapped.

"Then use the dagger." He didn't want to let her, wanted her to give up her dependence on a focal point. It could decide death or victory, and he did not want to leave such a thing to chance.

He readied himself, bringing the sword up and sending his ki pulsing into it.

The dagger flew. He brought the sword down. Light burned their eyes, then faded as fast as it had come. Their first success of the evening.

"Now without the dagger."

"On one condition."

"I do not believe you are in a position to set conditions."

"Too bad. Why haven't you tried Tessaiga?"

Damn her. This was not something he wanted to talk about, especially not with her.

"I know that you'd rather die than take advice from me, but I got to see it in action a lot, and Totosai told us a thing or two about it. If you want it to work, try thinking about all of those things you said would happen to Rin if I didn't help you."

What good was that supposed to do? Except maybe enrage him to the point of ignoring the burn of the shield on the damn thing?

"Just try."

He remembered his words to the miko. The thought of harm falling his ward, especially the kind that had been forced on the miko sent every instinct within into freefall. His ward had endured enough in her short life. The thought of Naraku getting his hands on her, knowing who she was, twisted painfully in his gut. He knew the girl would suffer for the hanyou's hatred of him.

The sword was heavy in his hand. He barely even realized it had transformed to it's true state, instead bringing it up and then slashing down just so. The attack raced though the field, and despite his amazement, he noticed Kagome's energy flying at it, piercing it and disappearing. The power seemed to swell, and then the field exploded.
"Did that just-" Kagome started, but stopped, afraid of the daiyoukai's prolonged silence.

"How did you know?" Sesshoumaru demanded suddenly, his eyes sharp and intent on the miko.

"You obviously care for her. And that sword was meant to protect humans. She's the only human worth something to you. You just had to be reminded," she told him with a small smile.

"And your sudden ability?"

"Maybe it's because attacks from Tessaiga are more familiar to me. You opened the wind scar. You didn't try soryuha."

Which was strange, because he had intended to. He looked at the sword in his hand curiously. It felt strange to wield it, as if it was barely permitting it. But that couldn't be correct. One could either pass through the shield and activate it, or they could not. There were no in-betweens.

"I do not think I will be using this sword." He hadn't meant to say it aloud. The whole situation had thrown him so badly he didn't even realize he had said anything.

"Wait a minute. The first time you ever met me you tried to kill me over that thing. You constantly hunted Inu Yasha down for it, caused countless fights, pulled multiple stunts worthy of a darwin award and now you don't want it?"

"This Sesshoumaru will do as he pleases."

"Training, remember?" Kagome bit out.

"What is a darwin award?"

And suddenly she was more than fine to leave the topic well enough alone.

"Want to try with Tenseiga again?" She asked. He eyed her skeptically, but let the issue go.

"No, dawn approaches, and you must rest before your next lesson." She only nodded gratefully. She was getting tired, and perhaps it would be better to wait until he had figure out his issue with Tessaiga. Something had to be wrong for Sesshoumaru to act like that.

She yawned slightly as she leaned back on the cloud, finally able to relax on it as they moved toward the citadel.

"Is all this training keeping you from your duties?" Kagome asked.

"Your training is one of my duties." Short, succinct, and not what she was asking, but she let it go.

When they landed, she stumbled to her room, blinking groggily. She didn't even change before falling onto the futon.

"Keep watch over her. I may not be back at nightfall," Sesshoumaru stated. Kagome turned sharply.

"You're just going to leave me in the woods all night?"

"I must go see Totosai," Sesshoumaru told her bluntly, forgoing formal speech. That alone told Kagome it must be urgent. She nodded once, and the youkai was gone.

"I'll never get used to that," she sighed as she sat on the forest floor.
"He's in a hurry, and I think I can guess why," The disembodied face replied.

"He was acting strangely when he tried to use Tessaiga. He's wanted that sword since I met him, literally, and now it seems like he doesn't. I don't get it."

"That sword was not just his father's anymore, was it? Totosai told me that he repaired it with one of the hanyou's fangs."

"So there's a part of Inu Yasha in it?"

"Yes."

"No wonder frosty butt didn't want it."

"Frosty-"

"You didn't hear that," Kagome gasped, unaware the private nickname she had for Sesshoumaru had even crossed her lips. For several minutes they stared at each other, Kagome mortified, Bokusenou stupefied.

And then he began laughing hysterically. Kagome lowered her hand from her mouth and watched the tree laugh for longer than she thought possible for anyone to find that funny. She had a feeling that if he had tear ducts, he'd be crying sap.

"I have known that pup since he was born, and never have I heard so apt a term, if a bit childish. But you are both children still, so it is a small thing. Thank you miko, for bringing joy to this one's heart. It is not often I have reason to laugh."

"Then I'll try to visit more often, if you would like."

"I think I would. Although there are more practical reasons for you to visit, which I would like to speak to you about."

"Okay," Kagome said, wondering where the tree was going with all this. For a moment, she thought about the nature extremists in her time. Maybe they were right, especially if the were tree youkai.

"I have been here since before the forest itself, and I have seen many things. Some beautiful, some not."

"I have been here since before the forest itself, and I have seen many things. Some beautiful, some not."

"He paused, as if trying to figure out how to word what was coming as gently as he could. "My roots run deep, and my sight goes further than any others. I know what happened to you.""

"It's not like it's a big secret," Kagome started.

"I know you keep one hidden, locked away from all, even yourself."

"We're not going to talk about that."

"If you don't, you will never be able to help Sesshoumaru defeat Naraku."

"We're doing just fine in that area," Kagome snapped. That familiar darkness slipped it's tendrils from the box she kept it locked in, deep within her mind. If she didn't think about it, it couldn't hurt her. She wouldn't think about it. Better to just shove it back down, down so deep she could pretend it was never there.

"Miko, I have no wish to cause you pain," he began.

"Then don't talk about it." She stood and began pacing in front of him anxiously, her hands fidgeting
restlessly. She began to remove the knife from the sheath, putting it back, and slid it out. He knew that if Sesshoumaru had seen it, he would have approved. Her motions were perfect and quick.

"You must. There is little time as it is. If you don't confront this, Naraku will be able to use it against you, and from what I know of the creature, he will use every tool at hand to hurt you."

"It can't hurt me, it doesn't matter," Kagome snarled, a perfect imitation of an angry Sesshoumaru.

"Then why does even mentioning it affect you in such a way?" The spirit asked, his voice still kind, still patient. He had directed his gaze at Naraku's fortress, and dove into the earth to find the past there. What he had seen in the blood that soaked the stone and soil beneath it had moved him, a difficult task considering he had watched in silence as both humans and youkai enacted their dramas all over the land.

"Because it doesn't matter and everyone keeps acting like it does!" She shouted, tears beginning to trail down her cheeks. Her head began to pound and she ached for the embrace of the ocean in her mind. Wanted to be anywhere but here, talking to a tree about that.

"It was not your fault," Bokusenou said gently. "And you did something very brave-"

"That failed anyway!" Kagome shouted, dropping to her knees in front of the tree, the floodgates were open, and the dagger dropped to the forest floor, forgotten. The youkai felt no small pain for the girl's plight. The memories she carried were too much for one so young, too heavy by far for any one person. And yet the source of all the darkness within her, the insecurity, was that one secret. It bred self loathing and self blame in it's wake. She didn't have to acknowledge it for it to harm her.

"Everything that happened was my fault!"

"How can you say such a thing?" He rumbled in the darkness, confused by her statement.

"If I hadn't been so stupid, Naraku would never have gotten the jewel."

"Naraku is devious, he would have found some way to wrest it from you."

"And what about Inu Yasha? That m-monster told me if gave him my virginity, he'd let Inu Yasha go. He made him watch and killed him anyway!" She bawled, her words barely intelligible through the heaving gasps as she tried to suck in air. "And that was the last sight he had of me. Being used by-by." She couldn't continue through the deep lungfuls of air she was pulling in, trying to breath even though it felt a boulder was sitting on her chest.

"You wished to save someone you loved. I see only courage in that. You made a sacrifice, and it is no fault of yours that he didn't hold up his end of the bargain. But no little one, so far, I see nothing that casts the blame on you."

She stared at him, wondering how he could say such things so easily. He hadn't been there. Hadn't felt those awful, lying lips kissing her or the miasma burning or the clawed hands around her neck. He didn't know what it was like to watch those brown, human eyes crying as she gave herself up, hadn't heard her love's curses as she screamed in agony.

"You have the perspective of time and distance," She accused bitterly.

"That is correct, and I will not deny it. You have great cause to be angry. But do not aim that anger at yourself," He urged gently. "Lay it at the feet of the one who has done this great wrong."

"But what about Sango? If I wasn't, if I hadn't-It's like they knew I was dirty, and they came after us,
and she got hurt because of m-me!" The sobs began to wrench themselves from deep in her chest, and Bokusenou waited them out patiently. He had watched humans for centuries, and still he did not understand their willingness to add to their shame. It took almost an hour for her to cry out, before she leaned against him, not even looking up at him anymore.

"Child, the truth is that there are bad men everywhere. Bad women. Bad youkai. Even if you had refused Naraku's offer and come across those men, they would have still forced themselves upon you. What you did had no bearing on that. Your friend's hurt was because of those men. Not you. Out of all of the choices that were made, you made only one of them. You did a brave thing to save the hanyou. The rest was out of your hands."

"But I could have-" She started.

"No, you could not. You made sure your pup made it to Sesshoumaru safely, yes?" He felt her nod. "And you were the one to get loose from your ropes first, at the bandit camp. And you didn't leave your friend behind." Another nod. "And now, even though I can feel the darkness pulling at you, you are willing to face down the man who coerced you in the foulest way possible to save your loved ones." Another nod. "Even going so far as to join Sesshoumaru," He paused, wanting a moment for his words to sink in.

"I'm not saying it will feel better right away child. It might not for many years. But do not add to the burden so eagerly. It is misplaced."

Another nod, this one more sleepy than anything. Using his magic, he lulled her to sleep. It was not difficult, the confrontation he had forced had taken most of her energy. He watched over her, wondering what the wayward daiyoukai was up too. The anxiety rolling off the pup had been obvious to him, though he saw more than most. Something had broken some conviction in him, and that was all he could tell.

Ah, well, Totosai was due for another visit soon.

"You won't be happy if I tell you," Totosai grumbled as he drank his tea. Sesshoumaru, having refused everything, stared down imperiously at the old man, waiting for his answers. Several minutes passed in complete silence, and just as he was getting ready to throw him into a wall, Totosai began to speak.

But not to answer his question.

"What happened to the girl?"

"This Sesshoumaru presumes you mean the miko."

"Yes. Kagome."

"She is residing in this Sesshoumaru's shiro."

"How did that come to happen?" The old man's bored tone was beginning to grate on his nerves, but he knew if he didn't play along, he would never get the answers he sought. Damn his eyes.

"She came to this Sesshoumaru, after the half breed was slain. When they were initially captured, she sent her pup to to the Shiro."

"So she came for the pup but ended up staying." It was a statement of fact, not a question.
"She was in no condition to leave," Sesshoumaru snapped, the first sign of his growing fury.

"Awful nice, you letting her stay like that. But she's better now, right?"

"This Sesshoumaru is training her to assist in the defeat of Naraku. Which is why-"

"You're accepting help from a human?" Totosai gasped, interrupting him while choking on his tea. He eyed the daiyoukai warily. The pale haired man seemed less than thrilled with his blunt observation. "Forgive me if I find that hard to believe."

"She is able to add her power to my own attacks. Now-"

"Interesting. Bet you old man's spinning in his grave, knowing his son and a miko can combine their power." Sesshoumaru felt the full weight of the old youkai's stare, and for the first time realized that he was being measured. Considered. But for what?

"Perhaps it is this Sesshoumaru's turn to shock his father then."

And suddenly the old man began to laugh. A deep, full bodied laugh, his head thrown back and arms clutching his stomach. Sesshoumaru endured this for several minutes before sending out a warning flare of his youki. The laughter stopped abruptly, and the old man contemplated him soberly.

"Well, seems to me there's a problem here, right enough. You haven't mastered the Meido yet, have you?"

"I have not."

"I can't really help you until you do. Wish I could, and that's as much as surprise to me as it is the truth."

"What about Tessaiga?" Sesshoumaru prompted.

"What about it?"

"Something does not feel right about it."

"You mean you were actually able to use it?" Once again the old man's eyes bugged wildly. "How'd you manage that?"

"The miko showed this Sesshoumaru how."

"She showed you?" Totosai asked slowly, as if unsure he had heard correctly. Now why was he getting such a strange look from the obviously crazy demon?

"Hn."

"Well then, that might change things a bit. Hmph, your old man never counted on things getting this boogerized up, I'll tell you that. All those plans, and Inu Yasha had to go and die. Well, at least he tried."

"What are you talking about?" Sesshoumaru snapped, impatient with the seemingly nonsensical paths the old man's ramblings were taking.

"That old dog knew what needed to be done and set it up even before he died. Once he passed, everything fell into place. He knew you'd go looking for Tessaiga and had a barrier put around it that would repel any demon that did not feel for humans. Sounds less specific than it was considering you
and your brother were the only ones that could find his grave. And for you-

"Tenseiga."

"Yeah. Well, Tenseiga was initially just a healing sword. But your father, he got it in his head to steal a move from some other demon, can't even remember his name now, and since the power was so great, he instilled the move in Tenseiga, which became yours."

"And what moved my father to leave me such a sword?"

"He said something about learning to protect. Can't really remember a lot of that conversation." A blatant lie. He'd always remember the inu's final wishes, and knew each and every reason they were carried out. But he was already giving away so much. Things weren't supposed to happen this way. Somehow Naraku had managed to throw everything off the path the dead inu had predicted.

"But he always meant for the two to be joined back together."

"And in the end it would have gone to the hanyou," Sesshoumaru finished, a sour taste filling his mouth.

"That would be it."

"And Tessaiga's strangeness to me?"

"It can let you past the barrier, but it knows it's not your sword. You can perform the basics with it. But anything new probably won't work."

At least now he knew why he had been unable to perform soryuha. He tried to tamp down the rage at his father's willingness to leave him with nothing.

"You know, he expected a lot from you. He was an anomaly for his line. Not many daiyoukai came from his family, and what with your mother's blood, well. When you were born, he knew you'd be powerful. He was right."

'What has that to do with anything?" He didn't ask the question aloud, wasn't willing to give that much away. The old blacksmith had already seen him confused, and it was not a feeling he enjoyed admitting.

"You're close, closer than you think Sesshoumaru. That ultimate sword is out there."

"But it will not be Tessaiga," Sesshoumaru finished.

"No."

"I will realize my father's wishes." Totosai's gaze became even heavier on his shoulders. He had never felt such weight from a simple look, and he wondered if this is how people felt when he stared at them.

'No, it is like being stared through,' He admitted to himself.

"Why?"

"The Tesisaga must be completed. I will perfect the meido, and join the two."

"And then?"
"It will go back to my father's grave." It was useless to him now anyway. He wasn't sure he wanted to touch the damnable thing anymore. A false present from his father. A glimpse of what he could have had. Only to give it to the worthless half breed!

He told himself that this was not bitterness, merely disappointment clawing at his gut.

"Well, when you're done, I'll expect I'll know," Was all Totosai told him as he made to leave the volcano. Sesshoumaru didn't even acknowledge the old man as he walked away, holding tightly to the spikes in his emotion.

He was purposely hunting, he knew that. He should go back to Bokusenou's forest and retrieve the woman, but he felt too volatile to be anywhere near her and her damnable questions. Three insignificant battles were behind him, and he searched out stronger prey. Auras pulled at him, the fear exciting his blood. A hundred beings fled, exciting the need to chase. But none of the power he felt satisfied his craving.

He wanted a challenge. And he would find it.

Plains and forests and villages blurred into oneness as he sped up, searching for any power worth fighting, worth opening the meido for.

"Kagome, wake up," A voice said. The old scratchy voice kept speaking to her, pushing through to her sleep addled mind. She snuggled deeper into the-bark? Wait, what? Kagome jerked back, taking in her surroundings. It was completely dark beneath the canopy, and she could barely see anything.

"Kagome, you must wake."

"Huh?" Suddenly she remembered where she was. Bokusenou had somehow grown around her, cupping her in his trunk like a child in a cradle.

"Sesshoumaru requires your aid."

"Where is he?" She asked, looking around in the dark, trying to make out the figure of the daiyoukai. When she saw and heard nothing, she gave up. If he needed her, he would say something. Maybe.

"He is not here. But the wind knows where. I will send you," The tree supplied. Kagome jumped and stood, staring at the almost invisible face of the old youkai. What was he talking about?

"Wait, how-"

"No time. The forest will take you, just step forward," He commanded her, his tone suddenly sharp. Stunned by his abrupt change in tone, dumbly, she did as he asked and experienced the queerest feeling. It was as if she was moving quickly, but staying completely still, almost like being carried by the forest floor faster than a car could move. Looking down, she assumed that her conclusion was correct, and fought nausea, resolving to keep looking forward. When she almost fell back, moving even more quickly, she closed her eyes, determined not to throw up.

When it stopped, she saw bright flashes of light striking one another, and the clang of two swords, almost bell like, echoing in the dark woods she found herself in. They blinked in and out of existence, moving like pinballs, further and further away. She chased them, trying to keep up.

"It would be nice if the forest could help me out a little here," She growled, trying to keep track of the light moving further and further away. The ground didn't start moving, so she hurried her pace,
determined to help, ignoring the trill of fear that knotted her stomach. The first real battle since- well, she hoped she wasn't rusty.

But when she stepped into a clearing, she realized the forest was helping her. Some sort of shield slid into place, although she wasn't sure the fighting youkai would even notice they couldn't move from the large meadow.

They pushed back from one another, stilling as they stared, one grinning, the other impassive. Sesshoumaru's opponent was a dark reflection in a mirror, long ebony hair falling down his back like a midnight curtain, blending with his black clothing in the dark.

"Sesshoumaru." Kagome breathed, taking in the sight of the warrior. He looked tense, and she knew from watching closely that he was angry about something. But the other youkai's vivid violet eyes snapped to her, and the grin grew, revealing gleaming white fangs.

"A fan, Sesshoumaru? And a human no less," It chuckled. Sesshoumaru didn't even look at her as he darted forward, a blur. But the other youkai wasn't there anymore.

And then she felt the claws digging into her waist through her hakama and around her throat.

"You smell so tasty-" It whispered in her ear.

He brain shut down as tears started falling. She wanted to scream, really, she did. But nothing could get past the fist sized lump in her throat. The secret she had kept under lock and key was still too close to the surface, still too raw to ignore as his tongue swept up her cheek. The memory won out, and took her.

"Her fear is delicious, wouldn't you agree Sesshoumaru?" He asked, glancing at the still daiyoukai, noting his the eyes once gold now incarnadine.

"Miko-" A throaty growl.

No answer.

"Miko?" The youkai asked, looking down at the woman in his grasp. She was dressed as one, but any miko would fight. "No, I don't believe she is. She'd be fighting me right now, might even be able to burn me a little, maybe."

They could hear her heart beating, could hear the strangled noises trying to escape from her throat, ending before they could get to her mouth. Her tears piked at his already fraying control. The blood pricked from her skin tore a snarl from his chest, as unexpected as it was gratifying to release. But her eyes burned brightly in the night. Not flat, as he had expected, but hurting. Hurting like Rin's.

A white blur rushed forth, and her knees hit the ground, the jolt of pain not even registering.

The energy welled within her. Naraku's face interposed on the youkai that had licked her, his spit still glistening on her cheek. She turned, saw that Sesshoumaru had opened the meido.

A perfect sphere loomed in the sky.

The youkai was smiling evilly. Something growing in his palm, glowing vividly. His face was his own once more. But the cruelty was still there. The deep down sickness that ate at her when she closed her eyes.

The energy overwhelmed the clearing as she pulled everything she had from within, draining her
reserves, and threw it at the meido.

And something strange happened. Sesshoumaru stepped back, his eyes widening as the meido changed. It sucked up the miko's energy. That he had expected. The rosy pink like a pinpoint in the darkness. But then he heard the winds.

"Neat trick Sesshoumaru, you can make it whistle," Was all he heard before the winds grew. Then he saw it, growing in the blackness.

A vortex.

A sudden vacuum, the meido pulled at everything in the clearing. Everything except himself and the miko. And he realized it a split second before the youkai did. It was long enough for him to be pulled in. Like that, it was suddenly gone. The winds, the meido, the youkai. The trees didn't rustle, and anything living within the area had fled. Just silence. He turned, his eyes once more impassive.

"Miko-"

"The meido, it was-" Kagome began.

"What are you doing here?" He bit out.

"Bokusenou said-" She stopped, suddenly wary. He was already angry. If she told him Bokusenou had said he needed help, he'd probably kill her. "He got me here somehow." She felt the eyes boring into the top of her head as she stared at the ground. "I'm sorry I got in the way."

"The meido has been mastered."

She jerked, wondering why he sounded so angry as he said it. Finally bringing her eyes back to his face, she tried to figure out why there had been that hint of rage. Instead of looking at her, he walked forward. He took Tessaiga out, further confusing Kagome.

As he touched Tessaiga to Tenseiga, energy permeated the air, the ki releasing forming a false wind within the clearing. She watched as the swords glowed. And then there were two shadow swords, their edges barely outside the lines of the real ones.

When the shadow Tenseiga broke, the pulse knocked her to ground, the sudden light blinding her. Minutes later, she was staring dazedly up at Sesshoumaru walking away from the sword lying on the ground.

"What ails you?"

"The light-" She tried explaining. He looked at her as if she'd gone mad. "You didn't see it, or feel the pulse?"

"Tenseiga is empty now."

"No, no!" Kagome cried, looking at the sword laying on the ground. "I can still feel it beating," She explained, running to the sword. She picked it up, the sudden shock jolting up her fingertips, so strong she almost dropped it. He was sheathing Tessaiga when she brought it's mate to him.

"It's beating, feel," She told him, holding it up to him as she had so recently offered Tessiaga. Almost hesitantly, he took it from her, his hands wrapping around the hilt. As he did, his eyes widened in shock.
"Can you travel?"

"Yeah," She answered, still cowed by the expression she had seen before it had been pulled in, hidden from her. The cloud was suddenly just there, and she plopped onto it, crossing her legs. They began to travel, and she dared a question.

"Why were you so angry the meido was complete?"

He stared ahead for a long time, and she thought he was ignoring her when he suddenly answered. "The ability, once mastered, was meant to be given to the Tessaiga."

It didn't take long for the ramifications to hit her. "I'm sorry."

He didn't reply as they traveled. She realized how far Bokusenou's spell had taken her when the sky began to lighten and the world seemed tinted by blue. It had always been her favorite part of the day, though she rarely saw it. That brief time when it wasn't quite day or night, but everything was blue. Every new years as they had waited for the sunrise, her mother had said it was the blue of her father's eyes.

They veered from their direction slightly, and when the cloud touched down, they were standing in font of a waterfall. Kagome watched, silent was he moved to it, his hand plunging into what had to be freezing cold water without a flinch. When it withdrew, he was holding a strange dark sliver of stone. It looked like onyx, but instead of reflecting light off of it's surface, it drew it in.

"What is it?" Kagome asked, eying the shard distrustfully.

"A shard of Hosenki's armor. This Sesshoumaru has a task he must complete."

"Do you want to be alone for it?" She asked, wondering if he was going to leave Tenseiga where Tessiaga had once been entombed.

"It matters not."

She saw the pathway open, and watched him walk through it. Even though she wanted to go, she knew he'd want to do it alone, and held back as the pathway closed. Suddenly alone, she pulled her knees to her chest, and let out the tears of frustration and anger.

Some help she was. She had gotten herself captured, and hadn't even thought to purify the bastard. Self loathing welled up in her as hot, angry tears leaked from beneath her lids. The blue faded, and the world was lit with the cheerful light of the sun. Fervently she wished it would just rain. It shouldn't be sunny, as if the kami themselves were mocking her and Sesshoumaru both!

The tears had stopped by the time he appeared, as if from nowhere. But her breathing still hadn't evened out. She was so wrapped within her own self hatred that she didn't even notice him standing before her, staring down blankly.

"Miko-" He finally said, hoping to gain her attention. It had been a long night, and he only wished to leave and find his own bed. She didn't even look up, her breaths still coming in little gasps.

"Miko-" He started again.

"I can't help with Naraku!" She sobbed, her tears starting anew. If she had been looking up, she
would have seen him step back, surprised by the conviction in her outburst and her sudden change of heart. Instead, she let the crying take her, each breath interspersed with the sordid story.

"He told me if I let him u-use me, he would let Inu Yasha go. He p-promised he'd let him go. And he made him watch. And made me l-look at Inu Yasha the whole time!"

Sesshoumaru stared down at the woman, wondering how the nightmares of the bandits had superseded this in her mind. He hadn't felt or known a trace of this event in her core, where everything should have been apparent for him to see and to know.

"He came in me right as he ripped Inu Yasha apart, and Inu Yasha kept crying and screaming and telling me not to do it the whole time. He didn't even care about himself. Gods, everything hurt-" Kagome fell into unintelligible sobs, the words too garbled for even Sesshoumaru to understand.

When half a mark had passed without her cries abating, he gave in.

"Miko, that is no reason you cannot help this Sesshoumaru."

And thankfully her tears ceased. Unfortunately they were replaced with a glare.

"He'll use me again, against you. Something. He'll do something. I couldn't even protect myself against that youkai-"

"This Sesshoumaru agreed to protect you."

"And what if you can't?" She shouted, finally standing and poking him in the chest. "He's pure evil, even you know that. What if I can't join my attack with yours?" She started.

"This Sesshoumaru does not appreciate what you are trying to imply. I gave my word, and I will not be forsworn!" He finally snarled. The events of the evening had been too much to bear. To find out his father had cheated him so completely- And though he had wanted to master opening the meido, he had not expected to so suddenly. Had not wanted to.

But that damn woman!

Once the Tessaiga had been in his father's tomb, it had resonated with where it had once rested. Though it had felt right, or correct, to put it back, it had not been easy. He imagined he had even heard his father's laughter, which had not helped either.

The world was mocking him. And now this. Did he even really need the onna's help? Of course he did. Because the Tenseiga rested at his side, once more a weapon of healing, as contradictory as that sounded. He was left only with himself to battle others with. But that need still chafed at him, mocking him as much as the imagined laughter had.

The miko was staring at him as if he'd grown another head, or spontaneously regrown his arm.

"I'm sorry," She mumbled, suddenly looking at the ground again. "But I don't think I can do it."

"Then do not think. You are more than capable of facing the hanyou."

Her expression did nothing to hide her incredulity. And something was building.

"How is it just so easy for you? It's like you don't feel anything!" Kagome accused, poking him in the chest angrily as she shouted. "Do you have any idea what it's like for a man to touch me! That youkai licked me and all I could see was Naraku's face and I was scared! How am I supposed to face
the real thing and not have a mental breakdown?"

He'd had enough. Somehow, everything of the past 24 hours was enough to send him flying over the edge of reason. Everything in his stilled, and a curious calm overtook him. Something deeper that felt infinitely more fragile than his normal calm equilibrium.

"You say the hanyou coerced you into rutting and killed the half breed? Then you have every reason, every right, to face him down. You've come this far and survived. Most humans could not. Why stop now?"

"I'm not-"

"You are."

The whole situation felt as absurd as it probably looked.

"But what if Naraku does something. He used me. He knows I'm dirty," Kagome tried again, needing to make him realize what a liability she would be if she tried to help him.

"If you were truly impure, your own powers as a miko would not be so strong."

He had her there, and they both knew it. It bothered him that she not only inflicted such loathing on herself, but insisted on dragging him into as well.

"I'm scared Inu Yasha hates me, wherever he is in the afterlife."

Sesshoumaru moved his gaze from her to the sky, peering into the perfect blue. She pulled back from him, suddenly aware she had been shouting at someone who could kill her easily, and had probably dreamed of doing so for the past three years.

"You attempted to save your alpha. As your leader, he would find only pride that you gave what you held dearest." He really didn't want to talk right now. It felt like every quietly spoken word was chipping away at that calmness, and beneath lay something violent and vivid, completely unwanted and unnatural.

She stared at the youkai, bewildered. Surely this was not Sesshoumaru talking. It couldn't be. Sesshoumaru did not make people feel better. He just didn't. This new Sesshoumaru bothered her for some reason.

"You know, in the whole time I've known you, you've said maybe two sentences in a conversation. Now you're suddenly Mister Talkative."

"This Sesshoumaru has no choice, if you are to fight. And you must. Although this Sesshoumaru does not understand why you have not told the taijiya. As your companion, she would be the better choice."

"She'd worry more, hate more. There's already too much there. Even when we save Miroku and Kohaku, it'll take a long time for her to heal."

He wondered if she meant that he could withstand the information more easily than the slayer. He had noticed the hatred burning in the woman. It rolled off of her in waves, and even Kotaeru had told him that she practiced with a single minded intensity that was falling into obsession. Perhaps the miko was correct, although he was loath to admit it, and didn't agree with her reasoning. Healing was not his forte. But an obsessed, angry fighter was less than half as useful as a thinking, calm, rational warrior. And he had no doubts that if the slayer knew the truth, she would be pushed over the edge
of reason and completely useless to him.

"It is as you say, she is better off not knowing."

"So you won't tell her?"

"I will not."

"Please don't tell anyone else. I don't think I could stand it if-" She didn't finish her statement, looking on the ground.

"This Sesshoumaru will honor your request."

'Should I be prepared for more such outbursts? I know nothing of the human mind.'

When he summoned the cloud of youki, she sat on it gratefully, confident of his promise. There was a complete silence, hers contemplative and his tense, on the way back to the shiro.

"Why is it taking so long?" Sango demanded, cornering Sesshoumaru in the dojo. He had been going through several kata, trying to calm his own inner turmoil. The loss on tenseiga as a weapon had left him listing strangely. There had been days where his disappeared to go find youkai outside of his borders to destroy. And though there had been many, none had presented him with satisfaction he had expected upon their demise.

"It takes time," He told her staring down at her imperiously. Despite his generosity in the area of wardrobe, she wore her slayer's garb every day except when it was being washed, donning priestess robes much in the way Kagome did. Today was a wash day apparently. He didn't like seeing the outfit on the woman, something rankled in him when he saw it.

"It's been two weeks. How long does it take youkai to travel and convince a few bandits?" She demanded again.

"It is no few. Do not insult my men again. If the wait is too much, go train or leave."

His words were final, and he was pleased to note that at least one of the shiro's new additions obeyed him without question. The other one was more of a problem. Though she appeared to obey, usually at least, she had a passive aggressive way of getting around his orders. Or blatantly ignoring them.

She'd been spending an inordinate amount of time Bokusenou, for one. Three times since she had met the koboku no kai he'd had to go find her. How she had gotten to his wood in the first place, without a single guard seeing, was still beyond him. All three times had been when he was scheduled to train her.

When he had informed her that if she wasn't willing to train to protect herself, he would not teach her, there had been problems. Problems that had left him with a singularly humiliating scar on his back that took it's time in healing. There was still an ache beneath the skin that bothered him almost as much as the loss of an offensive weapon and the inability to just kill her and be done with the irritation.

Holy powers had rarely bothered him. In fact, he was singular among demons for that ability alone, at least now that his father was gone. But the woman had managed to summon enough power to actually harm him, and that rankled. She could never summon that much energy when practicing, although even now he knew he wasn't putting his all into it either.
He growled, damning his father for the umpteenth time since he had placed Tessaiga back in the
tomb. What good was power without focus? Only once had he tried to use the Tenseiga as an
offensive weapon, and while he had been able to summon the soryuha through it before, though he
rarely had, instead the power had gathered, and his swing had healed the torn landscape of the
training field. It was as if he and the miko hadn't practiced there. Instead, the ruptured ground had
flattened, and the grass grown tall once more.

Channeling his youkai with her reiki was all well and good, and though she was still having
problems summoning it and timing it correctly, they had made progress.

But there had been nothing like the inferno of holy night when they had joined focused attacks.

Frustrated, he gave up on the kata, knowing he would find no peace in it. Instead, he inhaled deeply
as he exited the dojo, searching for a particular scent. And let the air out in a weary sigh. He had
been looking for Rin, and found her. With the kit. And that woman.

Rin had brightened visibly despite the tension that hung heavy in the air of the shiro. War was being
planned, and everyone was lost to their own world of worry. The kit and his mother had brought
some of the light back for her, and he was grateful for it. But at times when he just wanted something
to listen to that didn't involve war, finding the girl without the added presence of the miko was
becoming increasingly difficult.

But he did not mind the inane babble of the child, though why was still a mystery. Something about
it soothed the impatience he was feeling more often. If he had his way, he would have destroyed
everything outside of his lands, and probably a good portion of those in it, and that was something he
could not afford.

Ignoring his misgivings about the miko's presence, he sought out his ward, and was not surprised to
find her in the inner gardens, though her quiet, bright eyed attentiveness did.

The miko was telling them a story. All were so wrapped up in the listening or telling that they
completely ignored him as he walked to a nearby tree and sat, one leg propping up his arm, the other
lying flat on the ground. He didn't listen to the miko's story so much as her tone. And the delighted
gasps of both children.

The atmosphere was different than anywhere else in the shiro, indeed, the citadel itself. Despite the
presence of the normally boisterous children, it was calm, and while the scents and energies present
did not scream delight, there was a quiet joy that lulled him. For the duration of the story, he did not
think on the loss of the Tessaiga or of Tenseiga's new lack of abilities, or of the war and it's
implications.

Instead, it was enough to sit and enjoy. A sort of peace suffused his being, and though he had not felt
such in recent memory, he was able to name the feeling.

Contentment.

Chapter End Notes

As for the Koboku No Kai, I don't know if it's ever implicitly stated what Bokusenou is,
and I went back and tried to figure it out. Not finding any definites, I chose to call him
that. They're tree spirits of very old trees (different from Kodama, who make thier
homes in trees).
"There is a wolf here, and he was asking for an audience with you."

"Was?" Sesshoumaru asked, noting the discomfort in the guard's scent.

"He took off without warning, saying the Lady Kagome's name. He could not be stopped, though we tried. He had some sort of weapon on his hand that pushed them back."

There was a stirring of wind, and the guard dropped to his knees. He had not wanted to tell the master that someone had penetrated the shiro and had expected to be punished for it. Though self preservation instincts gave way to worry after his lord's hasty exit. Sesshoumaru never hurried, yet there was no other word for the inu's sudden departure.

Kagome was playing hide and seek with the children in the inner gardens. Shippou wasn't allowed to be the seeker, not since he had admitted a superior nose. Kagome had promised she wouldn't look for them by their auras, and it had started a fun quest of hide and seek. And even though she could hear their giggles as she passed by them, intentionally ignoring their hiding spot, she was having a good time.

In fact, her only truly happy times were spent with the children. The shiro was becoming increasingly tense and even depressing. War loomed, and there was no mistaking that fact. Sesshoumaru had even cut down on their nightly training sessions to deal more with the arising problems that the refugees brought with with them.

But those thoughts were far from her mind as she let herself delight in the small giggles coming from behind two different trees.

"I'm going to find you!" She called in the opposite direction of where the two lay in wait.

Just as she was about to pounce on Shippou, a hand caught her arm in a tight grip. She stilled, her eyes wide as she turned to Kouga.

"Kagome, how did you get here? Sesshoumaru's got you hostage, doesn't he?" The youkai asked, never once stopping to notice the sudden surge in her reiki nor the small, distressed noises that were growing in volume. "Well, it doesn't matter, I'll save you and we can go defeat Naraku. Now that mutt face is gone, we can hit him hard without have to worry about the half-breed slowing us-"

He never got the chance to finish.

Light radiated from her, as if a second skin had swelled and burst, blinding everyone in the garden.
Guards fell back, every instinct telling them to run from the holy light or risk purification. There was a crash as a wall crumbled, and the wolf demon fell into the rubble, unconscious and looking as if he'd been hit by lighting, clothing and hair singed.

But the light didn't stop, and when the threat of the wolf was removed, they began to fall back, fear pricking at their senses. When a blur they dimly recognized as their master threw itself fearlessly into the light, there was a surge of youki and the two energies clashed. As their master's aura grew, they began to relax.

Sesshoumaru however, didn't relax, couldn't. Ruefully he admitted to himself that Tenka had been right, the woman at full power was a force to be reckoned with. It was taking every fiber of his being to try and weave his energy into her own and force it back. He was pushing toward her physically as he did so, the air crackling around him as the two powers converged again and again.

"Miko, you're frightening your pup!" He snarled as soon as he was in earshot. The roar of magic around him caught his words and carried them away, and he only hoped the woman heard them as he kept pushing his own energy out, pulling from his reserves and praying it was enough.

As if a light had gone out, she stopped, her eyes red from tears. Both pulled back, their auras withdrawing back to their skin. It worried him that he could still sense it, crackling along her skin as if unwilling to settle.

"Mama?" The voice was timid and very small, as if the little boy had shrunk. Sesshoumaru could tell tears threatened.

"What was that about?" A new voice asked. Sesshoumaru turned, youki rising up to meet the challenge the wolf was issuing as his aura flared with frustration and confused rage.

"You will leave, now. An escort will show you to the guest wing," Sesshoumaru told him, refusing to let out the growl that was growing in his chest.

"Now wait just a damn minute-" The wolf began again.

"These are my lands, my word is law. If you choose to ignore this Sesshoumaru's command, there will be a penalty. Guards, escort him to the guest wing and make sure he stays there until summoned."

The wolf didn't fight, the chill in the inu's word's stilling him. With another glance at Kagome, his eyes wide at the sight of her ki still spiking erratically, he allowed himself to be led out of the garden.

"Mama, please, I can't." Shippou began, distress lacing his tone. He was standing next to her, trying to touch her but afraid of the shimmering, crackling energy dancing over her skin.

"I need to let it out, Sesshoumaru, it won't go back down," Kagome whimpered, her hands clenched with the effort of keeping it all in. He smelled the blood from her nails digging into her palms and made the best decision he could.

"Rin, take the kit inside. I will return shortly." He was grateful for the child's faith as she pulled the kit towards the doors of his home. At least one person obeyed him without question. Turning to the onna, he picked her up, trying not to notice the small, rather unpleasant jolts of electricity that jabbed at him wherever she came into contact.

The scenery blurred as he raced toward the field, her energy spiking more and more harshly, the spaces between the peaks becoming shorter and shorter.
"We're here," He told her, his feet touching down, flattening the tall grass. He should have set her down, he knew that, or dropped her or thrown her from him, because he was suddenly engulfed in the power that had been trying to escape the woman. Light blinded him in a sense, because all he could see were the multitudes of colors surrounding him, stabbing at his eyes viciously.

And he couldn't let go. He tried to, but she was clinging to him, silent, though he could smell her tears somehow, despite the fact that the energy had all but obliterated every other scent in the air.

Minutes passed, but each one felt like a small eternity. And then the power began to recede, dying down and sinking beneath her skin. As with a storm churning the sea, the maelstrom passed, and the tide of energy stilled, it's movements perceptible only beneath the surface. She was shaking in his grip, her breath coming in little gasps. The tears still trickled from tightly shut lids. Yet she still wouldn't let go.

"Miko-" He finally broke the silence.

"I'm sorry. He just grabbed me and called me his woman again and something just broke," She whispered. "I didn't hurt you did I?"

It had been uncomfortable, but as he did a mental check of himself, there was no lingering pain. Strange, because it should have injured him. By all rights, it would have ripped lesser youkai apart.

"This Sesshoumaru is uninjured."

She sighed, releasing a breath he hadn't been aware of her holding, and smiled tremulously up at him.

"I'm sorry I lost control like that. It was like it was acting independently, you know? It just needed out, and it wouldn't listen to me."

"I had thought the wolf was a friend of yours," He admitted, though her understood her fear. He had expected her to release some energy, enough to keep the wolf away. He had not expected her to release such that it could have killed every youkai within the citadel.

"He was, but he keeps calling me his woman, and I'm not. I'm not anyone's woman. He wouldn't let go, just kept going on and on about defeating Naraku and Inu Yasha being dead, as if it was a good thing. If he had started in about us mating, I don't think I could have handled it," She admitted in a frustrated tone laced with tears. "He's a good guy, but he's just too-" She searched for a word, frustration obvious.

"Unrefined?" He supplied. She nodded. He noticed she still hadn't let go of him.

"I don't feel safe around him yet," She admitted slowly.

"That implies you feel safe with this Sesshoumaru."

She blinked owlishly before giving him a small grin.

"Guess that means I do. You can't accuse me of not trusting you anymore."

"Hn. He will want to speak with you," He began, changing the topic, uncomfortable with the revelation that of all people, he was apparently 'safe'.

"I can't. I can't see him again, what if he tries to touch me?"
"This Sesshoumaru could speak to him."

"No, he'll go after Naraku even harder, he'd be killed!"

"Then he will only learn of the bandit attack. It will be enough to stay his declarations, at least until after Naraku is dead and the jewel completed."

"You'd really do that for me?" She asked, surprised by the offer.

"It would not do for him to act as such again in the walls of the citadel. Although if he were to do so in Naraku's fortress it would not be amiss."

"Is that supposed to be funny?"

He ignored her, already launching himself into the sky. But Kagome could swear she saw a corner of his mouth tilt up, just barely noticeable. It was enough to relax her as they flew back to the city. Outrageous display of power notwithstanding, it had not been a bad day. And as much as she had been afraid of Kouga, she was glad he was okay. And even if it had been another youkai, Sesshoumaru had come, even if she was more than capable of defending herself. It was nice to be able to depend on someone besides herself.

"I want to know why you're keeping Kagome locked up here!" Kouga demanded before Sesshoumaru had even sat down. The guest wing was luxurious by anyone's standards, and that threw him, because until now it had always been caves for him. He liked the wilds, liked the smell of nature. And he hated the four walls and roof that enclosed him. It felt like breathing the stale air in a cage.

The daiyoukai didn't even glance at him as he finished arranging himself at the table. A servant brought tea, her glance nervous as she sat the cups on the table, trying to arrange them perfectly, but still trembling with the tension in the room. The ookami didn't seem to notice the energy sparking along Sesshoumaru's hand, nor the look in his eyes. Sesshoumaru found his lack of notice insulting. It was as if the youkai found no reason to watch him.

"You may go," He told her, finding the fussing of cup arrangements more annoying than usual. She fled without another word, grateful to leave the angry daiyoukai and the irate ookami alone.

"Sit," Sesshoumaru commanded, his tone even more glacial than before. Kouga thumped onto the floor across from him, glaring angrily. Ignoring the tea Sesshoumaru poured for him, he forced down the building growl, determined to get answers.

"This Sesshoumaru is not holding the miko captive. She is here of her own free will."

"I doubt that. Why would she come to you when-"

"When your own territories have been taken by Naraku?" Sesshoumaru asked, his tone light. But the comment stung, and he knew it. It was meant to be a humbling blow, and by the narrowing of Kouga's eyes, it had hit the mark.

"When she was captured, she sent her pup and the firecat to my lands. When she escaped, she came to retrieve him."

"That doesn't explain why she's here!" Sesshoumaru ignored the outburst from the ookami and continued on as if he hadn't even spoken. It was an effort to keep his youki held in check though. There was something challenging about the wolf's demeanor, and the beast in Sesshoumaru wanted...
to confront it and demand submission. However, acting on instincts would only cause more trouble at this point, and he had enough to handle as it was.

"Before she reached my borders, she was captured by bandits and held for almost a month."

Kouga stopped, his form visibly slumping as the implications hit him.

"Was she-?"

"Yes. Both she and the slayer. The physical wounds have healed." He didn't have to elaborate.

"She should be with friends, not-"

"A wolf that has constantly laid claim to her? It matters not. This Sesshoumaru has sworn to protect her, and she has accepted that. She has also chosen to aid this Sesshoumaru in his fight against the half-breed."

"And what fight is that? I don't know if you've noticed, but outside your borders everything has gone to shit. Nothing is safe from Naraku."

The miko had counted to ten at some point during their training, and when asked told him that she was trying to keep from losing her temper. When she had started again, then again, and again, she had admitted it was taking longer than usual. Mentally, he began counting, hoping it would help. When it didn't, he thought of the wolf's pelt as a rug to be walked over. However, the image didn't last. The wolf's scent combined with what would probably be a course pelt made the entire thought distasteful. Finally, he was able to continue.

"We have a plan that has been set in motion. It will take a bit longer, but it is the surest thing to work."

"And what plan is that?"

"How many men do you have?" Sesshoumaru asked, deliberately keeping the youkai off balance.

"About thirty," The wolf responded cautiously, clearly uneasy.

"We require assistance of youkai. Thus far we've been using the bandits to distract his children, but soon it will not be enough. If you wish to help, go find his children, distract them, or better, kill them if you can."

"He's got the jewel-" Kouga began, trying to make Sesshoumaru understand that it would be impossible. One of Naraku's lesser children had destroyed his clan. How could he face one powered by the jewel? How could he send the last of his pack to face them?

"The jewel is in three pieces according to the miko. One, the largest, is with Naraku. The slayer's younger brother is being kept alive by a shard. The other has not moved, so it is doubtful one of his children has it."

"How do you know all this?" Kouga asked, his eyes wide.

"The miko."

"Her name is Kagome," Came the commanding growl.

"She has not corrected this Sesshoumaru thus far," he replied phlegmatically.
"Strange, she did it often enough to me and mutt face."

"She has changed."

"Will she ever be able, I mean-" Kouga was blushing madly, indicating that he knew his question had been about to stray outside the lines of propriety. Sesshoumaru eyed him intently, only to receive a wary glance.

"She is under this Sesshoumaru's protection. However, it is only temporary. If there is a time in the future where claiming her becomes a possibility, she will inform you or not."

"Yeah right, pack isn't-"

"The miko is more than free to make her own choices. My status as alpha is only a formality where she is concerned. But you saw her reaction to you. She is useless to me when in that state, and dangerous to those under my care. If you wish to see her again, do not touch her. And make no mistake wolf, if you try to lay claim to her again, I will personally see to it that you join the brotherhood of the mujin."

Kouga was as white as a sheet and uncharacteristically silent when he nodded his agreement.

Sesshoumaru stood and left, thankful he had gotten through to the ill bred mongrel. Initially, he had only hoped to warn the youkai off. Instead, he had found himself outright threatening the other, and the sudden outburst had him more than slightly off kilter. The wolf's lack of reaction to him, despite his own youki practically begging for release bothered him as well.

Since when did anyone not find him threatening upon sight?

'I do not think I can take much more of this strangeness. It is most troublesome,' he thought to himself. Perhaps he had lied when he had told the wolf his position as her alpha was formality. But why would he want to add that insufferable wench to his pack?

The power that had buffeted at him only scant hours ago replayed in his mind. The press of light and sheer strength that had blinded his senses was nothing to be trifled with.

'And a great asset to my pack.'

Perhaps it came down to instinct. The onna was powerful, and looked to him for protection. In the end, it was the foundation of a pack, and the foundation of the relationship between an alpha and another packmate. His own instincts, normally so tightly leashed, surfacing in such a manner bothered him as much as the idea that the miko had, in whatever manner, been approved of by them.

"He's not going to leave us alone, is he?" The question would not have been so rude if the tone was voiced in had not been so petulant.

"No Kouga, I don't think he will," Kagome admitted pragmatically. In all honesty, she wasn't upset that the daiyoukai watched from a distance. In the past Kouga had been a friend that was gently rebuffed. But with her experiences things had changed. His constant barrage of touch and plethora of claims on her person weren't funny anymore, and they had ceased to be flattering long ago.

"Why are you here, really?"

"Sesshoumaru said I can help. And after what Naraku has done, well, he's the best option. He's been training me, trying to make me stronger. And he's showing me how to fight."
"You know how to fight, I mean, you knocked me into the wall, or did the wolf shaped impression in stone not do it for ya?"

"I can't do that to human men, and I'm sorry I reacted that way. I didn't mean, it's just-" Kouga held up his hands in a placating gesture to stop her sudden torrent.

"It's okay. Sesshoumaru explained what happened, and I get it. I promise I won't touch you and I'm not so stupid that I'll claim you as my woman. Just, don't do that again. I won't hurt you, I promise," He said quietly, as if saying the last pained him.

"Oh Kouga, I didn't think you would. It's just really hard sometimes, you know? Being touched by anyone except the children, it's- difficult."

"You let Sesshoumaru touch you." She knew he was trying to keep it from being an accusation, but it came out that way anyway.

"He doesn't do it often okay? Sesshoumaru touching me basically means there's no other choice. I know he doesn't want to touch me about as much as I don't want to be touched. But part of my training requires it."

"What do you mean?"

"When he shows me something new, he makes sure I can do it, no matter the situation."

"Are you saying he attacks you?" They had stopped walking and the ookami was staring down at her, completely flummoxed. "Are you out of your mind, he could-"

"He won't. It's just how it is. And if he keeps training me, I'll never be in the position to be harmed again, at least not like last time."

"Hmph, you're right about that much. If he trains you, you'll be able to kill the bastards with just a glare," The wolf joked feebly. Kagome smiled, more amused with Kouga's sudden capitulation and apparent dislike of Sesshoumaru than the joke itself.

"He's helping me. I probably drive him crazy, and I'm pretty sure he's envisioned me in pieces, but he's doing it, and that's all that matters. We'll get Naraku and hopefully the land will heal, and that's what's really important."

"You're right. Gods, it's so horrible out there. Once you hit the border, you'd never know there was a war going on, but it is. I've never seen anything like this, and I've warred before. But this, it's just fire and blood wherever you go. Sesshoumaru's been good though, I'll give him that much. There's refugees flocking in from all over, and he's taking them in, even the humans." The fear of the youkai lord was gone, and Kagome noted it had been replaced with just an inkling of approval, and dare she say it, admiration?

But her merriment quickly transitioned into astonishment. She had been aware that refugees were filtering in, but the way Kouga explained it, it sounded like droves of humans were filing into Sesshoumaru's lands, resettling and making new homes for themselves.

"Are there many seeking asylum?" She asked, trying to get a better picture of the world outside the citadel. It vexed her that her world had grown so small. It had been at least a week since she had really thought about anything outside of the citadel. Even the war felt distant, despite the constant overhanging tension.

"More than I can count. I've never seen anything like it. Even my tribe came. I've been searching for
the northern tribe, but I haven't heard any word yet."

"Oh no, Ayame-But she's alright, she has to be."

"I feel so stupid for ignoring her. Her tribe had already been attacked and they needed the help. Even if I didn't mate her, I could have helped. Especially now that I have Goraishi," He said.

"What?"

She watched the wolf flex his hand, and suddenly there was a gold, clawed gauntlet there, glittering in the sun. He moved his hand, and each clawed finger moved fluidly, perfectly, as if it were only a continuation of each digit.

"It's a weapon the elder's felt I had earned, although sometimes I wonder how. I promised to protect the clan with it, but the only thing I've been able to do for them is bring them here." His anguish obvious, Kagome put a concerned hand on his shoulder.

"Kouga, sometimes the best thing you can do is run away. I know it's hard, but you did the right thing," She assured him, hoping to project the admiration she felt. She knew it had to be hard to run away when fighting was ingrained in his nature.

However, he was more amazed that she had touched him at all, and that she had only added more bearing to her statement.

"That means a lot to me Kagome," He told her, tears glistening in his eyes. She had been the first to openly approve of his tactics. His clan had listened to him, and because he was a leader, he couldn't ask for affirmation that he was doing the right thing. The very action would profess his own self doubt, and it was critical that he be seen as a strong leader, or his whole pack would fall apart.

"It's alright Kouga. Friends?" She asked, smiling brightly.

"Friends," He agreed. He wanted to embrace her, to hold her and just soak up that easy confidence she had in him, but he held back, knowing it might do more harm than good. Not to mention he could feel the cool aura of the daiyoukai watching them, waiting for him to slip up.

"So, where are Ginta and Hakkaku?"

"They've made camp a few miles away from here with the others. I came here to ask Sesshoumaru for permission to settle here, and where might be a good place. I'd like to find some caves, something good and defensible for the women and elders."

"I'm sure Sesshoumaru will help," Kagome told him as they began walking again, meandering around the gardens.

"Actually, he asked us for help. He needs help distracting some of Naraku's hellish little spawn, and as long as they're not powered by a jewel, we should be able to do something."

"He asked you to what?" Kagome demanded, doing an about face to look at the wolf.

"He asked us to distract-"

"I'll kill him," Kagome muttered, stalking past the wolf, her every step radiating pure rage. A part of him was interested in watching the fireworks. After all, Kagome had been able to knock him out, and she hadn't even been pissed at him. And from the crackling of energy suddenly saturating the air, she was livid with the inu.
Two minutes later, when she had finally reached the youkai in question, he watched as her finger poked into his chest angrily, her words clearly audible.

"You have no right asking him to make his clan fodder for Naraku's children."

"He knows the risks miko. He accepted."

"His clan has already been ripped into by one of Naraku's children once-"

"He will provide a better diversion than humans."

"Not if he's dead!"

"Hey, have a little faith," Kouga remarked, exaggerating his tone to sound more wounded than he really was. Watching the exchange had been instructive in many ways. He had picked a perfect time to walk in on the conversation, even if both parties didn't seem to appreciate it. "We'll be fine, you know we're strong. I got into the gardens here, and that was just by myself. Imagine the clan working to make some mischief for those assholes."

"Language, wolf," Sesshoumaru rumbled.

"She's heard it before, and I have no doubt she'll hear it again. It doesn't matter anyway. We'll be fine," He assured, giving her his widest grin and a wink.

"Kouga, if you get killed I will kick your butt!" Kagome warned, her ire now directing it's steady heat on him.

"I'll be dead."

"I'll make Sesshoumaru bring you back just so I can beat the testosterone out!" She warned ominously.

Both males were unsure of just how that would work, but Sesshoumaru nodded, unwilling to excite the onna's temper further, and then Kouga nodded, and both agreed relaxed their guard now that her energy wasn't spiking so capriciously.

"Be safe Kouga," She sighed in resignation.

"Can't make any promises like that, but I'll come back, that much I can say," He grinned again, wanting to hug her but once again refraining.

"It's close to dinner time, and I promised the children I'd eat with them."

"What about the slayer?"

"Sango's been coming for dinner," Kagome said defensively.

"Hnn." Kagome turned on her heels and left before either youkai could see the anxiety she held for her friend's mental state. But they could sense it in her stride and her scent.

"What's up with Sango?" Kouga asked. But he turned to the daiyoukai only to find to find him gone. Huffing gently, he knew a dismissal when he saw one, and figured it was as good a time as any to go back to his own camp and talk to his clan. Hopefully they would agree with Sesshoumaru's plan. Not that he wouldn't love to be there to take Naraku down, but he was beginning to think of his people, and how they were dwindling rapidly. If taking attention from Sesshoumaru and Kagome helped end the massacre just outside the borders of the western lands without sacrificing too many of his own,
"Sesshoumaru, you can bend my energy," Kagome said thoughtfully that night, looking at the rent field.

"I can," He conceded indifferently.

"Can I bend yours?"

She hadn't thought she would offend him with such a statement. In all actuality, the question had been nagging her for days. Sesshoumaru could bend her power. Was it possible for her to bend his? Caught in her own musings, she missed the sudden displeased flare in his aura, although she felt something pricking her skin, as if a warning.

"It is possible."

"Want to try?"

"This Sesshoumaru will not permit it."

"Why not? What if it's at a point where you can't direct it?"

"Such a situation will never arise," he declared, the note of warning she had felt becoming audible in his tone. She ignored the distinct rebuke and pushed forward, heedless of his growing displeasure.

"Aren't you the one who always says be prepared? Well, seems like a logical thing to do if were going to be fighting together."

"Be ready," Was all he said, giving her scant seconds to prepare for the sudden onslaught of youki he discharged. The energy was palpable Kagome felt winds pulling at her, and as if in the middle of a mini thunder storm, she could hear and see it disrupting the peaceful night.

Her own ki rose up to meet it in a natural response. Instead of obliterating it, as her instincts screamed to, she tried to imagine it twisting around his. It proved to be more stubborn than she thought, and she concentrated harder, determined to show the youkai she was just as capable as he when it came to their energy. Dauntless, she felt her own ki begin twisting and almost insisting the other follow.

And was surprised when it flared abruptly, then seemed to bow to her will, caught up in the ability to twist and turn and weave them together, tangling them, there was something beautiful about the contrast of them, opposing forces wrapped and braided.

"It's beautiful," She breathed, completely unaware of Sesshoumaru's growing disapprobation. He watched her tangle and weave and bind his own formidable power. It had been difficult for him to accomplish when she was at full strength, and granted, he hadn't released anything close to a full attack, it was appalling that she could control it. Worse yet, she had the gall to call it beautiful.

He took the time to breathe, to remind himself that it would be counter-productive for her to fear him. But damn her eyes, it wasn't natural, despite her latent abilities, for her to be so blithe in the face of his own will.

"Sesshoumaru, what's wrong? I can feel it," She started, confusion evident. He slipped through her tangles, dispersing the energy before it manifested any more of his turbulent emotions. She started, stupefied by his reaction.
"What's wrong?" She demanded this time, her gaze imploring.

"Nothing. We should be going back."

"No, we've barely been here two hours. I'm not tired, so I know you aren't. What happened Sesshoumaru?"

"Nothing."

"That's not nothing," She insisted. "That was your energy, and I could feel this-this consternation, then this rage. It wanted to hurt me," She accused. "I'm supposed to trust you, but your energy wants to hurt me. That's not 'nothing'."

"You would not understand." His tone was apathetic at best.

"Try me."

"You are human." Growing glacial.

"I got that. Now tell me."

"Do not make demands of this Sesshoumaru." A veritable arctic chill laced through his tone that time, but she refused to be bullied by him.

"You swore you'd protect me. Sometimes that means from you. I need to know what that meant so I can be prepared for it if it happens again."

"It will not happen again."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because you will not be bending this Sesshoumaru's youki to your will," He informed her, his tone growing even more distant than before. But Kagome saw the tick in his jaw as he stared past her. No, through her, as if determined not to acknowledge the very sight of her.

"Is that what this is about? I could bend your energy? It's not like you let it all loose, and I was paying attention when you did it to mine, that's all."

"It is not that," He insisted, tiring of the conversation and it's implications.

"Was it because I called it beautiful?" She asked, her eyes staring him down, determined to catch any change in expression. When she saw his jaws clench ever so slighty, she pushed forward, daring herself and hoping it panned out.

"It was. Seeing that much energy just twining, it was amazing. It was like watching a star being born. But that doesn't mean it isn't frightening. Terrible things can be beautiful too. It's just looking at them a different way."

"This Sesshoumaru would not have his own power deemed beautiful. It is an affront to my strength."

"Kami in heaven, give me patience," She begged as she stared at the sky. "You are probably the strongest, most deadly person I have ever known. And I've heard the females around the shiro talk about how beautiful you are. Is it an affront to you that they think so?"

He had always known of his beauty, and because it was nothing but a coincidence of birth, it had never mattered overmuch to him. There had been select moments where it had proven to be an
advantage, but others seeming lust for it had never appealed to him. His own strength mattered far more than beauty. Achieving the heights he had through effort was more important than simple genetics at work.

But still, she had a point. And her admission of his lethality stroked a wound on his ego he was loathe to admit existed to begin with. Daring to finally face her, he saw her eyes bright with her own anger and face flushed with the conviction her words had caused.

"It is as you say."

"Good," She quipped, for once foregoing any speeches and simply nodding. "Now, that was hard, but I want to get better. If I can do yours, it might be possible for me to bend another youkai's, and I don't think I have to tell you how useful that could be."

She had him there, though it irritated him that he had not thought of it. And she was correct, if she could deal with his energy at full blast, any other youkai would be child's play.

"Be ready."

He opened the channels for his youki to be released, and watched as she struggled to wrap her own reiki around it, a new eye to her movements. She was thinking in ways he had not, and though it bothered him, at least she was thinking. And it would be a good offense as well as defense. If she could master such a thing, her use in battle would double.

'She will be a weapon to be reckoned with if this succeeds,' He told himself, wondering why he wasn't even remotely afraid. Even within pack, one should always be aware of the possibility of another going rogue. Strengths were something to evaluate, and weaknesses something to watch for and exploit. But he did neither as he watched her tangle and push and then try to expel, sending it flying along the field.

There was a small pride there he kept hidden, not that she would have noticed. She was using instinct to guide her motions, something there that didn't need trained, which was as unexpected as it was satisfying. By the time the power had diffused, the field looked as if giants had battled on it. Determined to not be disturbed by this latent talent, he considered her carefully.

"Very good," He told her blandly when she stared at him expectantly. She fairly glowed with the praise, and he wondered if she had somehow seen beneath the apathy he projected. Deciding that it didn't matter, because praise would drive her further, no matter how dispassionately uttered, he threw more of his own power at her, determined to see how good she was.

Though she was finding it difficult to handle his energy, much less aim it once he really started trying, she was proving an aptitude. And something else was changing in her. A small confidence he hadn't seen before. Though he had been training her to act, to move and to think, she hadn't truly taken the step from merely emulating to truly learning. Marking this as a pivotal moment, he decided that now she was truly capable of using her training, to act instead of reacting.

"It sounds like you've got the battle in the bag," Sango surmised after Kagome had finished relaying the past night's events to her. "If you can do that, Naraku shouldn't be much harder, if he is at all."

"He's got the jewel behind him though," Kagome sighed. "And that's sort of a wild card." The only reason Sango understood the term was from many fireside games when they had made camp, and the thought of those days brought bitter tears to her eyes before they could be stopped.

"Sango, what's wrong?" Kagome asked, leaning towards her friend, concern evident.
"I just want it all to be over. It's like my suffering is Naraku's personal entertainment. I keep trying to have faith, but I just can't," Sango whispered, perturbed by the sudden swell of emotion.

"Sango, Naraku's an evil bastard. And he does it because he's scared of you."

"Scared? What reason does he have to be scared of me? He's taken my family, my love, everything," She muttered, beginning to get angry. In what world was Naraku scared of her?

"He's trying to break you. Both of us. Why would he do that if he wasn't scared? He's not doing it to everyone else in the world. Just us. He knows we're stronger than him, that he can hurt us and try to deceive us and destroy us, but we'll still keep fighting. We have to keep fighting," Kagome whispered, almost frantic as she hugged her friend tightly. "If we give in, he'll win, and I'll never let that happen."


"Not anything," Kagome said, the dark memory of Naraku's trick trying to force it's way into replaying. She stomped it down into a dark corner of her mind and squeezed her friend.

"I would give my life for them," Sango told her as she drew back, searching the miko's face.

"There are things that are worse than dying. Miroku and Kohaku wouldn't want that for you."

"I would suffer the bandits a hundred times over if it freed them," Sango whispered quietly.

"It won't come to that," Kagome interjected, squeezing her friend's hand reassuringly. If it took every bit of her energy and Sesshoumaru's, she would make sure her friend would never have to endure a memory as dark as the one she possessed.

"I'm so tired of waiting Kagome."

Kagome had forgotten that even though she was plenty busy, Sango only had the comfort of her daily training sessions with Kotaeru, and even those were just a couple of hours long. Even if she included the time Sango took to practice with hiraikotsu and Kirara, there were plenty of hours left in the day that were left empty, giving her too much time to think.

"Maybe Sesshoumaru will let you come with us to train at night."

"I don't think so. From the way you tell it, he's hesitant enough to let you try and manipulate his energy. I doubt he'd want an audience for something like that." Kagome ceded to her friend's point, knowing the daiyoukai would be less than thrilled that Sango even knew what was going on, much less asking if she could come along.

"I just feel so useless," Sango sighed.

"Why?" Kagome demanded, surprised. "You're the one that came up with the idea of using the bandits. Sesshoumaru says the reports he's getting have been good. Each group of bandits have a few youkai with them, and between all of them, they've been stirring up plenty of trouble for Naraku. And now we know about all of them, something we didn't have before. We'd be walking in blind if it weren't for you!"

The vehemence with which the statement was spoken warmed Sango, and she held on tightly to that feeling.
Daily she was surrounded by wealth, in a real home. Everything was foreign to her. The shiro itself may have been inherited, but it required a vast amount of wealth to maintain. There were servants, and it was still awkward for her to be waited upon. And everyone was youkai, and they knew what she was, and there were times when she couldn't help but feel as if she were being watched. Part of her wondered if the others were waiting for some sign of displeasure from the daiyoukai that ruled, waited for a chance to exact revenge on her for the countless youkai she had slain.

And Kagome herself was drifting away. There was so little time for them anymore, what with her daily and nightly training sessions with the inu. Sango couldn't help but feel a certain amount of jealousy. The miko made time for Sesshoumaru and Shippou and Rin both, even for Bokusenou once a week. But thus far she had only spent snatched moments alone with the taijiya.

She forced her attention back to the present, realizing her friend was talking to her.

"It's just been so crazy. The only consolation I have out of it is that I'm getting stronger and that by the time I hit the futon, I'm so tired I don't even dream."

"The healer, Tenka, gave me a potion to help me sleep. It doesn't suppress dreams, but it lets me sleep deeply enough that I don't remember them."

Silence reigned, and it was a new kind for the girls. There was a level of discomfort that hadn't been there before.

"I'm sorry I've been away, training so much. I need to be stronger so next time-" Kagome stopped, took a deep breath and fought back the tightness in her chest, determined not to give away how fresh those wounds still were. "I need to be stronger. And if I keep moving, maybe I can become fast enough they can't get me." She knew Sango thought they referred to human men, and that was fine. It was easier to accept than the truth. Those shadow beasts that lurked within, fighting for tenuous grasps in her consciousness, always there when she least expected them. Even with her newly discovered abilities they hadn't quieted, and she wasn't sure if they ever would. But if she just kept going fast enough...

"I understand," Sango said in a quiet voice.

"Thank you," Kagome said, her acceptance tinted with relief.

Both women fell back onto the futon, lounging lazily. The softness of the blankets and the plushness of the bed itself only made it easier to drift lazily and force all real thoughts out of their mind.

"Do you ever miss him?" Sango asked quietly, as if afraid to voice the question. Kagome stared at the ceiling, trying not to be hurt by the question. She knew what Sango meant and chose to ignore the poor word choice.

"I do, even when I try not to, he's there. He always complained that I was so weak, I just-maybe he's proud of me now. Or throwing a hissy fit that it took me so long to take the initiative."

"I don't think so. Although he's probably cursing up a storm that you're working with Sesshoumaru. I bet that rankles, even if he is in some sort of paradise. And for Sesshoumaru to just give up their father's sword after all the effort he put into stealing it. It's a wonder we don't hear him yelling at us," Sango giggled.

For the first time since his death, Kagome was able to think about him without the all consuming waves of pain that had accompanied any thought of the hanyou, and she thanked Sango for that. Sesshoumaru did not and probably never would be able to help her with that particular problem, and
Bokusenou was kind, but he was still male for all the world he was a tree. And Shippou was too young to know how deeply her heart had been scarred, the burden too much when he was still grieving the loss of one he had considered a big brother.

"It would be funny to see his reaction to all of this. I mean, I'm getting trained by Sesshoumaru on how to combine our attacks, and when we actually manage to do it, he's nice to me. Not outwardly, he's still as cold as ice, but I can tell he approves, even if he's as bland as toast."

Sango ignored the expression she didn't quite understand, grasping the general meaning.

"Hmm, he would have a conniption if he was here. I know Sesshoumaru finds this necessary, or else he wouldn't be doing it. But even though Sesshoumaru always had Rin following him like a lost puppy, I would never have believed he'd help us."

"The exceptions rather than the rule?" Kagome guessed.

"I guess, although I think he barely tolerates me."

"Why would you say that?" Kagome hedged. She knew why, and she was still trying to figure out some way to fix it. It wasn't Sango's fault she had been raised in a village of demon slayers.

"You know why," Sango replied, sending a flat look at her friend. Kagome sighed and returned her gaze to the ceiling. It had been a problem, one she was still trying to find a satisfactory solution to. Sango had proved that her insights were valid and that she was intent on destroying Naraku. But Sesshoumaru barely spoke to her or of her, and excepting three inhabitants, none of the other youkai in the shiro would speak to her.

"You know, I had a thought," Sango admitted after a time.

"What's that?"

"My village wasn't the only one of it's kind. I'm betting that among all the refugees there's more slayers. And if there's a group large enough, it would be difficult to take us down. We'd have an easier time of it than the bandits anyway."

"Sango, no!" Kagome shouted, sitting upright and grabbing her friend's hand. "You can't. We need you here, for when we finally go after Naraku."

"Kagome, you said Sesshoumaru admitted there were some delays and that it'd be at least another month before any direct moves could be made. I know Naraku and his tricks. I'm tired of just sitting here waiting, it's not in me. And I'd be able to get back well before the month's over," Sango assured her.

"No, please Sango, don't-"

"I've been thinking about it awhile Kagome. I just can't sit here waiting when I could do something, anything to help speed up Houshi-sama and Kohaku's release. Even Kirara's getting restless."

"But what if you get hurt?" Kagome pressed, trying to sway the taijiya's mind.

"I'll take Kirara and she can bring me back. It's only a month Kagome, and I'll be back. And this is only if I can find other slayers. If there's enough of us, it won't be a problem."

"Promise me you won't go unless you have at least a dozen of you, promise Sango," Kagome pressed, trying to choke back the tears. Any joy she had held from the fond memories of Inu Yasha
was whisked away by this new revelation. Her best friend was leaving her! Here, in the shiro, where the only friendly faces were two children and a tree!

"I'm sure I'll find more than that," Sango pledged. "And I'll make sure to test them before we leave. But Kagome, you understand, right? I need to do something."

"I understand," Kagome lied, hating herself as she did it. "I'm just scared of losing you too," She admitted.

"You won't lose me. I've got Miroku and Kohaku to fight for. And I'll be surrounded by other slayers. We'll take down those youkai a peg or two," She tried to inject some of the energy Inu Yasha had so often had, and though she fell short, both girls smiled tremulously at one another.

"Do you want me to ask Sesshoumaru?" Kagome asked finally, giving in to the inevitable. There was a determination in Sango's eyes that reminded her of how Sesshoumaru spoke. Once there, there was almost nothing that could be done to change it.

"I'd consider it a great favor if you would. I don't know if he'd approve, and maybe if you ask, he'll give it more consideration."

"I don't know how me asking is going to change anything, but I'll do it," Kagome agreed, puzzled over how to word this particular request. Caught up as she was in that particular conundrum, she didn't notice Sango's baffled stare.

The taijiya was aware of pack dynamics, whereas the miko was not, and even though the inu hanyou they had traveled with had never actually enlightened her on the subject, she was sure that at some point the miko would have picked up on the fact that she and Shippou had stepped into the pack, leaving others outside of it.

"I'll ask him tonight, somehow," Kagome said, and even though she wanted to ignore the whole situation, she knew for Sango's sake she would keep her word.

"Thank you, Kagome," Sango told her, praying her tone conveyed the depth of her gratitude.

Kagome was glad her friend couldn't read her mind, or else she wouldn't be thanking her at all.

_A/N:_ It was about this point in the story that I realized, no, this wasn't going to end with Naraku. And it's not. As to the Goraishi. I read that it has the same power as a full blown wind scar. So that's what I'm going with in this story.

Also, I got a pm about when Sess and Kagome were going to kiss. Umm, lemme see...not for awhile. I'm not giving Kagome an instant fix to her problems, and Sesshoumaru isn't suddenly going to fall in love with her, or realize it, whatever. While instant fixes are wonderful, people generally don't work that way. Besides, I love the wangst (at least the muses do). Suffer as I suffer. Seriously. Now it's my bedtime.
The sky was clear that night as they touched down in the field. A half formed moon and stars lit the area, exposing a flat, smooth plain free of any sign of disturbance. As if in deference to their presence, not even the wind stirred the tall grasses that had resisted the changing of the seasons. It would have been a beautiful night, one she would have appreciated before, but it was with a singular absentmindedness that she stepped from the cloud of youki onto the ground. Not even noting Sesshoumaru's intent regard, she mentally fumbled over her phrasing for the umpteenth time that evening.

"You seem in doubt," Sesshoumaru observed dispassionately. Kagome looked ahead of her. After searching for a way to approach the topic all evening, a part of her was grateful he had broached the topic -however inadvertently- himself. Another part of her wanted to strangle him for forcing the issue when she still wasn't sure how to voice it. Taking her time, she tried to word everything carefully, afraid he would find something suspicious with Sango's request.

"Sango wants to try and form a band of any slayers that might be among the refugees and go beyond the border to try and help with the efforts against Naraku." Direct, blunt, and only slightly rushed. That couldn't be bad right? Nothing to misconstrued as something it wasn't. Hopefully. It was not the first time she was made painfully aware of how little she knew about protocols, but it was the first time those protocols truly mattered to her. Sesshoumaru had proven the rules she eschewed were very much a part of his life and his own behavior.

"Has the taijiya considered that searching out slayers might be a waste of time? At best they would be skeptical of a woman looking for slayers in a land belonging to a youkai such as myself. At worst they could consider her a traitor, asking for their aid at the behest of a youkai."

Kagome hadn't considered that, and it only added to her growing list of worries.

"Neither of us thought about that, I guess. It feels like this is Naraku's war against everyone, so I didn't think it would matter."

"I would think it would have pleased you, to find some way to keep the woman here."

"I don't think any of the options would please me to be honest. If she stays, she's unhappy, so I'm unhappy for her. If she goes, she gets what she wanted, but I'll be worried she'll get hurt. There's no real right or wrong on this one, just one of us getting what they want. If she stays, we'll both feel bad. If she goes, at least she'll feel like she's doing something," Kagome groaned, feeling childish for whining.
"Not many would be willing to make such a concession."

"It's what friends do. I'm just worried that she'll get hurt, and I don't know if I could handle that, not on top of everything else. And I'm the one relaying the message. I don't know if she'd ask you, so if something does happen, I'd feel responsible."

"Her choices are her own."

"So you support the idea?" She really didn't want to hear his answer, she knew what it would be anyway.

"It is a good idea, if she can actually find that many willing to admit their skills."

"I'll tell her, and give her fair warning of what to expect."

"She will report back to me before she ventures beyond the border. I will send one of my hawks with her."

"Hawks?" Kagome asked, confused.

"This Sesshoumaru has little doubt that with her in potential danger, you would find it hard to focus, and I require your full attention. The hawk will be a way to relay messages. They are well trained, and the fastest of their kind."

"Th-thank you!" She cried, her eyes bright. It wouldn't alleviate all of her worry, but it would be good for the taijiya to check in and let her know she was alright.

"Now, are you ready?" He asked, implying by his tone alone that he considered the matter trivial at best and that she had been wasting time. Ignoring his curtness, she nodded.

"Mmhmm," She hummed an agreement. "Throw it at me."

"Tonight, I want you to attempt something different."

"I'm always ready for a challenge."

And on that score she was correct, and he found it to be the singular pleasure in this whole predicament. For once he had a willing and very capable student. She fumbled, but that was to be expected. However, she never stopped trying, and she was showing an amazing aptitude with different tactics of energy use that he found himself actually enjoying the challenge of teaching her. Though he knew the groundwork better -how could he not after centuries of practice?- this was a new approach to the idea altogether, and in that they were similar.

"When I project my youki, I want you to add yours, then throw it back at me, and then catch them again."

"Like volleyball with energy?" She asked, her eyes comprehending his directions.

"Volleyball?" He asked. When she made little observations he didn't understand, he asked, mostly for information. It was another reason he had come to value their daily escapes from the castle. The onna was a fount of information. Facts and methods he had never heard of seemed to tumble from her lips, the miko completely unaware of their value to him. And he would have it stay that way, which is why he repeated the little things that erupted when she wasn't thinking as blandly as possible.
"It's a game from my time, sort of like exercise. There's a small field with a net between two teams. Both teams hit a ball back and forth. The point is to keep the ball from hitting the ground. When it does, it's a point."

This game, and ones she had described before, all sounded incredibly childish. What point was there to hitting a ball back and forth? And why use a net at all?

"It's just one of the things in my time. Anyway, how am I supposed to fling it back?" She asked, her nose wrinkling.

"Just push it at this Sesshoumaru-"

"You said there was no protocol when we trained," She interrupted. He stopped short, his irritation with the interruption quashed effectively by her observation.

"You are correct," He admitted.

"That sort of day with the council?" She asked, staring at him, expression both bemused and pitying.

"I don't understand."

"You tend to speak more formally when it's been a trying day with the council," She explained. He wasn't entirely comfortable with the observation, nor her ability to read him well enough to deduce such.

"It was not my council, but petitioners," He told her stiffly, trying to hide any further tells from her.

"Calm down, it was just an observation, and I've seen you often enough after a long day to notice it. Besides, I think I'm one of the few you change your speech patterns with, so it wouldn't be noticeable to too many people."

She had a point, and it was almost as irritating as her initial point had been. Damn her. The hollow eyed miko was gone, and the woman before him had purpose. But did that new found purpose and drive have to include inflicting her regard on him as well? He was more than pleased with their relationship of student and teacher. He did not like her making personal observations about him. He was alpha, it was his place to hold any such habits if he should wish, and he did not.

If he were prone to cursing, he might indulge at that moment. However, he was not, so he did not. On reflection, he knew it would only give her more to work with anyway.

"Just do as we have been doing. Catch it when it is passed, and push it back at me."

She did just that, and when he caught it and threw it back to her, Kagome let a smile play on her lips. Even if he disapproved of games, and this was training, experimenting with something that was as far removed from a game as anything else could be. But it didn't keep it from feeling like a game. And it certainly didn't keep it from being fun.

Just to annoy and confuse him, when the ball of their combined ki came back at her, she caught it, threw it in the air and spiked it like a volleyball, sending it hurtling high over his head. He jumped fluidly and hit the orb back at her, expression flat. Doing her best to call on her highschool abilities, she jumped in the air and threw her fist forward, only to miss it by inches. The orb sailed past her hand and behind her, hitting the ground and exploded. The resulting blast, small as it was, sent her flying into the sparse grass face first. When she stood, she could swear Sesshoumaru had just barely managed to school his expression into apathy, although the corner of his lips twitched.
"I hadn't thought of that," Sango murmured thoughtfully as Kagome relayed Sesshoumaru's words from the night before. "But in a time like this, surely others wouldn't find this a betrayal. It's not just one species at stake in this, but all of us. Without some form of alliance, death is inevitable for one if not for both."

"You really think so?" Kagome asked, her worst fears confirmed. Sango was a cynic, and it was something Kagome had grappled with since meeting the woman. But Sango's cool observation wasn't just a pessimistic nature running away with her. It sounded so...factual.

"Hnn. You and Sesshoumaru are working together though, and from everything you've told me, there isn't a stronger youkai or miko to be found. In a way, it's like you two are the expression of what's necessary. There's nothing in nature so dissimilar than a youkai and a miko's energies."

"Are you calling us mascots?" Kagome asked, her eyes twinkling merrily. It was a thought that had not occurred to her, but the youkai in the shiro did seem to adopt a position of deference when she ran across them, even the higher ranking ones. Did they perhaps see her as close to their master's equal?

"Something like that," Sango admitted reluctantly. "Maybe even the first to take real steps toward making peace between our species."

Startled by that, Kagome waited patiently for her friend to explain her reasoning. Kagome understood what Sango was saying about her. But Sesshoumaru...In what way could he be equated with someone that was progressing in such a direction?

"Rin. I mean, you adopted Shippou, and Rin is his ward. It's not a secret that she follows him everywhere and worships the ground he walks on. And even though you have to look hard to see it, for us humans at least, he does treat her as one of his own."

It was as unlikely as it was clear, but Kagome nodded in agreement. The daiyoukai was succinctly uncomfortable about her commenting on anything personal involving him, and desperate not to effect his relationship with his ward, had thus far kept all commentary to herself. Sango was right.

The daiyoukai would seek the girl out, and after half a mark of listening to the child, despite all appearances, he was completely relaxed. It was subtle, and if Kagome hadn't been watching so closely, hadn't dealt with him on such a personal basis each night, she was sure she would never have even noticed. But he did relax in the girl's presence, and it was something both needed to cope with the darkening atmosphere of the shiro.

"It's strange. A few months ago, if you'd said we'd be where we're at right now, I would checked to see if you were one of Naraku's puppets, or a kitsune trying to trick me. Now, it just feels like a new chapter. So surreal sometimes," Kagome sighed, falling back onto the futon and ignored the fact the Sango had already begun to pack.

"I was always afraid something bad would happen. After my village-" There was a pause where Kagome respectfully studied the ceiling, allowing the taijiya a moment of privacy. "Well, I knew the worst could happen. But it can't get much worse, can it?" Sango asked, her tone suddenly desperate. Kagome sat back up and watched her friend warily, wondering where this new wave of fear came from. She didn't want to tell her that it could get worse, didn't want to add to the older girl's already considerable burdens.

Instead she pulled her into a tight embrace, searching for the right words.

"It'll get better. It's always darkest before dawn," Kagome quoted, remembering the oft repeated
words, a soothing reminder of her own mother.

"We'll make it, and beat Naraku, and everything will work out," Sango said, sounding more as if she was trying to convince herself than the miko holding her. Neither was so impolite to point out the others tears. Instead, they held tightly to one another, trying to find comfort in one of the few sure things they knew.

They trusted one another's strength, and Kagome promised herself that she would believe in Sango, because Sango believed in her, and that's just what friends did.

"When this is over, you and Miroku will get married, and have a dozen children, and I'll spoil each and every one of them," Kagome laughed. Sango squeezed her tightly before pulling back. Sango made no comment, knowing that once it was over, Kagome would only have friends, and not the great love Sango herself had discovered, and she refused to bring something awful to mind during her last day with her friend for a month.

"We'll all be happy," Sango promised instead, her eyes shining with the remnants of her tears.

"We will," Kagome agreed. The promise sounded faintly hollow and forced despite her best intentions.

It was a gray morning, one the suited Kagome's mood perfectly for once. Sango's departure had left her feeling disconnected and worried about the distance that had grown between her and the other woman. To have just grasped their friendship, only to lose it again left her tottering precariously on the edge of a crying jag she did not want to indulge.

Instead she found the children, both just waking and devouring a large breakfast, and suggested a game. Both children had wolfed down their food quickly, surprising the miko. Caught by their eagerness, she suggested a game of simon says, knowing that the child and kitune would be on equal ground for once. They chose an out of the way room that looked as if it wasn't used often for anything. Although there was no apparent dust, it felt as if the room itself hadn't been aired out in quite some time.

"Touch your nose," Kagome said, giggling when Shippou slipped and touched his nose.

"Nope, Simon didn't say," Rin corrected, looking at the kitsune with delight. So many games counted on finding or endurance or speed, and it was a welcome change to be better at something than her new playmate.

"She's right Shippo. One step back," Kagome told him. Sighing, the kitsune stepped back, his expression conveying his own chagrin.

"Sesshoumaru-sama!" Rin squealed, although she never moved. He nodded his head to acknowledge his ward's adoring gaze, then focused his attention on the miko.

"A game," She supplied, suppressing the urge to smile when his eyes narrowed. "It looks like it's going to rain any second, and they need something to do. Me too for that matter," She added, trying to smile brightly.

"It is in that interest that this Sesshoumaru has sought them out," He intoned, completely excluding Kagome from his words. Stung, she wondered why he would look for the children and not her. Had she done something wrong?

"Oh."
"I have procured a suitable tutor, and their lessons are to begin today."

Stunned, and that was all he could call it. For once he had found a way to completely silence the normally verbose onna. He savored the victory silently, allowing himself the momentary pleasure of basking in her shock.

"Tutor?" Shippou asked. "But I wanna play!"

"Shippou, Sesshoumaru has done a very kind thing for Rin and you both. Tell him thank you for the opportunity," Kagome insisted, imploring Sesshoumaru silently to excuse the pup's glowering.

"But I want-"

"Don't you want to learn? If you study, you can eventually be as smart as Sesshoumaru," Kagome tried, ignoring the silent huff she heard from the daiyoukai's direction. "And I'm sure that you and Rin can make it fun for one another."

"But it's school!" Shippou whined.

"Where I come from, learning is fun," Kagome told him conspiratorially. "And I wasn't so lucky. We had at least twenty students in a class, so we couldn't ask for help. Sesshoumaru is offering to let you share with Rin, and you'll both be able to learn much faster than I did," She finished. "And, if you study hard, I'll make sure you both get rewards at the end of each week."

Nothing but the promise of a reward seemed to goad the kit into agreeing, his eyes shining with the promise of some untold goody.

"Follow this Sesshoumaru," The daiyoukai commanded. Both children began to follow, and he paused, turning to the miko expectantly.

"Are you coming?"

"Oh, yeah, sorry," She stuttered, still reeling from the shock at the change. Following silently, she was only half aware of the children's chatter. The walls of the shiro passed by in a blur until they stood in a room that screamed 'order'.

"Sesshoumaru-sama, Kagome-sama," A voice said. Kagome whirled at the sight of Tenka, her eyes widening.

"You're the tutor?" She asked, surprise evident.

"I am. Is that not to your liking?" He asked, eyes confirming the depth of his sudden apprehension, which only served to confuse Kagome.

"It's fine, I just thought you were one of the shiro's healers," She murmured, still wondering at the flash of distress that had sparked in his eyes.

"I am well educated as well as being a healer. If it please you, I would be honored to teach your kit," He began.

"I don't know why you're being so formal with me, save it for him," Kagome said with a wry smile while gesturing at Sesshoumaru, who did not look in the least amused. "It's fine. If you meet his approval, I'm sure you're more than just 'well educated'. And I know you'll be good to them."

"I will endeavor to do my best Lady," He bowed slightly at his promise, eyes dancing with
merriment. He hadn't seen the two interact much since her arrival at the shiro, instead hearing secondhand from Sesshoumaru. His daimyou's observations had always been dry, and Tenka hadn't expected the easy familiarity and jests at the daiyoukai's expense.

"We shall leave the children to their tasks," Sesshoumaru rumbled, breaking through the giggles that hadn't escaped, but still hung in the air, as if mocking his superiority.

"You both be good for Tenka-sensei. I'll be getting reports from him to see if you're doing your work. Remember what I said Ship," Kagome warned, softening her tone with a wink. Both children nodded and waved goodbye, and when the door to the room slid shut, she tried not to think about how her life was always changing, moving, without a pause for breath.

"There are youkai closing in on the border," Sesshoumaru intoned as they walked down a corridor, heading in the general directing of the inner gardens.

"Has Naraku gotten too eager?" Kagome asked, her eyes narrowed at the implications.

"No, these are not Naraku's. These are solitary or small packs, but they threaten those seeking asylum."

"And why are you telling me?" She asked, brow raised in askance.

"Because this Sesshoumaru would like to start putting your training to good use."

"But I'm still not proficient, I mean, I bumble all the time in practice!" Alarm made her voice crack. "Remember last time, I just stood there!" She reminded him, bringing up the fight with the youkai she had interrupted.

"You will not this time," He replied, not even deigning to look at her as he continued walking. His apathy struck her, and for a minute she wanted to throw a tantrum, as she had with Inu Yasha. It was childish, but it had gotten the hanyou's attention. However, the youkai lord did not seem partial to overt displays of emotion, and throwing a tantrum wouldn't gain her any ground.

"Fine."

He didn't reply, and she hadn't really expected him to. But when they stopped at the dojo and he came back and held a bow and quiver out to her. She inspected both, pulling the bowstring and testing the draw.

"Do you really think this is a good idea?" She asked as she sat herself on the cloud of youki he had summoned for travel. His response was to be silent as he began directing the cloud beneath her.

"I wish you could see the look on your face," Kagome crowed, trying to keep from falling over as laughter bent her double. The youkai looked more than mildly affronted, and she wondered if maybe this was the way to get a reaction from him, to steal all his thunder and his battle.

"It seems your lack of faith in your abilities was misplaced," He said softly, calmly. Kagome wiped a tear from her eye and straightened, but wasn't able to bite back the grin that she knew reached from ear to ear. It hurt her cheeks it was so wide. Even his suddenly soft tone didn't break her mood.

"Okay. Be that way."

"What way?" He asked, brow raised.
"All quiet and stuff. First you were ready to go kill things, and now you're mad. Because I am awesome!" She finished in a sing song voice.

Refusing to acknowledge anything she said at this point, he merely summoned his youki and sent a tendril at her, pushing her back slightly. When her laughter stopped and her eyes widened at him in shock, he allowed himself a smirk.

"Did you just-?"

"There are more to find, and there is storm coming."

Satisfied with her nod, they took off. He ignored that she hadn't even disembarked the cloud of youki she was riding to dispatch the group of youkai. Or given him a chance to vent some of his anger on them. In fact, it had been over as quickly and efficiently as possible, as he himself would have done. Should he be proud the speech-making, time-wasting miko had matured, or be slightly threatened by her sudden ease with her powers and using them?

They had not gone a mile when he touched down again, his eyes alert. He could smell them, but couldn't see them. He knew the miko didn't have the luxury of his superior senses, and wondered if she could feel them at all.

"I feel something, it's weird. It's youki, but they don't want to be found."

"Prey rarely does," He commented in an offhand manner, eyes scanning the forest around them.

"No, not like that. They're really scared. Not angry or anything. Don't attack, okay?"

His look was as flat and bored as anything she'd ever seen, and she hoped it was him giving her a frustrated 'fine'.

"Hey, you can come out, we're not going to hurt you!" Kagome called, her eyes scanning the trees. For several minutes there was no change, and then Sesshoumaru inhaled sharply, his eyes widening. His only luxury was that Kagome's gasp covered his own indiscretion.

Children were coming out of the woods. Youkai, hanyou, and human. A motley assortment, ranging in size and coloring.

"We heard that it was safe here," The oldest said, coming to the front of the group. He had a baby tied to his back, and another on his front. The boy was human, but the two babes were youkai. Where did he find them, and why was he carrying them?

"You are just inside the border of this Sesshoumaru's lands," The daiyoukai replied blandly.

"Oh. We didn't realize, we thought you was one of them," The boy remarked. Sesshoumaru put him at about age twelve. Barely too young to be trained in war or sent into the fields to farm.

"Sesshoumaru, we've got to get them away from here," Kagome said quietly.

"How did you come to travel here together?" Sesshoumaru asked instead, ignoring the woman.

"At first it was just me. But it's bad out there, real bad. Heard rumors about the west still being safe, and one day I was hiding in the woods from some bandits coming through, and she," He jerked his head to a youkai that looked about his age, "Did something to keep me from being noticed."

Sesshoumaru focused his eyes on the girl, a sort of snake youkai, although the only outward sign of
her lineage were the slit pupils and faint, scale like patterns on her skin that were barely visible in the dim sunlight.

"My parents were killed, but we're forest creatures. I know how to hide, how to hide others," She admitted in a sibilant voice.

"Zurui came with me after that. The others we found along the way, we couldn't just leave 'em, especially not the babies," The human defended, looking ready to run at a moments notice.

"Are all of you orphans?" Kagome asked gently, bending her knees so that she was at eye level with most of them and less threatening.

"Not all of us. Some have folks off fighting, but our villages-" The child tried to explain. "They don't know where we are, and we don't know where they are."

"Sesshoumaru," Kagome gently begged, her eyes filled with tears.

"How many?" Sesshoumaru rumbled.

"A dozen, including the babies," Zurui explained, coming to the boy's side. Kagome noticed she too carried a child on her back.

"Sesshoumaru-" Kagome began again.

"Most of the refugee camps are either human or youkai. Your group will not be welcome, such as it is."

She wanted to hit him then, hard and fast. The expression on the children's faces were enough to break her heart. They were children for kami's sake!

"The shiro has plenty of room."

"What?" She whispered, stunned.

More humans, in his home? Kagome eyed the inu warily, wondering if this was some sort of joke. Sesshoumaru was not nice, and definitely not to humans or those with human blood.

"Sesshoumaru," Kagome began again, wondering at the sudden offer, no, command.

"My Lord," Zurui started respectfully. "It would be an honor, but-"

"It has a price. You will be messengers for this Sesshoumaru's court." Kagome saw the children relax, which was strange. "Come."

The cloud that suddenly appeared seemed at least quadruple it's normal size, and Kagome twitched. This was different, this was not the youkai she knew, and it had upset some internal balance inside of her. She liked constants, clung to them since everything had gone so awry, and his sudden actions pushed something off kilter. Ignoring what felt strangely like vertigo, she beckoned to the children.

"You're a miko," Zurui observed as Kagome took her hand.

"I am."

"Miko don't help youkai," The girl started.

"I'm different, I promise. I'm helping Lord Sesshoumaru, and I'll help you too."
"The last miko we met tried to separate us." It was a quiet accusation, and Kagome tried not to flinch at the cold distrust in the child’s tone.

"I won't do anything like that, I promise. In fact, when we arrive, you can meet my kit, Shippou. And Sesshoumaru's human ward, Rin." Zurui's eyes widened at the promise and the gentle tone it was said in.

"Come on," The older boy said, helping the smaller children onto the cloud. Kagome noted that excepting two hanyou, there was an almost even number of human and youkai children in the group. Once the last had been helped up onto the floating mass, the oldest boy, obviously the leader, got on and sat.

"What's your name?" Kagome inquired as they lifted into the sky. She noticed that Sesshoumaru was going much more slowly than usual, probably out of deference to their new guests.

"Tegatai," He offered, suddenly shy. Kagome could see the lines of exhaustion beginning to creep onto his face. How long had he been traveling and taking care of the others? She looked at the youkai girl and the human boy and tried to say something, anything to bring some light to the darkness in their eyes.

"I'm sure your families would be very proud of you," She offered gently. "You've done a very noble thing." If the youkai suddenly clutched the baby to her chest a little more tightly, and if there were tears in the boy's eyes, Kagome didn't comment on it. Instead, she offered to take the child from Zurui's back and cooed at it gently on the way back to the shiro.

"I didn't expect you to bring them back here," Kagome said gently, her confusion still evident. On the way back it had begun to rain, and for all of his power, Sesshoumaru hadn't been able to keep them clear of it. However, upon their arrival, he had ordered several of his household servants to take the children to the bathhouse and get them warm clothes, followed by an order to make sure they ate.

Then she had silently followed him to his study and sat across from him. While he hadn't asked her to follow, she'd had the strange feeling he wanted to say something to her in private. The noise of the rain outside didn't penetrate through to his study, and for a moment she wished she had his hearing. Surely any noise to cover his contemplative silence would have been welcome.

"It was a good idea, letting them eat with my ward and your pup. It will ease their fears." He ignored the question in her statement.

"Why would they be afraid of coming here?"

"From what I gathered, they've been traveling for several weeks, mostly at night to avoid the normal dangers. Despite that, they have seen and experienced much. For them, there is no such thing as a gift without strings."

Kagome had nothing to say to that, and was trying to find some sort of balance in the sudden upset his actions had caused. She needed stability. Absolutes were good for her, and she had attained them, for awhile at least. Now she felt unsteady in the face of this new side of Sesshoumaru, and felt selfish for being so. She didn't want him to be unkind, but predictable was good. Small kindnesses were fine, she knew he was capable of those. But this?

"Your scent, it's-" He searched for a word.

"It's nothing. I'm just surprised is all."
"It hints at more than surprise."

"Why do you care all of a sudden?" Kagome demanded, angry at his prodding. She had let that anger creep into her voice, and she didn't understand why she was angry. It bothered her even more, and caught up in her own inner turmoil, she didn't notice the sudden anger in the daiyoukai's amber orbs.

"As much as it pains this Sesshoumaru to say it, you are a valuable asset, one that must be sound of mind. You are also pack, and as your alpha, it is my duty to inquire." The words were even, calm, and cool, antithetic to the exasperation he felt.

Several minutes later her aura, if not her scent, calmed and she was leaning on her hands, elbows on the table and breathing deeply.

"Nothing is the same anymore. Sango's gone, Inu Yasha is dead, and you're nice." She knew it wouldn't make any sense to the youkai, and she didn't care anymore. When she had come here and been thrown into a cycle of training and dreamless sleep, she had been fine. There was barely any time to think, and that was okay. But since Sango had departed, she felt like she was walking on eggshells again, and the shadows lurked around every corner, waiting to get her.

"You would have left them?" Sesshoumaru asked. His tone was flat, but there was a warning in his voice that was unmistakable.

"No! No, that's not what I meant at all. Damnit, it's just- Everything is upside down. Give me some breathing room to make it right in my head."

"There is no time for such. It will be less than a month before we travel to the hanyou's stronghold."

"Sango told me you had said it would be longer," Kagome gasped, surprised by the sudden change.

"We don't have the time," He growled.

"But I'm not- we can't," Kagome began.

"Today you were able to purify youkai without hesitation, before this Sesshoumaru could even cut them down. You are able."

"But combining our attacks-" She began again, fear suddenly dancing in her stomach and making it heave.

"There is little else we can do. This Sesshoumaru is no longer in possession of a sword capable of channeling the Soryuha."

"So it's just my bow!" She demanded shrilly. "Have you lost your mind?"

Sesshoumaru had been holding on to his temper quite well, at least he thought so. The woman's emotional upset was understandable. But he was the leader of a war that would not allow for constants, indeed, allowed for little but change. Her incredulity at his actions with the children bothered him, even though he knew it shouldn't. He had cultivated a reputation for being indifferent. But they were children orphaned by the war he was letting drag on while the miko gathered her courage and abilities. However indirectly, it was his fault they had no home.

But her frank disbelief did bother him. Greatly. And her doubts in his own abilities bothered him even more.
"You said that you trusted this Sesshoumaru," He finally ground out, clinging to the last, fraying threads of his temper. The last thing he wanted was to have this conversation with anyone, much less a human!

"Well-" Kagome tried to interject, but was cut off by his angry hand in the air, effectively stopping her.

"Then trust this Sesshoumaru's judgment. You asked for protection, in doing so you asked to be pack. Part of that is trusting your alpha."

"But I didn't know-" Kagome tried again.

"You traveled with a hanyou. Despite his questionable breeding, his instincts were similar to my own. You formed a pack. This is different, but the same. Trust your alpha." The command held less ire and more strength this time, and Kagome wondered if she'd ever have a handle on anything again.

"Fine," She muttered, pulling away from the table. Even if he didn't know it, he had made the unsteadiness worse. It felt like the world was wobbling around her, and any second she expected another surprise. Something unpleasant.

"Rin and the kit will be with the orphans. Rin will have a hard time keeping away."

Kagome knew an out when she heard it, and despite the new group being part of her own disquiet, she'd welcome them right now, as well as her own pup and Rin. Fleeing the room, she didn't care if she upset Sesshoumaru any more than she already had by saying nothing.

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"She is infuriating," Sesshoumaru admitted hours later. The rain had eased and finally passed over them, leaving the world smelling fresh and new. Unable to sleep, Sesshoumaru had opted to go hunting. Instead, his ventures had taken him to Bokusenou.

"She can't help it if you're acting contradictory to your nature," The spirit supplied. A sudden growl from the daiyoukai made him want to smile, although he kept his expression still.

"It is not a contradiction. This Sesshoumaru is responsible. It was my actions that enabled them to become orphaned. If this war were over already," He intoned, his own self doubt beginning to creep in. Not for the first time did he wonder if he and the miko could destroy the hanyou right now. They certainly had power on their side. But without a weapon to focus his own attacks... He wanted to laugh at himself. After mocking the miko for needing a focal point for her energy, he was proving to have the same handicap.

"You can't make things move any faster. Your plan is a good one. There are always orphans in war, and don't think otherwise. But in taking these children in, and not just youkai children, but humans and hanyou as well, you have contradicted a view you yourself have often validated."

"It is my right to do as I will."

"It is. You are a daiyoukai, and you rule a sizable piece of land and the peoples therein. But right now Kagome's world is in flux. There is nothing solid for her to stand so that she may gain her footing, except you, or so she thought. Cold, distant, and purposeful. Your aloofness was a constant, however much she disliked it. A kind you? You might as well have said the sky was green."

"She does not feel ready to battle Naraku."
"Do you think she is?"

"Yes. If anything her abilities are plateauing. She is ready."

"Are you?"

The question took the daiyoukai off guard. No one had ever questioned his abilities. He was, simply put, the best. And yet his lack of a weapon, or even his need for one, bothered him.

"I am," He answered, although a small niggling of doubt began wrapping itself around his own assurance in his abilities. Had he come to depend on blades so much? In retrospect, he found that he had, and the revelation gnawed at him mockingly.

"I believe you are," The tree told him. He wanted to believe the tree. More than anything he wanted it to be moot and to know he was at his best. It disturbed him that it was an issue at all. Perhaps the woman wasn't the only one knocked off balance by current events.

"Hnn."

After spending time getting to know the children and helping them settle in, Kagome had announced that it was time for bed. Rin and Shippou wanted to sleep with their new friends, and she wasn't able to deny such a request. When all of them had looked at the small futons set up for them, each one separated by a few feet, they had looked so uncomfortable that she hadn't been able to resist asking.

"We're used to sleeping together," Tegatai answered, looking at the floor to hide his blush. "The little one's get scared," He tried to explain, worried at the miko's silence. Kagome smiled and ruffled his hair gently.

"What if we pull the futons together? That way everyone knows where everyone is," She offered. Within minutes the plush mats had been pulled together to form a giant mattress, and she sat back, watching as the two oldest, Zurui and Tegatai tucked each one in. That they were so responsible pulled at her. They should be playing, calling each other names, all the myriad things children their age did. But instead Kagome was forced to watch them solemnly promise each child they'd be there through the night, and that they weren't going anywhere.


"Goodnight Lady Kagome," Zurui and Tegatai said shyly from their spot on the giant pallet. Kagome nodded tightly, trying not to cry.

"Goodnight guys. Sleep well," She whispered, leaving quickly, afraid they'd see her tears. She rushed away from the room, determined to make it to her own quarters before breaking down. Several servants paused to watch her fleeing to her rooms, and for even though she knew it was irrational, she hated them for seeing her in such a state.

Barely making it, she slammed the door closed behind her and threw herself onto the futon and gave into the feelings churning in her. Sobs filled the silence and if she had been aware of it, she would have been horrified that she was wailing into mattress.

Sango was gone, and the only person she really knew in the shiro was Shippou, and she just couldn't talk about Inu Yasha with him. She couldn't talk to anybody, and it wasn't fair! Everything was different now, and it was as if everything had been taken away from her. She couldn't even go back to the well? What if Naraku was watching the village (as he surely was) and tracked her there? What
if he tried to use it? Kagome had always wondered why Inu Yasha was able to go through, and figured it was the subjugation beads. Naraku had the jewel. What if it enabled him to get through? He'd massacre her family for fun!

The thought of her family in danger sent her into another set of hysterics. It had been months she had seen her. Did she wonder if she was dead? Had they had a funeral, or were they holding out hope? Would she even make it back? What if Naraku found a way to destroy the portal somehow?

She cried it out, losing all track of time. So wrapped up in her own misery, she missed the servant knocking on her door and asking after her.

When her nose was stuffy and her throat hurt, she began quieting. Sobs became muffled hiccups and she inhaled deeply, dragging in air. Her eyes burned and she just wanted to sleep. Without even changing, she gave into the darkness behind her eye lids.

Tall spires reached for the sky, blackened fingers that twisted sharply. Kagome felt her heart skip a beat when she recognized where she was. Terror suddenly welled up like bile when the whispers started. Her feet tried to carry her forward as she stumbled, forcing herself to move.

"No, no, nononononono!"

She could feel them chasing her down, breaths heavy and malodorous. Her own panic was frantic as she scrambled over rocks and saved herself from tripping. They were silent, as if their feet never touched the ground. Refusing to look back, she kept trying to gain distance. She knew they were there, following patiently, determined to get her.

"Just go away!" She screamed, looking over her shoulder for just a moment. She almost tripped and fell face first when she saw him.

Naraku.

He had a small smile on his face, a smirk really. His eyes were predatory, and she could see the bloodlust in the red orbs. Leading the others, with each step he was gaining on her. She turned, determined more than ever to flee into the maze of black monoliths that seemed to stab the sky. Scenery flashed by, all of it stark black to the grey of the world. Only she and Naraku held any color, standing out vividly in the landscape.

Stumbling, she found herself at a cliff overlooking a large pit. Eyes darting left and right searched for an escape. Walls seemed to appear from nowhere, caging her in. The only paths were forward in the yawning darkness, or back to Naraku.

"Got you," His voice whispered in her ear, his tongue sliding around the curved shell. Strong, clawed hands tightened around her upper arms and drew her forcefully to the body behind her. She could feel him, all of him. It was just like before. She couldn't do it again.

"No! Never again!" She shrieked through the tears. Her aura swelled, then seemed to shatter as light bathed the barren landscape.
"Sesshoumaru-sama! Please come quick! The guest wing, the miko-" Tenka said, pale and sweating. Sesshoumaru looked up from the papers he was going over, immediately sensing the panic in the other youkai's scent.

"What is it?" But his question was answered when he felt the sudden snap of the miko's aura. He stood, ignoring the clatter of scrolls hitting the floor as he rushed through the corridors of the shiro. The scream that pierced the air almost made him jump out of his skin as he navigated the halls. When he finally made it to the guest wing, he saw the servants all gathered at the far end of the hall, too frightened to go any nearer to the energy that bathed the corridor in a false sunlight.

"My lord, it sounded like she was having a nightmare, then-" One servant began. When he couldn't finish, just looked back to the light, Sesshoumaru withheld a sigh.

"Have Tenka prepare one of the sleeping potions he gave the slayer and bring it to her rooms."

"Y-yes Sesshoumaru-sama!" The servant bowed, then fled. Ignoring the others, Sesshoumaru opened the door to the onna's room, shielding his eyes to try and see where her futon was located. When he saw nothing, he allowed his nose to take over. The scents were soaked with her energy, and he felt like a blind man as he tried to figure out where it was the strongest, following the lead with hesitant steps.

Her energy burned him, and he knew that while she was strong during practice, and focused, it had never compared to this.

He found her, jerking wildly and crying in her sleep. Her back arched and her hands were clenched in fists as she refused something over and over. When he heard her whisper Naraku, he knew that she was back in that world once more. But she was fighting, and it was leaking into the real world. How to stop it?

He did not want to go back to that place, especially not when he just wanted to be as far from the woman as possible. But if her energy spiked anymore than it already was, she was going to harm those within the shiro, and even the lowest servants were under his protection.

"Woman," He called, shaking her violently. When that didn't work, he tried to slap her. Nothing but an arc of her own power meeting his flesh and burning him even more deeply than the wash of her holy energy, shocking him with it's intensity.

Cursing, he summoned his own energy, determined to stop her from doing something he knew would frighten her and give him just cause to rip her apart. It was just too damned tempting to get her out of his life, and he needed her to defeat Naraku.

Their energies swelled and he tried pushing hers back. He failed, the rage being vented preventing him from bullying it into submission. But he found the crack, just as he had before, and dove into it just as Tenka came to the door, sleeping draught in hand.

"Miko!" He roared. The landscape was trembling beneath his feet, and everything was bathed in pink. Here though, unlike in the real world, her power was not a barrage against his senses. It did burn however, like fire licking against his skin. Angry that she had the power to hurt him even in her core, he shielded his eyes and kept moving forward, trying to find her.

Once he finally found her, it felt like hours before he had traversed through the pulsing walls of light. Each one was stronger than the last, buffeting his skin and leaving angry welts in their place. Thankful the wounds healed almost as instantly as they had been inflicted, he almost collapsed when
he saw her curled up on the crystal platform, cradled. He couldn't tell if it was moving or if the light she emitted was playing on the surface strangely.

"Miko," He said again, eager to get out of her core. When she didn't move, he tried again, once more to no avail. Finally his hand shot out to shake her and he was shocked to find her under the crystal, as if it had grown around her, a second skin that was barely perceptible in the dancing light.

"Damnit woman," He snarled, bringing his fist down on the crystal. When it didn't even crack under his strength he brought it down again and again, cursing her for putting him in such a position. After several minutes his hand felt as if it had broken in several places and the crystal sheath had remained unfazed.

Another pulse of energy burst out, blinding him and he fell against the dias, wracking his brain for an answer. His hand felt useless, and he wondered if in her core, his healing abilities didn't exist. Did he have the same limits as she? Snarling, he wouldn't wish such a hellish existence on anyone. No power, no strength...

But she was still sending out waves of power. The realization hit him just as another pulse of energy shocked out, rocking the landscape.

What would happen if he tried to summon his own ki and send it out as she was? Would it reflect in the real world like her own? Would it even make a difference here since it was her soul? Would she recognize the feel of his aura? They'd practiced together enough, she'd touched it a thousand times, knew the unique flavor of it. Would that penetrate to her through the crystal?

Before another wave could hit him, he pulled everything in him, draining precious reserves. Determined to stop the next wave and pull her from her core, he focused it all, waiting for the next pulse of reiki to hit him. His blood felt as if it had caught fire, and the wall of light coming at him was moving at a crawl. It almost touched him when he released everything, a defiant bellow stretching his jaws and reverberating through the shadow world of her self.

This would not be his end.

The light dimmed, and somewhere close by he heard the sound of something shattering. It felt as if the world was rushing up to meet him, and everything was strangely monotone as he tried to breathe.

"Sesshoumaru, Sesshoumaru!"

For the first time the miko sounded concerned about him. He wanted to laugh, to tell her he was impervious, that he didn't need a human to worry about him, a daiyoukai. But the world was swimming, and sleep sounded like such a good idea.

A/N: Next week's chapter might come early or late, depending. Alchemy is coming up and I've got a lot to get ready. Whoo!

I am in search of a beta, and will be posting for one once I get back from Alchemy. Hopefully he or she will be amenable to ripping this story apart and handing it back to me covered with red marks. (I'm a masochist at heart). That being said, toodles.
"Kagome, when will Sesshoumaru-sama wake up?" Rin asked again, worrying her lip. Kagome held the little girl more tightly to her while trying to fight back the tears that threatened.

This was her fault. If she hadn't been so weak, Sesshoumaru wouldn't be like this. His whole body was covered in burn scars. Shiny and pink, they stubbornly resisted his natural healing abilities. And they were all her fault. Even his hair was mostly gone, singed down close to the flesh and completely missing in places showing scorches on the scalp.

His seeming coma was her fault too. When he'd broken the crystal placenta she had willingly let form around her to keep the shadows -and Naraku- out, she'd awakened only to see him falling to the ground. Even though she'd done her damnedest to get him out of the center of herself, it hadn't been enough. She hadn't been fast enough, something.

Tenka assured her he was alive, but hadn't been able to say anything else. The daiyoukai's breathing had always been light, barely perceptible. Now, even as he lay still on the futon, she only had the healer's word that he was alive at all. He seemed perfectly still, a macabre statue created to remind her of her own lack of control.

"Rin, maybe you should go with Shippou and find the others. They need you both to show them around the shiro," Kagome murmured.

"But I want to stay with Sesshoumaru," The child mumbled. It stabbed her heart, hearing the little girl talk like that. Hurt because she loved Rin as much as she loved her own son, and she had been the one to cause this. Rin had already seen so much death, and Sesshoumaru was the only parent she had. What if he-

No, better not to think like that. He would heal. He had to. If not Japan was lost, and she took her time, free of the darkness and Naraku's influence, as a sign that they won. Had to hold on to that, because right now it felt like everything was falling apart.

"Sweetie, I promise the minute he wakes up I'll send Tenka for you or come get you myself. But you need to eat and to get some sun, or you'll get sick. Sesshoumaru wouldn't want that," Kagome ordered gently. Using Sesshoumaru as an incentive felt wrong, but the little girl hadn't budged for two days, refusing to leave the daiyoukai's side.

The little girl nodded wearily and scampered out of the healing room. Kagome sighed and let herself relax, but only a little. Still wracking her brain for an idea, she let her gaze rest on the only good thing to come out of the situation.
'If he's alive to appreciate it,' She thought sourly.

Because somehow, in the melee of their spirits rising and clashing, Sesshoumaru had regrown his arm. She knew it was nothing she had done, in fact, didn't know how she could have, or him for that matter. Tenka had taken one look at it and shaken his head in confused wonderment. Youkai healed, easily. But growing back a lost limb was rare enough that he'd only heard of it once in legend.

She let tendrils of her energy slip out, praying that his aura wouldn't rebuff it. When it was able to touch him without sending up any answering protection, she pulled back, wondering if it was possible to replicate what he had done to her.

Was he resting, as Tenka tried to promise time and again? Even the healer didn't seem to believe himself when he said it. Or was he trapped in a place like hers? The very thought of trying to get in that deeply into anyone's subconscious, especially the private daiyoukai's, frightened her. But what if he was trapped there? Kagome knew little about comas, but she remembered stories from her time of people that never woke up. The very idea of Sesshoumaru becoming a vegetable sent chills running down her spine.

She'd asked him, once, how he had done it. It had been a trespass on her very heart and mind, and she at least wanted an answer. Since it had been such an invasion, the daiyoukai had tried to explain it to her in the plainest terms possible.

"*When one calls on power, there is a psychical crack that can be breached. Tenka knows more than this Sesshoumaru, but he said to follow the power.*"

Could she provoke Sesshoumaru's power? But what if he needed everything he had for the healing his body was doing? The skin had knit itself back together, but the shiny patches of skin were resisting.

'*He'd want to be awake. He needs to be awake. How often is he telling me that we don't have time?*

Determined with her plan, she sent another tendril of her power out, concentrating to keep it from becoming too much to manage. Ever since she had come back from that dream, her own power had been more unstable. Noticeably stronger, but definitely more unstable.

She tapped him with it once, then again. When he didn't shift, she began tapping out a beat on his chest. Still nothing.

Praying she wouldn't kill him, she gave a stronger jab, and his own youki swelled in response. Seeing what could be her only chance, she closed her eyes and drifted along her own power, determined to follow the source of his ki before it settled once again, closing the path.

*There!*

It was frightening, allowing herself to be pulled along her own power and then his, meandering into him almost like vapor. Staunchly refusing to look at her physical body -terrified she'd be shocked back into it- she allowed herself to trust the daiyoukai's unconscious energy. He'd called her pack, so maybe he wouldn't strike back at her. Maybe.

The world she opened her eyes to felt as real as the one outside of him, and she stood on the stone walkway, dressed in her miko robes with no issue. Jumping once, trying to see if anything worked differently here, she found she couldn't fly, which was a letdown, although why she couldn't explain.

Cherry blossoms were blooming, and there was a gentle rain, barely there, washing the fragile petals from the trees. Huffing gently as one landed on her nose, she couldn't help but envy Sesshoumaru. It
was beautiful, nothing at all like her own twisted core, where the landscapes were nothing but harsh and desolate. This felt...lush. There was no feeling of danger anywhere, and even the sound of the rain hitting stone was in harmony with the scenery.

"You're not here to stare, Kagome," She berated herself. Giving herself a small shake, she cast her senses out, seeking the daiyoukai. And found nothing, but everything.

"Makes sense, it's him, so he'd feel like he was everywhere, I guess," Kagome muttered as she began walking. Thankfully, this dreamlike world did not include geta. In fact, she was barefoot. Deciding to let her feet take her where they would, praying they'd know the right way, she delighted in the feel of the wet grass between her toes as she was taken off of the path and deeper into a grove of the cherry blossom trees.

When she found him, she took a moment to stare. He looked like a statue, one that had been wrought by a god. No longer wearing his normal curiass and pauldron, he was sitting in the rain in the center of the grove, eyes closed and positioned as if in deep meditation.

"Sesshoumaru?" She whispered, afraid to break that fathomless concentration.

But gold eyes snapped open and rested on her, the depths revealing the level of his disdain.

"What, miko?"

"I came for you," She stuttered, knowing she deserved his anger for intruding on his most private sanctum, for her actions before, even if they had been done in her sleep.

He eyed her indifferently, then looked to the area surrounding him.

"You could have sent one of the servants," He told her in an offhand manner, standing fluidly. His damp hair seemed to form a solid, heavy curtain as he walked, swaying slightly and gathering the small drops of zephyr like crystals.

'Does he not know where he is?'

"I don't think a servant could have made it here," She whispered, suddenly afraid of telling him the truth. In this world he still had only one arm, and she doubted he knew it from the real world. Was his coma that deep? Or did he just not remember anything?

"And why is that?"

"This is your core," She stated simply, readying herself for the inevitable wave of rage.

"Hnn. I should have noticed it's spring here, not winter." His easy acceptance confused her, then sent a wave of gratitude washing over her. Maybe he just wasn't capable of being angry in such a place.

"You've been here for a couple of days now, ever since-" She started, then stopped.

"Since?" His brow was raised in a manner that demanded explanation, even if his tone was as flat as she had ever heard it.

"You followed me to my core, Tenka told me I was releasing my power and somehow, I don't remember everything. You changed it, something. But you got hurt in the process," Trying to explain, she realized how little of that night's events she understood. And was just beginning to grasp the depth of her own cowardice.
"How could this one be harmed in your core?"

"I was releasing my power in the real world. I didn't realize it."

"I see."

With that damning statement he began walking toward her, his eyes reflecting a multitude of emotions, and for a moment, when he stood directly in front of her, she was frightened he might strike her.

"How is it you came here?" He finally asked.

"I provoked your aura, and followed it, like you explained. It was scary," She admitted, looking down to the ground.

"Did you expect something as in your own mind?"

"Yeah," She agreed, not wanting to even as she did it. Sesshoumaru was a creature of war and blood and death and most importantly, conquest. Almost everything she knew of him was at odds with this peaceful place. It was like something she'd picture her own mind looking like, and the utter reversal of such a thing was beginning to make her feel as if perhaps she wasn't the person she thought she was.

"From what this Sesshoumaru has read, our cores reflect our own state of mind, our own deepest wishes and fears. I fear nothing, wish for nothing. It is merely a place of peace." He began walking, and given little choice to do otherwise, Kagome began to follow, easily coming up alongside him.

"You're being more forthcoming than usual," Kagome mumbled, looking up to him.

"Perhaps it is the will of this one that I never be needed in your own core again. If you change it, it will no longer haunt you."

"And I won't do anything crazy in my sleep anymore," She muttered, self loathing on the rise once again. If he, someone who killed constantly and looked after a good portion of Japan's peoples while planning a war, had a place like this, why was it so hard for her own to reflect something peaceful?

"It is as you say. I have been here for two days?" He asked, changing the topic so abruptly she stopped for a minute, trying to change gears.

"Yeah. Tenka said your body might be trying to heal itself. He said- he said that you used a lot of energy in that blast, and then your body had to regenerate." When she finished speaking, the related matter suddenly shocked through her.

"But something amazing happened! You'll never believe me if I tell you," She informed him in something just above an excited whisper. "Even Tenka is surprised, he said it was almost impossible!" At some point when she had turned to face him, she had grabbed his hand excitedly. Something made her hold back from informing him of the sudden restoration of his arm, and she doubted he would believe her anyway.

"You will tell this Sesshoumaru," The daiyoukai rumbled, pulling his hand from her grasp.

"You won't believe me. You have to come back out," She informed him. Surely he wouldn't be as angry when he came out if he saw he had his arm back!

"Onna, you will tell this Sesshoumaru. You look like Rin or your pup trying to keep a secret, it is
laughable." His tone was almost mocking, but not quite. Was he making fun of her, or at her?

"I can't. You have to come out, you'll love it!" She almost crowed, ignoring what sounded suspiciously like a long suffering sigh.

"This Sesshoumaru is not able to yet," He informed her, as if it were entirely beyond his control, and he wasn't sure whether he liked or disliked the notion.

"Why not?"

A one shouldered shrug and he began walking once more.

"Would you like me to stay until you can?" She asked.

Another roll of his shoulder was her answer as he continued on. Catching up to him, she wondered briefly how he felt about her actually being there. Was he grateful, or angry? Probably angry, she mused. And was he more irate with the fact that she had invaded such a personal space, or that she had so little faith in his abilities to come back?

Several minutes in an easy sort of silence and she looked to the sky, allowing the rain to hit her forehead gently.

"You know, even though it's raining, and it's been raining since I got here, we're not soaked. Just damp."

"The mind does as it wills in such places. Would you prefer to be soaked?" He intoned.

"No, not at all. It's actually really nice. I didn't expect something like this from you, even after what you said, it's strange," She admitted slowly, afraid to offend him.

"The first time within your own mind, it was- strange. This one did not expect it to be so barren."

"Maybe I can change it, make it something like this," She sighed, tipping her head back once more. Her mouth opened to catch the rain and she relished the cold, crystalline perfection that slipped down her throat. How long had it been since she had done something like this?

"Some people feel the rain, others just get wet," She whispered, smiling as another hit the tip of her nose.

"A wise intuition," He observed, still toneless. Pausing, Kagome wondered if her presence was making him tone himself down, or if he really was always so controlled. He had looked peaceful in the grove of sakura trees, and it pained her to think she had broken it.

"Would you like me to leave?"

"You have asked before. This Sesshoumaru cares not."

"It just feels like I'm intruding, keeping you from enjoying all of-" She swept her hand around the serene world. "This."

"It is a place of rest. There is little to enjoy."

"I'd enjoy a place like this. I find it sad you don't," She told him, not really thinking about the words. "It's as if time stopped and decided to leave this place alone."

"Hnn."
"You know," She said thinking aloud. "I put you here, kind of. I mean, it's my fault you're here to begin with. Do you think if I gave you some of my energy, you'd be able to come out sooner?"

"It is possible, although our own spirits are so inimical to the other that this Sesshoumaru doubts it is possible."

"Could be worth trying. If I don't go all out, if it doesn't work it shouldn't hurt," She told him. 'I hope.' She wasn't so sure in that in his current state he could resist anything that would damage him further. But she wanted -desperately- to try and make up for some of the wrong she'd done.

"You are more than welcome to try." Ignoring the flash of hurt at the slight hesitance in his tone, she realized she really had no idea how to go about such a thing.

"How did you break me out of the crystal?" She asked.

"I pulled everything I had and forced it out."

'Well that's helpful. If I do that I'm likely to kill us both.'

"Your own technique seems highly-" It was the first time she had ever seen him search so hard for a word. "Instinctual. Perhaps you should let that guide you."

Not sure whether she had been insulted or not, she stopped walking and paused, letting the rain drip down her hair and over her eyelids. Trying to turn inward seemed ridiculous given the circumstances. Could she look inward on a self that was the inner self? It sounded as foolish as it did bizarre.

"You seem agitated."

"It's going to sound really stupid," She told him, letting one eye peek at him. The returning stare seemed to say, 'You generally do.'.

"This is the inner me, right? Like the soul self?"

"That is what I have deduced."

"So how am I supposed to look in and draw out the power?"

"You think too literally."

Huffing, she closed her eye and clenched the lids together, trying to figure out what to do and feeling more ludicrous by the second. There, just beyond the blackness behind her eyes, she could feel him watching, not laughing, but she could tell he was mocking her. There was a faint thrumming of disapproval around her, the entirety of his core making known what his expression did not.

'I wish I could see the way he does,' She mentally snorted. The whole place was his, so he'd know the rules and the rhyme and reason, even if it wasn't a conscious thing. Ignoring him, she kept her eyes closed as she walked away, once again trusting her own feet to take her where they would. Hopefully she wouldn't walk into a tree. In a sort of dream world, that was the last thing she would be able to handle, especially feeling so clownish already.

When a spot seemed to grab her, she folded her legs beneath her and let her fingers trail over the top of the tall grass. Still not opening her eyes, she tried to think about healing the body of the youkai she had ripped apart as he tried to help her. Regret laced itself through the energy humming beneath her skin, and she forced it away, determined just to help him.
Warmth washed through her, and the rain falling on her face and over her lips tasted vaguely sweet as she let herself drift along the threads of power. When that strange something seemed to resonate with her thoughts perfectly, she began weaving it in and out of the landscape. If it was the core of his being, it would reach him, right?

When at first nothing reacted violently, or even protested, she took it as a good sign and added more power, strengthening her attempt. Somewhere in the distance she heard a humming sound, and realized just as distantly that she was humming the lullaby her mother had sung to her as a child. The power seemed to unfurl from within her, and suddenly she knew it wasn't the inner self of the inner self. It just was, and with the realization it felt like the humming grew just a little louder, the power a little stronger.

Time lost meaning, and as she was in his center, Sesshoumaru took over her conscious thought. She was within him, surrounded by him, and the avatar of himself within was a pale shadow to the energies around her. Seeing beyond the setting, she felt him everywhere. Everything that drove him lost the abstract titles and became simple emotions. Determination. Strength. Pride. A deep savage joy that felt wild and unbroken. She would have been afraid of it, should have been afraid of it, but it warmed like fire, a different sort of viciousness than Naraku's; a natural, primitive instinct that she would never have guessed lurked within the calm daiyoukai. And then she felt a deep anger flavored with disappointment and shied away from it, feeling like an unwelcome voyeur as it brushed against her.

Yet despite that anger that lurked, she trusted him implicitly. There was nothing in him that proclaimed him to be like Naraku. Nothing devious, nothing truly spiteful. Earlier unease with his actions seeped away in the face of bald honesty as her power grew stronger, pulsing gently.

When the world around her swelled and rocked gently, she pulled everything back, still awed by the force she had drifted against and into.

"I'm not sure I would have believed it if I hadn't felt it," She commented softly, knowing he was behind her. "I felt like a flower unfurling, and suddenly you were everywhere." She studiously ignored saying anything about his own personal feelings, knowing he wouldn't be happy with her observations.

"The teachings of the human mystics say that the soul is the lotus," Sesshoumaru answered just as softly. For a moment Kagome wanted to laugh. Never in a million years would she have thought Sesshoumaru would know anything about human spirituality.

"In my time, we study the writings of a man who said that god lives within the heart of a rose. I wonder if a lotus is the same."

"It seems a similar thought, although perhaps it is less god and more the true center of the self."

"It's very strange," She smiled suddenly, "To be talking spirituality and mysticism with you."

"This Sesshoumaru admits he has very little time for such pursuits. But there are truths that once found, stay." His tone belied a deeper revelation, and even though her curiosity was piqued, she wouldn't pry, positive he wouldn't tell her anyway. And besides, hadn't she already seen enough? If the soul could be felt, surely she had felt it. Still dazzled by what had touched her, she leaned back into the tall grass, content. At some point, the sky had lost its dusk or dawn plainness and begun moving into night. Stars began to dust the sky and for a moment she savored the feel of being outside of time.

"You know, you were right. This place suits you," She admitted.
"One would think so," He replied.

"We can go back now."

"You sound as if you don't wish to leave," He intoned, and Kagome actually giggled and then let out a long sigh.

"Who would want to leave such a place knowing what the world outside is like? But it must be done, and I promised Rin you would come back. I'd hate to drag out her worry. It seems selfish."

"You care very much for the child, don't you?" He asked suddenly, shocking the miko.

"I do," She answered slowly, wondering at the observation.

"Hnn," Was all he said. Making a frustrated noise, Kagome stood and began walking, trying to find the path she had taken back. Casting her senses to feel it out, because seeing it would be ridiculous, she felt the warm wisps of herself and began drifting.

"I'll see you out there," She told him, feeling herself tugged from the daiyoukai's world. He said nothing as she began fading. The transition wasn't so dramatic as it had always been with her world, and again she wondered if it was because she was leaving peaceably or because in his world everything reflected him, and he was a subtle being. Deciding against her ruminations, as she'd probably never get an answer, she let herself enjoy the feeling as she settled back into herself.

Gold eyes opened as her own did, and she blushed deeply, realizing that at some point she had fallen over while she was, well, whatever it was. She still didn't have a name for what happened, and it felt strangely intimate. Too intimate to think on too long.

"Welcome back," She rasped, her throat dry.

"You're back," Another voice breathed. Kagome's gaze swung to the youkai seated away from them. He was staring at both Kagome and Sesshoumaru with wide eyes, as if he didn't quite believe what he was seeing.

"Everything alright?" She asked, her throat still strangely raw.

"You were gone for almost a day. The light, it was your power again, but, it wouldn't let me near you. You were singing for most of it, until about an hour ago," Tenka replied, still staring. She began to fidget, suddenly uncomfortable with that stare.

"I didn't realize," She replied, blushing madly.

"You healed him. Even his hair, everything is back as it was." Kagome looked down and almost gasped. Wanted to, but the noise felt stuck in her throat. Sesshoumaru was back to normal, as if the horrible burns had never happened at all! Even his hair, which had been burnt down to fuzz on his scalp was back and, if her own mind wasn't playing tricks on her, longer than it had been before.

"May I have some water?" She asked gently. The request seemed to know the mujin from his shock and he hurriedly poured water from a jug into two cups. Sesshoumaru began propping himself up on the futon when he stopped suddenly and looked to his left arm.

"It's back."

"It is," Kagome replied. "Told you there was a surprise waiting for you when you came back."
"Did you do this?" His gaze was heavy and considering, and for a moment she wanted to lie and say she had. She wanted to have given him something. But instead she shook her head and glanced at Tenka, accepting the proffered glass and drinking it down in one gulp.

"I have heard that when one releases massive amounts of their own ki, well, it was a legend. But when from what I could feel, you released a massive wave of youki to serve as a wavebreak to Kagome's reiki. It was quite spectacular, If legends are true, you regenerated your own arm in the process," Tenka explained as he refilled the cups again. Kagome tried not to swallow this one too eagerly and sipped, allowing the cold to soothe her sore throat.

"How did those in the shiro fare?" He asked.

"Well, it scared everyone to be frank. I don't think any of us have ever felt anything quite like that. From reports coming in, even the humans felt a disturbance. One of your advisers was ready with an explanation, what it is I still don't know. I've been here looking after you since it happened, and the miko when she decided to do well, whatever it is she did," He finished. Then his vivid green eyes rested on her and she felt like a bug under a magnifying glass.

"Just what did you do? I've never heard of a miko being able to heal a youkai. If I hadn't been sitting here, outside the shield, I never would have believed it was you."

"I don't know. I did what he did, going to the core or whatever you guys call it. I was afraid-" Here her voice began to crack a little, thinking about what she had almost done. "In my time, people who go into a deep sleep like that don't come out of it. I was afraid he was trapped in there, so I went to find him. When I got there, he didn't realize he was there." Almost opening her mouth again, she clenched her jaw together.

Sesshoumaru was very, very touchy about his capabilities, and with good reason. He was a daiyoukai, and a powerful one at that. How could she tell the healer that he wasn't able to leave that place?

"He was still healing when I went in. I didn't think about how different time is there. I started healing him. I mean, it was my fault he was hurt to begin with, so I tried, just a little power at first. When he didn't react badly there, I knew it was safe and sort of pushed it."

After her explanation she fell silent and busied herself with sipping from the cup, turning it in her hands and examining the ripples in the water, aware of their gazes resting on her.

"It seems that between the two of you, miracles occur quite often. But try to give some warning from now on. It's disconcerting to say the least," Tenka hedged carefully, trying to force a chuckle at the last. Kagome smiled gratefully at his attempt to ease the tension in the room as she and Sesshoumaru accepted more water and shifted away from one another, the strangeness of the situation sinking in.

"The children have all been very worried. Would you like me to fetch them?"

"This Sesshoumaru is capable of walking," The daiyoukai said snidely, standing fluidly. Kagome noticed that his hand clenched and unclenched, and she stared at the new appendage. Having years to grow used to the sight of him with only one arm, especially the past few months, it was strange to see the new limb. Despite the missing arm, he had seemed complete before. The new symmetry was strange on him.

"Well, if nothing else her healing seems complete. The children are probably in the gardens. I assured them both that it was completely natural, although I'm not sure they believed me until they saw you healing him. The kit promised Rin that everything would be fine."
Not wanting to examine the feelings that image evoked too carefully, Kagome stood and was grateful that despite a certain unsteadiness, she was fine.

"I'll be out there in a few minutes, could you let them know?" Kagome asked. Sesshoumaru gave her a flat look and she tried to fight down the sudden blush.

"Do you not wish to see them?" The question didn't sound important, even his tone seemed bored, but she remembered his odd comment in his dreamscape (for that was all she could really think to call it) and knew it was important to him.

"I'll be there in a few minutes," She tried again.

"Miko, if you aren't able to walk, they can be brought-"

"I have to pee okay!" Kagome snapped, praying the mortification would get lost beneath the anger at his assumption. And the anger died oh so easily and left her wanting a hole to open up beneath her and swallow her.

"Perhaps next time the Lady would just say she has something to see to?" Tenka suggested delicately, the tips of his pointed ears flushed. Kagome groaned and covered her face with her hands and decided if she was going to shove her foot in her mouth, she might as well go for broke.

"Just go, both of you, and I'll be there soon. Not. A. Word. Ever."

Both males were surprisingly silent as they left, the door sliding shut with a faint click.

Sesshoumaru had trouble keeping his gaze from wandering down to his arm. The afternoon sun shone down on his kimono sleeve, and he was too wary of giving away his awe by pulling the sleeve up to inspect the regenerated limb more closely. Instead he contended himself with crossing his arms and discreetly running his hand over it beneath the cover of silk as he kept his eyes on the group of children running rampant in the gardens.

Thus far only Rin and Shippou had come close to him. The kit had given a pointed 'See, I told you,' to his ward and the girl had insisted on hugging his waist and giving him a breathless hello. The other children had taken his presence into account and were avoiding him.

He noted the miko's presence in the garden and watched as she knelt down and was bowled over by the kitsune and his ward. Rin was as effusive with her thanks as the kit was with his welcome. Once again the orphans watched carefully, some staring in shock as the two interacted so easily with the miko. After bestowing a kiss to each forehead, they scampered off to leave her watching them distantly. Sesshoumaru approached cautiously. After her lack of decorum in the healing room, he was hesitant to engage her.

"They're happy, but I can feel the fear. Am I the reason?" She asked sadly, eyes following the rapid movements of a game of tag.

"We both are. Do not trouble yourself. They have proven to be resilient." She seemed to ignore his words and let out a little sigh, and although he couldn't smell the salty tang of tears, he swore he saw her eyes shimmer.

"They should be educated," He finally said. Kagome nodded her agreement, seemingly in another world.

"Do you think Tenka will be able to handle all of them?" When her voice broke the silence he had
delved into his own thoughts, and her sudden question snapped through his reverie.

"I think it should be fine. Most of them are young yet. It should not be hard to find another youkai should he need it though."

"In my time there are at least twenty people to a class with just one teacher. But the teacher usually specializes in a subject," she explained. With a small incline of his head, he acknowledged his curiosity and she began explaining her school system to him.

"Each class follows the same lesson plan. There are tests in each subject at fixed intervals. Twice a year there are really big tests, the midterm and the final. One is to gauge the student's progress, the other to decide if the student should advance or take remedial classes."

"These tests are important?" He asked.

"Yes. Then there are entrance exams to try and enter the school of your choice." This she said in a small, sad voice and he gave her a quick glance from the corner of his eye before looking forward again.

"And you take these tests?"

"I used to." No more, no less, and from the emotions he could practically feel simmering gently in her aura, he didn't want to know. Her anger and fear were easy enough to confront, as they burned out quickly. But this particular sadness had rooted itself deeply in her heart, and he had no wish to stir it or give any indication he was interested in it.

When he left the garden, he was struck by the fact that she hadn't inquired where he was going. Strange for the little onna. Brushing it from his mind, he strode purposefully to the council chambers, determined to hear any news.

"I'm to teach all of them?" Tenka asked, eying the rag tag group of children sitting in what had been dubbed the 'schoolroom'.

"These are the ones that are old enough to learn. The babies are with a couple of other youkai Sesshoumaru hired. If there are too many," Kagome began, hoping the children didn't sense the youkai's hesitance.

"No, it's fine. Lord Sesshoumaru is very generous. I had heard, but -"

"It's fine Tenka. It is kind of strange, isn't it? But he wants them to be educated before he sets them loose. Or he's trying to keep them occupied so they don't get in the way. Everyone seems so busy lately," Kagome sighed, giving the children a longing glance. She wanted to play with them, to bring some light back into their eyes.

Rin and Shippou had taken to them immediately, and Kagome was glad for it. Despite her gentle promises, the orphans were slow to trust her. She understood why, logically anyway. The release of power only a few nights before hadn't boded well for human or youkai, and it there had been no one to tell them that it wasn't a common occurrence, or what it meant. But it didn't make it hurt any less that they regarded her with such wariness.

"Then we'll get started. Have a good day Lady Kagome."

"Just Kagome," She tried to remind him with a laugh. He merely smiled and closed the door as she walked away.
Everyone was busy. Now she understood how Sango felt, at least in part. When she saw anyone at all, they were rushing on some errand, or so lost in thought that her presence probably didn't even register with them. Or they were ignoring her, which was more than possible. The events of only a few nights before were still imprinted in the building, she could feel the aftertaste of their auras soaking the atmosphere and even the physical walls.

Crossing her fingers, she wove her way through the shiro, following the path that (apparently) remained unknown to Sesshoumaru. The little side entrance had been a revelation, and one the Bokusenou had only been too eager to tell her of. She had used it several times to quietly disappear, and intent on some form of understanding, adult conversation, crept through the doorway in the wall. Once past the guards that stood watch outside of the shiro, she took the overgrown path out of the citadel. Sesshoumaru had wisely situated his home in the back, the inhabitants discouraged from exploring by the loyal guards he employed.

The path itself was long, but the way to Bokusenou short. Indulging her request to visit, he had done something, cast a sort of spell, that led her from one point to another, only cautioning that she always carry one of his leaves on her when she did it. It was a trigger to his spell, and the only issue she had with it had been plucking a leave from his branches. Something about taking from a tree with a face put her off.

But as she stepped at what became a small cross of paths, the air stirred gently around her, and with another step she was only a few feet away from the koboku no kai.

"It is good to see you child," The spirit said, his face seeming to appear from the suddenly fluid bark. 

"It's been awhile," She said, a private jest between the two of them. His own standards of time were vastly different from her own, and she enjoyed their banter.

"I felt something very strange recently, and I wonder if you could tell me what it is," He chuckled, knowing full well what it had been, but not why, which interested him far more.

"I had a nightmare," She admitted as she settled at his roots, finding a comfortable position and leaning back to look up at him. "I was in the core, or whatever it's called. Tenka calls it the core of the self. It feels like a dream place. But I was there, and Naraku was chasing me."

Bokusenou listened to the miko intently as she explained the dream and her reaction.

"I didn't realize I was doing it. And then Sesshoumaru did something. It felt like it echoed through the crystal, and suddenly I was free. I remember being terrified that the crystal was gone and I was there. But he fell, and it didn't matter. I pulled him out, and when I got back he was, he-" Bokusenou said nothing as she struggled to keep her tears in check. "He was burned. He was trying to get to me and I hurt him. But his arm was back, and it wasn't burned nearly as badly as the rest of him."

"That explains the other night. But there was something else, two suns after," He prodded. The release of energy and the sudden appearance of the daiyoukai's arm wasn't a surprise. He had guessed as much, and had seen a few truly strong youkai heal themselves to such an extent. That the daiyoukai had been able to wasn't surprising, although that he had released such a vast amount of his youki was.

"I went to his core, it still feels strange calling it that. I went and he wasn't able to come out. It was my fault he got hurt, so I tried to heal him," She finished quietly. It was something she still puzzled over, and by the looks cast in her direction, Tenka and other youkai felt the same way. Sesshoumaru barely regarded her at all. She supposed he shouldn't have to be thankful that she had fixed what she had broken, but still-
"And did you succeed?"

"Yeah. It was, well, it was glorious, what I felt. I've never felt anything like it. When I let go in his core, it was beautiful. The person there wasn't him, I was just surrounded by him. It was breathtaking," She admitted. "I've always been sympathetic, and even empathetic to a degree. But the strength of his emotions was just, it's so hard to explain," She muttered, looking for words.

"I think I can understand child. You formed a link there, and know the man in a way few if any do or ever will. Some will guess, some might even brush against his mind. But the core, well, whoever brought up that particular idea is either very intelligent or very foolish."

"Tenka doesn't seem foolish," Kagome admonished, as if the tree had been cruel for even thinking such. "How could you say something like that? He's one of the most sensitive, kind-" 

"Child, you don't have to defend him to me. But I have been around for a long time, yes?" When Kagome nodded he continued. "For most people, even youkai, they drift along the edges of that place. Those that find it usually don't understand what it is. Some have called it nirvana. Others the core, and any other number of things."

"But what is it?" Kagome interrupted.

"It's a place but not a place. Even I can't define it, even though I have contemplated it for many years. I have speculation, but that is all. It exists, and since it does, I have learned the how is not so important. Even the why is not imperative. But what one can do with it, that is something I have always found wondrous."

"Why? I mean, so far I've only seen people retreat to it," She muttered, irked that what she wanted to know hadn't been deemed important.

"You have retreated to it out of fear and pain. But some people spend their whole lives trying to find it. It is, as you have pointed out, the very core of the soul. Is it in the mind or heart, who can say? Perhaps both. But it is a reflection of the Self. You were being hunted by your own memories there, and reacted accordingly. He was in a deep healing sleep, and didn't even realize he was there."

"What's your point?" Kagome asked, trying her best not to sound rude. The tree was rambling and it was hard for her to understand what he was saying.

"Everything you are is in that place if you know how to look. It is a place where thoughts and poetry and metaphors become real for a person. It is for you to control."

"So you're saying I can make it different?" Kagome asked. She thought again of Sesshoumaru's quiet paradise and how it had felt like visiting heaven. But somebody else's heaven.

"Everything there is within your control." Kagome allowed herself a moment to savor the hope his words instilled. She could change that place, banish the nightmares and make it a haven.

"What about what I felt while I was in Sesshoumaru's, well, whatever?" Briefly she remembered that primal viciousness that in her mind had been a sort of savage innocence. What had that been, and why didn't it scare her?

"Understand child, that usually the core is not open to visitors, even if both people desperately want it. For you and the pup do do so with such ease, it's an anomaly. Most people have their own walls and protections, and I'm not speaking of physical ones. Just little things they do to keep others out. Facades. In the core, nothing can be hidden if someone knows how to look. It is why I'm so surprised you were able to find your way there."
"He was unconscious," Kagome supplied, only to receive a derisive harrumph from the tree.

"That pup is the most guarded being I've ever met, and that's saying something. Controlled, and cold. Even half dead he'd keep everyone out."

"We've been practicing with bending and directing each other's energies, maybe he recognized me?"

"Whatever the case, you healed him, and of the two, that's the bigger miracle. I've never heard of a miko able to heal a youkai."

"I hurt him, I had to try."

"And in trying, most would have done a great deal of harm. Maybe it has something to do with this training you're both enduring, although it hardly explains it. I suppose someday I might figure it out, but I venture to guess it will be long after you and the pup are gone."

Kagome allowed herself to be content with the silence as the tree spirit seemed to turn inwards and reflect on everything she'd told him. For someone stuck in one place, Bokusenou was able to see a lot. And she supposed that after centuries, maybe even millenia, he'd seen everything. No doubt he took a perverse sort of pleasure in being presented with a puzzle like this one.

"I feel like something is going to happen soon, although I'm not sure what. It's like a storm is just over the horizon," Kagome sighed after a time.

"In all the time I've been alive, I've learned to listen to the things most can't hear. The wind tells me that something is on the rise. The darkness reaching over this land is reaching it's zenith."

"It feels like something is drawing it's breath," She reflected quietly, staring into the sky.

"It does, child. It does."

"Try again," Sesshoumaru commanded. Kagome wiped the sweat from her brow and cursed the chain of events leading to this with a creativity she hadn't known she possessed.

"It won't change anything," She muttered, but complied anyway, drawing her energy into the dagger in her hand.

The past few nights had been filled with training. The past few afternoons had been filled with training. Ever since 'that night' as she'd dubbed it, her powers had grown exponentially in strength, but it seemed the stability of the energy and her command of it suffered in direct proportion to the growth. Instead of aligning with Sesshoumaru's blasts of youki, they fell short or quickly outstripped them. The two seemed to avoid each other, and if she didn't know better, she'd say that the kami were doing it on purpose.

"Stop thinking about it so hard and just do," He commanded when the blast veered off of the path she had set it on. Huffing, she tried again, angry that suddenly the energy seemed to have a mind of it's own. Since when did energy become sentient?

"It's not doing what I tell it," She whined as the energy seemed to burst before coming anywhere close to the blaze of youkai she had aimed at.

"It is not a living thing, it is your energy. It follows your will."

"So this is my fault?" She snapped, glaring hotly at the daiyoukai. When he said nothing, but stared
at her blankly, she knew he was silently blaming her.

"I can't help it, I don't know what changed." She snapped.

"You're afraid again."

"I'm not afraid," She retorted, crossing her arms over her chest and cocking her hip. She knew the pose, it was the one her mother affected when she was angry. The pang of homesickness rang through her and she quashed it mercilessly.

"You have a power most would murder for, but your will leaves something to be desired." Coming from him, and taking his previous comments into consideration, that had been almost kind.

"There's nothing wrong with my will! I'm willing it to join yours. It's just not doing it!" She shouted, hoping she hurt his ears. When he refused to even flinch, she drew in a breath, readying a volley of angry names that would have made Inu Yasha blush.

"No," He commanded sharply, holding up one hand. "You will cease this childishness. We will try another tactic."

"And what's that?"

"Run."

The word didn't register with her for a second, and even though she saw him tensing his muscles as if getting ready to move, she still didn't get it.

"Huh?"

"Run. If I can catch you, I will kill you. Run."

"You're kidding, right?" Panic started scrabbling at her and her heartbeat suddenly thundered in her ears. He wouldn't actually hurt her, right?

"If you can't defend yourself from a youkai, you're useless. Run." His tone was as flat and bland as it usually was. But she saw his eyes narrowing and could see the tension of his body holding itself back from lunging.

"No," She started.

Youki flared out and buffeted against her skin, a physical sensation that knocked her back. With quickly dawning horror, she realized that he wasn't joking, that he would attack her.

"Run!" He snarled, his eyes shifting, changing. Features sharpened and for a moment she saw the beast beneath the surface. He masqueraded as something close to human, but she'd been stupid to forget what was underneath. His real self lay just below the surface, pushing at the line between the two and forcing itself through. It was enough to send her fleeing across the field, heart hammering in her chest.

Somewhere deep down she knew he was playing with her. If he really wanted to hurt her, he could catch her, easily. But what if he wasn't lying, what if she suddenly became useless to him? She'd certainly put him through enough to warrant death, especially if measured in his terms.

Cursing, she barely caught herself from tripping as the field changed into forest. Bokusenou was nearby, he would keep her safe, hide her until Sesshoumaru calmed down. But what if he didn't calm
down? Or what if he left her, content with the knowledge that she was 'useless' and therefore unnecessary?

A fallen tree brought her down and she hadn't even been able to get her arms under her before he was over her, snarling as he pushed her back into the dirt.

"Stop it!"

"Defend yourself!" He ordered, his voice rough against her ear.

"No, stop it, I won't hurt you!"

"And if I spread your legs?" The snarl was hot in her ear.

A peculiar calm settled over her, and she let herself go limp under his heavy form. Her panic subdued, she tried to get her breath even though he was crushing her.

"You wouldn't. You promised to protect me, and you'd never go back on your word," She stated confidently, if breathlessly. "I'm pack."

She could hear his jaw click shut and his teeth grinding as he tried to control the rage he felt. Despite several layers of clothing she could feel his muscles tensed and straining, as if holding back by a thread.

"And if this is for your protection? If it's to teach you to act instead of letting yourself be the victim?" He finally snapped.

"You wouldn't do it. You can't twist your own honor like that," She replied as calmly as she had before.

He was off of her in a second and she pushed herself off of the ground and turned to face him. The light filtering through the trees hit his eyes and reflected eerily off of his pupils.

"Do not pretend to know me, miko."

Bokusenou's words came back to her, and for the first time in a long time, she felt as if she had truly gained her footing. And she realized that if he had even an inkling of how well she knew him, they'd be back where they started. A daiyoukai and a miko. Natural enemies. It couldn't happen, not when they were so close to the final battle.

"I won't. But never try to force me like that again Sesshoumaru. I am pack, and I know you wouldn't rape me. It goes against everything you are. But I am willing to try combining our attacks again," She stated calmly, simply.

"Tomorrow night," He muttered. She nodded, still balanced in that odd, bucolic certainty.

The ride back to the shiro was silent. The air buzzed with his anger, and she knew that without meaning to she'd overstepped herself. He was an honorable person, perhaps more so than anyone she'd ever met. And she'd seen a hint of the savagery she'd felt in his core, and like then, she was unafraid.

A/N: I know this is ultra late. Part of it is that my beta (my boyo actually) has recently had an increased workload in every day life and doesn't have the time, and I don't have lots of time to edit with everything going on. I do have this story almost finished, so it's largely a matter of editing while
writing my other stuff. I also have real life stuff, like my mom's tests and knitting boobs (See Stitch and Twitch, a Dokuga exclusive fic for further explanations).

Anywho, please forgive me.

The quote 'Some people feel the rain, others just get wet' is Bob Dylan's, not mine. It is a sentiment I agree with.

As for the core, I've always been fascinated by the idea of memory palaces. They feature in the Hannibal books and in movies like The Cell. There are several books on the theory and psychology of such places, and they make for absolutely fantastic reads. However, I'm choosing a more Cell-like approach, mainly because for the purposes of imagery and not slowing the story up with psychobabble. Kagome and Sesshoumaru wouldn't understand what it is, and Bokusenou would probably be the only 'person' in the story that would have a good grasp on the idea.

I'll post the next chapter as soon as it's edited, so it should only be a few days. Thank you for your patience!
The green eyes looking up at her searched for something, flicking back and forth across her face. She knelt down so the youkai could see better and waited patiently.

"The other night, you tried to purify us," The child accused in a quiet but forceful tone.

"No, but it almost happened," Kagome admitted softly. Zurui had sought her out, seemingly determined. Now that she was 'cornered' by the girl, the snake youkai didn't seem to know what to do.

"Why?" Her eyes were hard, angry. Perhaps she had expected a profuse apology, but Kagome wanted the child to understand before she asked forgiveness.

"You and Tegatai saw some pretty bad stuff while you were trying to get here, right?" When the child simply nodded, the darkness in her heart reflecting in the vivid green orbs, Kagome stopped herself from flinching and pressed on. "I wasn't here the whole time. The man who started all of this came after me and my friends. His name is Naraku, and he wanted the shikon jewel shards I carried."

"You had jewel shards? Then how was he able to get them?" The little girl demanded.

"I don't use jewel shards, I only protect them. I'm supposed to guard the jewel. But it broke, and he got most of the shards. When he had enough, he came after me and my friends. He killed the man I loved, and hurt us a lot. I was dreaming of him when I sent out that energy. Somehow I got so wrapped up in the nightmare that I couldn't get out, and I just wanted him to go away. I'm sorry you and your friends almost got hurt."

"Sesshoumaru, he did something-" Zurui tried, obviously at a loss for words.

"He broke my energy with his own. It was strong enough he grew his own arm back," Kagome added.

"Tegetai, everyone, we were scared that-" Now the girl stopped completely, her gaze directed resolutely at the ground.

"Sweetie, no one here will hurt any of you. You're safe here. Nothing like that is going to happen again," Kagome promised, pulling the girl to her gently and wrapping her arms around the small form. That the youkai allowed it at all was a small wonder to her, a little miracle she found some comfort in.

"Do you still have nightmares?" Sensing the question below it, Kagome squeezed her in what she
hoped was a reassuring manner.

"I do. I saw him kill Inu Yasha, and I want to forget, but I can't. Sometimes the hurt just seems to take over everything. But it's gotten a little better, with help from Shippou and Rin and you guys," Kagome whispered as she rocked gently back and forth. "And someday it won't hurt nearly as much."

"Does Lord Sesshoumaru help?" The snake asked innocently. Kagome found a sliver of amusement in that thought, knowing the daiyoukai would have answered with silence or a very firm 'no'.

"In his way he does. Inu Yasha was his little brother, and now Sesshoumaru is making sure I can take care of myself, and he and I are going to go after Naraku and beat him."

"I still see the bandits killing my parents," The little girl confessed, her voice jerking emotionally. Kagome felt the tears pooling and soaking through the shoulder of her kimono where the girl had buried her face.

"I know it's hard sweetie. I know it hurts so much that sometimes that's all you see. And I know everyone tells you to think about them before that. And you should. Think about how much they loved you and everything they taught you. You didn't learn that magic on your own did you? The way you hide everyone?"

"No, my mama taught me. She loved using it to surprise my papa," The girl answered tremulously.

"Think about that every time you do it. It's her legacy to you. Someday you'll get to surprise someone with it. I won't lie to you, you're too smart for that. It won't stop hurting for awhile. But it will get easier, it won't hurt as much. Someday you'll allow yourself to just remember them before they were taken. I promise," Kagome told her, pulling back enough to look into the cat like eyes that still shed tears.

"So you loved Sesshoumaru's brother? Was he your mate?"

"We weren't able to make it official, but we loved one another very much. He was a hanyou, like some of your friends. He had the cutest ears, like a dogs, on top of his head. And he was a lot different than Sesshoumaru. You know how Sesshoumaru is always really quiet?" Kagome asked, wanting to make the child smile.

"Mmhmm," The girl agreed, her drying tears leaving trails of salt on her cheeks.

"Well Inu Yasha was loud, a lot. And sometimes he would get on all fours, and sniff things out like a dog would!" Kagome mock whispered, as if telling a great secret. The little girl began giggling and hiccuped, startling herself. Obviously she had not expected to laugh during this conversation.

"He was sort of like a big brother to Shippou too. Even Rin lost her family. Everyone here knows what it's like to hurt Zurui. It's okay to talk to them, and let them talk to you. When you share pain, it's halved," Kagome advised, tapping the tip of the girl's nose with her finger.

"Thank you Lady Kagome."

"I'm just Kagome. All the stuffiness can be saved for Sesshoumaru," She chuckled, smiling when the girl nodded happily, her expression open. Struck by the difference, Kagome realized that for the first time since she had met Zurui, the child looked like a child.

"Now, I'm sure everybody else is going stir crazy. How about we all go to the garden to play a game?" She asked, heart tightening strangely in her chest.
"You seem happy tonight," Sesshoumaru observed flatly when Kagome met him outside of the dojo. Her eyes were bright, cheeks flush with pleasure, and a smile graced her features. She looked like the miko he had met and fought before Naraku's ascent into power.

"The children and I played a game. I finally got them to go to bed, it's been a long day," She chimed happily, barely stifling a laugh.

"Let us hope your good mood bodes well for training."

"Oh, I think it will," She said through a smile as she sat on the cloud of youki he summoned. As they flew along, Kagome played with the wisps beneath her fingertips, wondering if clouds felt anything like it.

"Do you think I can create something like this?"

"Like what?" He quipped, never once turning to look at her. Crossing her legs and then her arms over her chest she glared.

"Like your cloud. Do you think I could make my energy do something like this?"

"It is not the right of humans to fly."

"I didn't think dogs could either," She muttered, knowing he could hear her. When he continued to ignore her, she stuck her tongue out then turned her gaze back to the cloud. Experimenting, she tried to pull some of it apart from the rest, curious if it could be separated. When it did, she cupped it in her palms, rolling it around. Looking up to make sure he wasn't watching and satisfied that his gaze was directed ahead of him, she opened her senses.

It was harder than it had been in that dreamscape. For a moment she felt like she was trying to force the flower open instead of letting it happen naturally. When nothing budged, she relaxed and let out a small sigh. That's when she felt it.

It wasn't as intense as it had been before, when his being had brushed against her, but it was still there. Tastes of his determination and pride. Even the bitter anger. And that savage innocence. Briefly she wondered at the contradictory nature of the words. Even if she couldn't make sense of it verbally, she felt it.

"What are you doing?"

Startled, she dropped the ball of youki and it joined seamlessly with the cloud, seemingly lost in the whole.

"Nothing. I just wanted to see if I could separate it," Stuttering, afraid he'd know she was lying, since he always seemed to know.

"It is possible. We're here." The cloud touched down and she stepped off, irritation flickering over her prior happiness and wonder when she barely had time to step off before it disappeared into nothingness.

"Throw your energy."

She gathered it, easily, and pushed it from her down the length of the field. She felt the surge in his own ki and watched expectantly. She knew her own attack would follow through. But when his attack coursed from his hands and in the wake of her own power, it did something unexpected.
It blew up. Spectacularly.

"Sesshoumaru-" She began, a strange anxiety beginning to gnaw at her stomach.

"Again," He commanded, cutting her off. They both pushed the attacks into the field at the same time. Once more, his blew up, this time almost as it lost contact with him.

"Again." And again, it discharged just as it was losing contact with his body.

"Sesshoumaru," She started, the anxiety hardening into dread. "What's wrong?"

"There is nothing wrong." His inner disquiet was reflected in his tone and from that alone she knew how shaken he felt.

"Maybe you need the night off, take a break?" She offered.

"We don't have time."

Sighing, she gave in, and followed his lead when he prepared for another attack. Once again, her own raced down the field as his was blowing up, almost literally, in his face.

Again. And again. A dozen times they repeated the same thing, each time his youki growing more unstable and explosive.

"Damnit Sesshoumaru, either something is really wrong or you need a break. Decide. Either way nothing is going to change tonight," She muttered, angry at his easy dismissal of the problem.

"This Sesshoumaru-" He started.

"We've covered that several times. Protocol doesn't apply during training. Which means I can ask you what the hell is wrong? You don't do," She threw her hand at the ripped ground where his attacks had aborted, "That!"

"What makes you think you know what I do and do not do?" He demanded, turning to her sharply. Immediately she was struck by his anger, and by the phrasing of his question.

"Is this about last night?" She asked quietly, eyes searching his. He let out a disgusted huff before looking away.

"This Sesshoumaru does not-"

"Sesshoumaru, I need to know. We're supposed to be working together. Sometimes you have to communicate or else it falls apart. I'm not asking you bare your soul or anything, just be honest," She prodded gently, taking a step closer to him.

"Days ago you said you did not understand this Sesshoumaru, now you act as if you know what paths I will and will not take."

She was quiet for several minutes as she tried to formulate an answer that would placate instead of offend. When she thought she'd come up with something, she let out a sigh and forced it out, even though in part it felt like a lie.

"When I asked for protection, I didn't understand I was asking to become pack. I didn't even realize I was asking for protection, to be honest. I didn't want to be part of a pack, especially not yours. You frightened me and I didn't understand you. I don't pretend to now."
"And yet I no longer frighten you." It was as much an accusation as it was a statement, and she wanted to smile in the face of his ruffled ego.

"Because I am pack. I don't want Kouga touching me, and he was-is, a close friend I trust very much. I don't know what I'd do if Miroku tried to grab my butt, even if it is in jest. Other men, even Tenka despite his issue, I can't even contemplate it.

"I know you're powerful. I see it all the time. I know you're honorable, and I see that too. Take my trust as the compliment it is. I have unwavering faith in your honor as daiyoukai of the west, and as Sesshoumaru. I trust you because you're powerful, but you don't step outside of your own rules. If anyone ever existed that was the opposite of Naraku, it's you. And for that, I trust and respect you." When she finished, she was still staring at his back, hoping her words had penetrated.

"You speak very well, especially for a woman," He finally admitted. "It is still unusual not to be feared by a ningen."

"Rin doesn't fear you. She knows the same things about you that I do."

"She is young yet. Someday she will grow to fear me," He replied blandly.

"I think you underestimate her," The miko chuckled, finally allowing herself a smile and an inner sigh of relief.

"Hnn."

"Want to try again?"

In answer, she could see him drawing energy from within himself, could see the difference from his earlier attempts as it's strength created a subtle wind around his form.

"Ready when you are," She laughed, allowing her own power to sing through her and take physical form.

The attacks almost missed one another, which was fine, because if it had been perfect, she probably wouldn't have trusted it, or his faith in her own words. But they synced up at the last moment, his own power enclosing hers, twining and braiding around it.

The result was spectacular, and she allowed herself a private moment for pride. The light of their combined attacks faded, and she looked to the sky, trying to let her eyes adjust to the sudden darkness.

"Sesshoumaru, a shooting star! Make a wish!" In her excitement, it never occurred to her that he wouldn't make a wish, and even her poorly chosen words -in light of current events- weren't enough to faze her as she clenched her eyes closed and silently wished.

And even though he did not make a wish, he followed the path of the shooting star silently, allowing her the small pleasure without giving comment.

The world was quickly spiraling into winter, fall becoming a warmer and more distant memory with each passing day. She exchanged the fine linen hakama and kimono Sesshoumaru had provided her with for wool ones, and despite her initial, scratchy discomfort, she was grateful for the warmth.

Their training sessions were shorter, out of deference to her health. She had argued with him for almost an hour, insisting she was fine to train more, even when her nose had been red enough to
double as a cherry. He had calmly and quietly insisted that if she became ill, she'd be useless, and that soon they'd stop fooling around and actually target Naraku.

And then he had threatened her with something obscene in a mildly cheerful, pleasant tone, and it had been the tone as much as the dichotomy between it and the threat that had caught her off guard. Shock had given him enough time to summon his youki and move on, the argument settled.

'That's what he thinks,' She told herself the whole way back, even though she was shivering despite the new clothing.

Once back at the shiro, Sesshoumaru had gone to his own office, citing the need to speak with a general, which had been a courtesy she hadn't expected, and she had gone to find the children.

Tenka took up a goodly portion of their day, and feeling a bit puckish, she set off for the classroom, intent on mischief. Once she had slid the door open, she smiled brightly.

"Even in my time we have free days!" She sing songed blithely. "Who wants to play a game?"

She considered herself lucky that she hadn't been trampled by the stampede.

"You're looking well this day, Lady Kagome," Tenka observed through a small smile.

"Sesshoumaru said it's getting too cold to stay out long, and if even Sesshoumaru is saying it's time for a break, I think it should apply to everyone. You want to come?" Kagome asked, jerking her head in the direction the herd of children had gone.

"I am quite fine, and I have things to attend to. Thank you for the break, Kagome-sama."

"Just Kagome, jeez," She laughed before heading off at a jog to catch up with the children. By the time she found them, each pulling on new coats Sesshoumaru had ordered tailored for them and pulling on shoes similar to his own boots, the excited chatter hurt even her ears, and she wondered how the youkai and hanyou children handled it.

"Okay, it's really cold outside, and we don't want anyone to get sick, so we won't stay out too long," She commanded. As a group they released an exaggerated moan and she shook her finger at them while winking. "But we can come in and play another game, or I can tell you guys a story!"

Since her talk with Zurui, several other children had come to speak with her, word of her own story spreading through the brood like wildfire. Since then they had all become more comfortable with the miko, and oddly, with their benefactor, Sesshoumaru. Zurui had explained that the daiyoukai was not only helping them, but the miko, and that the two were going to stop Naraku. For them, it was enough. For Kagome, their unquestioning faith was enough to make her heart swell painfully, each face becoming a new reason to drive herself harder to win.

But with her decree, the doors slid open and she watched the children spill into the cold afternoon, each one trying to soak up the vestiges of a sun that hid behind clouds.

"Mama?" A voice asked, tugging at her hakama. Looking down, Kagome was surprised to find Shippou and Rin both looking up at her, uncertainty shining in their eyes.

"What is it?" She cooed, bending her knees to bring herself to their level.

"Are you and Sesshoumaru replacing us?" Rin asked suddenly, tears beginning to mist her eyes.

"Sweetie, oh no!" Kagome gasped, pulling both children to her in a tight hug. "Come with me, we'll
cuddle while they play a game, okay?" Kagome urged, standing and each hand open for one of their small ones. They walked over to one of the wooden benches scattered sparsely through the garden and she pulled one close on either side, wrapping her arms around them fully to keep them warm.

"I didn't know you guys felt that way, and I'm sorry you do. But neither of you is being replaced," She assured gently. "Shippou, you will always be my son, and Rin, you will always be Sesshoumaru's," She intoned, not giving a name to Rin's position because daughter was too strong and ward too reserved. "And we three are part of his pack. The other children may take their place in it someday, and we'll love them and care for them as much as we care for you two. But it doesn't mean you'll be replaced."

"But you barely spend any time with us anymore," Shippou whined against her kimono. She squeezed them both gently, trying to keep a smile from coming to her lips. It was one the children wouldn't understand and very easily could misconstrue.

"Both of you have your lessons, and even though I'm an adult, I have mine." When both gaped up at her, as if unable to comprehend an adult taking lessons, she smiled down at the conspiratorially. "Sesshoumaru is teaching me how to be a better fighter, and that takes lots of time, because you both know how clumsy I am."

"You're not clumsy anymore?" Shippou asked, agog.

"I'm still clumsy, but not as bad as I used to be," She admitted playfully. "And because we both have lessons, it's hard to find time. I want to be the best I can be so I can defeat Naraku, and Sesshoumaru feels the same."

"Do you think you'll be able to do it, I mean, he-" Shippou didn't finish the statement, but she knew where he was going.

"Sesshoumaru is very, very strong. And he has something to fight for, to protect. So do I. We both want to make sure you guys are always safe, and we'll do everything to make that happen. Now, I know the others coming in only seems to make it harder for us to have our own special time, and I know that it's hard. When my little brother was born, I got so jealous sometimes because my mom had to take care of him. Sometimes I just wanted to smack him, and he was a baby!"

"Kagome-chan wanted to hit her own brother?" Rin gasped, as if her hero had admitted some grievous sin.

"I was still little when he was born, and since he was a baby, he needed a lot of attention, and I wasn't used to sharing. I know it's hard, but you guys have had to share, and I'm very proud of both of you that you've done so. It's okay if you get jealous sometimes, but I want you to know there's no reason to. I will always be your Kagome, and I will always love you. But part of the joy of being us is that you can love lots of people, and it'll never make your love for someone else smaller."

"But how, if a heart always stays the same size?" Rin demanded, expression thoughtful.

"Hearts don't stay the same size. Each time you begin to care for someone else, it grows bigger."

"It does?" Both asked in unison, and with their worries eased, Kagome began telling them the story of the grinch, modifying the holiday it was based around to something they'd understand. By the time she was done, the other children had rushed to her, eager to go inside and find something to warm to drink and eat.

"It's freezing!" She muttered, stamping her feet. Each exhalation turned to visible condensation
before it even hit the air, and she noticed that even Sesshoumaru's breath was coming out in little
puffs of steam.

"It will be even colder at Naraku's fortress," He told her, voice flat. Kagome wanted to throw a jab of
energy his way, just for being so insufferably oblivious to the temperature. He was wearing his
normal clothing, sans armor, and had the gall to look like it didn't bother him.

Ripping her envious gaze from his strange pelt, she glanced at the field, suddenly realizing what had
seemed strange when they landed.

"The field, what happened?" She asked, pointing to the flat, even surface. The night before it had
been torn and jagged, small ravines littering the landscape.

"The Tenseiga," He answered simply.

'If I push, he'll never talk about it again. If he wants to bring it up, he will,' Kagome chanted, her new
mantra for dealing with Sesshoumaru. Rarely did she break the rule, even though the youkai was still
reticent, sometimes he would venture to explain things. Especially if she didn't ask.

"Rin and Shippou talked to me today. They asked if we were replacing them," Kagome informed her
training partner, hoping to speak to him about it before they started practicing.

"Why would they ask such a question?"

"It's how busy we've been, and the other children."

"And what did you say?"

"That they're pack, and that we'd never love them any less, even if the other children end up as pack.
And I told them that we're both training hard so we can defeat Naraku and keep them safe." She did
not mention the specifics, afraid she had assumed too much on Sesshoumaru's behalf. But
Sesshoumaru would never admit caring aloud, merely demonstrating it, however vaguely, through
actions. So it couldn't hurt to say it, could it?

"This Sesshoumaru-"

"Nope," Kagome cut in.

"We are not training yet," He hedged.

"But we are on the training field," she rebutted.

"Thank you," He admitted slowly, as if forced. Kagome was able to bite back most of the smile that
wanted to escape and turned to the field once more, readying herself for what had become the
highlight of her day.

"So, ready?" Kagome asked, turning her head at him as her ki began to pool and collect.

"This Sesshoumaru is never unprepared," He answered. Watching with no small amount of
satisfaction as their attacks met, there was a note of surprise, when instead of encompassing one or
the other, twining as they normally did, the blasts of reiki and youki converged fully, something she
had not seen before.

The resulting discharge tore through the earth, creating it's own winds as it torpedoed down the field,
gaining momentum instead of slowing, a force of it's own. And when it finally shattered, as if
meeting it's mark or cresting at it's peak, it felt cataclysmic. Light burst, burning the night with it's brightness. The backlash of power hit them hard and knocked him to one knee while she landed gracelessly on her bottom. For brief seconds it was like being stuck in a tempest, the wind roaring in her ears and pulling her hair free from it's confines.

And then all was quiet, and she looked to the sky.


"Was I dreaming?" She asked, heart finally deciding to speed up in response to the event. Fleetingly she lamented that somewhere along the way her natural fear response had altered, and that panicking after the danger was past was more than a little ridiculous.

"This Sesshoumaru does not believe so," He answered, staring at the field. He had healed it only the night before, wanting to gauge the strength of their attacks. But what, how had that happened? They'd done nothing differently than any other time.

"I didn't throw out anything stronger than usual," Kagome said, trying to solve the same puzzle he was staring at.

"Nor did I."

"But something must have, I mean, you don't know?" Her words would have warmed him, because she was deferring to him, a rarity. But in this area he was as much the novice as she, and it bothered him that he had considered himself able to comprehend what they were doing only to have this thrown in his face.

Reluctantly he admitted the truth. "This Sesshoumaru does not." Both founndered, their logic unable to explain why, or how.

"Want to try again?" She asked, adrenaline from fear shifting to reckless curiosity. When he looked at her, more caught off guard by her tone than anything else, he was met with blazing eyes and an incandescent smile.

"I think that would be a wise choice."

When their next attack was even stronger than the first, he allowed himself a rare smirk as she pumped her fist in the air, shouting gleefully.

Sesshoumaru arrived just ahead of another storm, and he felt the underlying disquiet, a tension, in his home. Something had happened, although he couldn't quite put his finger on what. Quickly searching out his ward, he found her asleep with the orphan children. The kit was also in there, and all of them had brought their sleeping pallets closer together, forming a giant futon where everyone cuddled everyone else. It was a nightly occurrence, and as such didn't bother him.

Content his ward was safe, he tried to sense the source and could feel the miko's energies flavored with anxiety. Writing it off to her rarely voiced worries for the taijiya, he sought out his own suite of rooms, determined to relax and plan the journey to Naraku's fortress. However, the miko had other plans. He could feel her energy hurtling toward him, seeking him out, suddenly desperate. The panic present in it was more than enough to express that something had happened since their last training session. He moved in her direction despite the overwhelming urge to avoid her. It was the desperate scrabbling of her aura over his own that made him want to get away as much as it concerned him.

"Sesshoumaru!" She called the moment he was in her sight, her tone bordering hysterical.
"What is it?"

"Naraku, he's joined the two bigger pieces. I felt something, it was like lighting. Something he did, I don't know what, but it's bad. I could feel it," Kagome babbled. He watched her hands fluttering madly, fingers twisting each other then separating to clench into fists before the whole process started all over again.

"Are you sure?" He asked.

"I'm positive. He did something. It feels, I can't explain it," She keened, frustration clear. Sesshoumaru could see the route her mind was taking, could see the madness rising up to meet her. Her whole body was trembling, as if struck with a fever. He had thought she'd be ready for this, and there wasn't time to go fishing in her mind to bring her back.

"We leave in the morning," He commanded, his voice breaking through the spiral she was plummeting down.

"The morning? But Sango, and--"

"I will have a message sent to her. If she can catch up, she may travel with us. But the hanyou has forced our hand, there is no time to wait for her."

"But I promised," Kagome began again, tears sounding in her voice as much as showing in her eyes.

"Do you understand what this means?" He snapped, losing patience. "The boy's shard is all that stands in the way of him making his wish. This world will be torn apart the minute he decides it, and I do not believe he would wish for the woman anymore."

"What else would he wish for?" Kagome demanded, stamping his foot.

"There is no time," He repeated himself, ignoring her question completely. Frustration made him want to shake the small woman and he barely refrained from giving in to the urge.

"I promised Sango, and she needs to be there for Miroku!" She finally shouted, her own anger easily matching his own. She was breathing heavily, her eyes shining and he knew if he didn't make the concession, somehow she would find a way to circumvent his will.

"I will send one of the hawks. They will not be that far."

"Thank you." It was not the first time she had thanked him, but it was perhaps the most heartfelt. Her body relaxed and the hint of madness in her eyes dimmed, although he worried about the fear still lacing her scent unpleasantly.

"Go to the children, they will want to be with you before you leave. It should not take long for the taijiya to arrive." He didn't want to be nice to her. In fact, he wanted to be mean and cruel and petty, and the sudden urge bothered him as much as her ease in frustrating him. He choked the emotions and schooled them back into apathy, and did the opposite instead, perhaps just to spite the sudden uprising of anger.

"Thanks." He watched her walk away and wished he'd been less careful with his words around Bokusenou. The woman was slowly driving him mad, and even if it was against his better logic to talk to the tree, at least the spirit could give him ideas on how to handle it.

When he caught himself wondering about advice from a tree, he took a deep breath and made a resolution.
The woman is a tool. A powerful one, but a tool nonetheless. You take care of tools. You don't abuse them. You treat them according to their nature, and when you are done, you put them away. The miko is no different. When this is done, she will go away, and live her own life."

It was comforting to put his chaotic thoughts in order, and even more comforting to contemplate the woman leaving. When the battle with Naraku was over, she would be gone, and it would be over. His life would go back to normal.

Once he had calmed himself, he went wrote out a quick, terse message and ordered a servant to give it to one of his prized youkai hawks.

"You've got to be kidding?" Sango half gasped half shrieked an afternoon two days later. Kagome had watched for her friend since the hawk had been sent, and the children had been sensitive to her mood and left her alone. Only Shippou and Rin dared break the tense silence around her, and she had explained only that she and Sesshoumaru would be leaving soon.

Both children had understood what she was implying and given her watery smiles.

"No. He joined the two halves. The only one missing is Kohaku's shard. I can feel it resonating, it's still pure. But, the jewel, it's just dark, and something, it felt like something changed in it. Not the taint, something different. It's just-argh!" Frustrated from trying to explain and unable to interpret the strange feeling that had pierced her, she gave up, angry noises rumbling in her throat.

"Well, the other slayers and I got a bit done. When I got Sesshoumaru's message, they said they'd go on ahead and keep fighting. There's talk of starting a new village, or rebuilding the old one when this is over," The taijiya confided, although Kagome couldn't tell if the news pleased or worried the other woman.

"Do you really want to stay a slayer after this is all over?" Kagome asked, horrified. She'd thought that meeting Shippou and Inu Yasha would have changed the woman's mind about her own vocation. Besides, Sango was supposed to have a dozen children, how could she still hunt demons if she was pregnant all the time?

"There will always be youkai that need to be exterminated," Sango reasoned, eyes steeling against the miko's horror.

Hesitant to agree, Kagome only nodded. Miroku would change things for Sango, soften her, at least she hoped. If the monk was dead, or worse, the darkness in Sango might never heal.

"Sesshoumaru says we'll head out in the morning," She finally said.

"I'm packed already, and Kirara's ready any time. What about you?"

"I've got a few spares as far as clothes go already packed, and some camping stuff, bedroll, blankets and all that. My bow and some arrows are ready any time. There's not a lot I need," Kagome supplied. "Sesshoumaru said he'd hunt for food. He wants us to travel light, to get there before Naraku does anything else."

Both girls stared at each other for a minute, the enormity of the situation hitting them at last.

"This is it," Kagome whispered.

"Not yet. It'll take at least a week, even if we take it fast. Don't get worked up Kagome. We'll do it," Sango promised. Kagome allowed her friend to comfort her, at least on the surface. Her stomach
heaved uneasily. Something was off, and she couldn't name it.

As if lightning had struck her, the moment when the jewel pieces were joined, something had pushed out, and the feel of the jewel had changed. It still felt tainted, but something was missing, and it didn't make any sense. Even in the context of a world where youkai lived and jewels granted wishes, it sounded ridiculous.

"We'll get Miroku and Kohaku and destroy Naraku," Kagome whispered, trying to force every ounce of confidence she possessed into her words. After training day in and day out for this specific thing, she should be ready. But she didn't feel it. Since that strange feeling, dread had been settling in her stomach, a heavy stone eating at her resolve.

"Be good for Tenka and Jaken," Kagome whispered into Shippou and Rin's hair, feeling crushed and lifted by the surrounded children as they clung to her tightly. Their departure was emotional for everyone except, of course, Sesshoumaru. Since she had given him the news, he had been silent except for forcing her to release more and more in their training sessions. Ignoring his earlier edict of being careful not to get her sick, he had kept her out all night the past few nights, pushing both her and himself to their limits. In the end she had succumbed to exhaustion, falling over in the field in a dead faint.

Waking had been an experience, as she didn't remember going back to the shiro, and certainly didn't remember cuddling up with Shippou, Rin and the orphans. But they had swarmed over her, warm and alive and so vivid that it had hurt to think of leaving them behind, even to save them. Seeing the dark circles under her eyes, several had gone to the kitchen and told them merely to bring the breakfast into the bedroom.

As if sensing her own inner disquiet, that had chattered animatedly, about anything, for over an hour. The only topic that was taboo, as if by an unspoken edict, was Naraku.

Now they surrounded her, clinging to her tightly, Rin and Shippou leading them in a group hug that would have been suffocating had it not been for the whispers asking for her safe return and victory. When she looked up even Jaken was tearing, and Tenka was studying the ceiling stubbornly. Sango watched in wide eyed shock, still incredulous that the orphans were there at all. Only Sesshoumaru seemed unaffected by the display.

Until the group, one by one, starting with Rin, stampeded over to him to offer the same. Only Shippou remained in her arms, and both watched, stifling giggles as they watched the daiyoukai listen to each one as if considering a great request.

"We will come back victorious," He assured, and Kagome swore that there might have been a hint of warmth in his tone. But declaration being made, he stood straight once more and for all the world looked as if the children surrounding him were nothing more than figments of her imagination. Taking that as a signal to move back, they retreated to group around Jaken and Tenka.

"We should be back in a few weeks at most. I expect all of you to behave," She demanded with a wink. All of the children nodded and she let Shippou join them. Kirara transformed, and Sango was on her in seconds as Kagome was boosting herself onto Ah Un's saddle. Still nervous about riding the dragon for the first time, she held onto the saddle horn and waved to the children with a forced smile.

"Be back before you know it!" She called cheerfully. Steadfastly ignoring the unsettling feeling of the beast rising from the ground, she continued waving until the shiro itself grew so small that it looked like a figurine.
"It's like they're all yours," Sango laughed, noticing that once out of sight of the shiro the miko's mood fell.

"Some of them have fathers at war, although none of them are sure if they survived. But the orphans, I mean, they don't have any parents. Everyone should have someone thinking of them, you know?" Kagome asked, grateful for anything that kept her mind off of the impending battle.

"Hmph, and you said Miroku and I were going to have a dozen children," The taijiya teased. "When this is all over, how are you going to feed them?" She laughed.

When her taunt was met only with silence, she turned to her friend again, only to catch glimpses of the miko's expression as her hair whipped around her face, effectively obscuring her visage.

"Kagome?" Sango asked, suddenly lost.

"It's nothing Sango." As if a cloud had lifted, Kagome forced herself to smile and pulled her hair to the side and began trying to braid the errant locks. Seeing the pseudo smile splitting her friend's face, Sango determined that she'd inquire later.

Several hours passed by them in silence, everyone lost in their own contemplations of the future. Kagome let her gaze drift from Sango to Sesshoumaru, and while the slayer was oblivious, the daiyoukai was not. However, he was disinclined to ask what was causing the riot of spikes in her aura.

By the time Kirara and Ah Un tired, both needing a break and water, it was well into evening and Kagome had been huddled close to Ah Un's body, hoping to gain some kind of warmth from him. When he had proved to be as cold blooded as his reptile cousins, she had settled merely for a windbreak. As they slowed and began their descent to a lake spotted from overhead, she was shivering uncontrollably. Her lips felt chapped and eyes dry, and warmth was a distant fond memory.

But when she tried to move off of the saddle, her thighs screamed in agony. Halfway off, both legs gave out in protest to her movement, and mortified, she fell the rest of the way. Tears gathered in her already sore eyes and she cursed them back, determined not to be a baby on the first day out.

And Sesshoumaru watched it all, eyes hard as she pulled herself into a sitting position. Dashing the remnants of the almost tears from her eyes, she tried standing, only to have her legs refuse to bend as she wanted them to.

"Taijiya," Sesshoumaru said, stopping Sango, who was moving to Kagome's aid. When Sango just glared at him angrily, he arched his brow. "Help her walk, it will ease the stiffness." With that, he turned away and moved into the forest, although for what neither female could guess.

"I can't believe we're teamed up with him, he's such an ass," Sango muttered, helping her friend stand. With an arm around the miko's waist, Kagome allowed some of her weight to be braced against her friend.

"He's not that bad. Besides, he might have the right idea. I don't think any of us can afford to get emotional with the final battle this close."

"How can you say that?" Sango huffed as she helped her friend move around the clearing. "How can we not get emotional?"

"It's crazy, I know, but if we let ourselves get too angry to think straight, what good are we?" The stiffness was just beginning to ease it's hold on her, and she was actually able to bend her knees without feeling like a sledgehammer was being brought down on them.
"It's houshi-sama and Kohaku. How am I supposed to ignore that?"

"We don't, I'm not saying we should. I'm just saying that we need to keep ourselves calm and rational. Naraku's going to pull out all of his tricks, and we have to be able to deal with them."

"Sometimes I think you've spent too much time with Sesshoumaru," Sango grumbled.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Kagome screeched indignantly.

"It's not an insult, don't worry. I just, you're not like you used to be." Kagome didn't want to be hurt by Sango's words, because the slayer was right. She had changed. It felt like years since the jewel had been stolen, since Inu Yasha had died. She had changed. A lot. But the way her friend stated it hurt.

"When this is over, I won't have to be strong all the time. I'll probably cry for weeks, or a few months. And then I'll keep going. I don't think I'd feel right, acting like my old self right now. Not since everyone's been hurt so much."

"I think that's why we need the old you more than ever," Sango admitted quietly, moving away from Kagome slowly, gauging the miko's ability to stand. When she was able to take several wobbly steps on her own, Sango looked back up at her face. "Even when everything was bad, you kept us together, made us smile."

Selfishly, Kagome didn't want that responsibility. She didn't want to be the glue or the cheerleader, and she definitely didn't want the pressure. But Sango was her best and closest friend, and she knew the taijiya had a tendency to slip into her own melancholy.

"I'll try harder," Kagome promised.

"Thanks Kagome," Sango whispered, looking the slightest bit pleased.

As if on cue, Sesshoumaru came back to the clearing, stalking silently over to the dragon and firecat. Both had gotten their fill of water and laid themselves down away from the pond. After being checked over by silent gold eyes, both stood as if commanded silently and moved to the taijiya and miko.

"One of the bandit encampments is close, if we ride hard, we can reach it just after nightfall," He informed them as they climbed back onto their mounts.

"Why are we stopping with them?" Sango demanded, voice dripping with venom. Kagome agreed, but kept silent.

"Some of my own are with them. This Sesshoumaru wants a full report."

"No," Sango disagreed, sneering at the daiyoukai. "There is no way you're subjecting Kagome and I to that. You know what happened."

"Now is not the time slayer," Sesshoumaru intoned.

"No," Sango snapped back belligerently. "We're not going. Kagome, do you want to sleep in a bandit camp?"

"I don't want to, but the report could be useful. And Sesshoumaru won't let anyone hurt us." It hurt to say that, and the very idea of sleeping in a bandit camp, surrounded by nothing but men made her want to weep. Sango's hurt look stabbed at her and she held up her hands, palms up and sighed, her
shoulders slumping in defeat.

"He's going to do it anyway, and if we separate, we can't take on Naraku on our own. And I'm sure that Sesshoumaru won't let those men near us since he knows our history," She tried again.

"Oh yeah, he cares so much that he'll protect us-" Sango snapped, but was cut off mid-tirade.

"The miko is correct. This Sesshoumaru will keep the bandits away from you."

Kagome wished she had her camera again, Sango's expression was almost comical.

"You will?" Sango asked slowly.

"There is little choice. Doubtless you would both be useless should any come near you," He answered phlegmatically. Kagome could hear the undercurrent of impatience in his tone and nodded.

"Now that that's solved, we need to get moving if we're going to make it. It's cold enough as is, I don't want to be traveling too long after dark," She told them both, shifting Ah Un's reins and urging him skyward. One by one they took to the sky, the cold winds stirred by their ascent stabbing Kagome mercilessly through her wool clothing. She tried to count her blessings and could only be thankful that it hadn't decided to rain.

Within minutes she was sneaking glances at Sango, trying to gauge the taijiy's mood. The female hunter looked ready to spit acid, keeping her gaze to the front of her except to throw angry glances at the daiyoukai. Glancing at Sesshoumaru, she found him unfazed by the poisonous looks being thrown his way, indeed, he seemed oblivious to everything but his own thoughts.

Wishing for Shippou's presence to break the tension, to start some sort of silly conversation, she leaned down again, wondering how they were going to work as a team when it seemed Sango hated Sesshoumaru and Sesshoumaru was apathetic to Sango at best.

Sango's earlier taunt returned after an hour in the air. Kagome thought about all of the children in the shiro and wondered what would become of them after the war was over. What would become of Shippou? Her place had been in the twenty-first century, not the feudal age. But three years had changed her, and her family.

The last time she had seen her mother, the woman had been warm and kind, but Kagome could see the distance she was endeavoring to put between them. Souta rarely spoke to her, if he was present at all when she visited. And her grandfather, he had been blunt and asked if she was going to stay there when it was over.

And really, what did her world have to offer besides her family? After passing her highschool entrance exam, she had been gone enough to flunk and end up on academic probation. Which of course, had led to being expelled. Even if she could have found a decent high school that would allow her to attend, there had never been time for the entrance exams.

Inu Yasha had consoled her, but had never really understood her depression. The long, uphill battle with school finished, she had given in and stayed in the feudal era for even longer periods of time.

Her friends were another thing she never saw anymore. High school studies and clubs kept them busy, not to mention their own love lives and dreams. As if afraid her failure was a contagious disease, they had disappeared soon after her dismissal from high school.

'No, that's not true. I forced them away. It was just so awkward,' Kagome thought, flushing guiltily for thinking such unkind thoughts of her friends. But they were gone, and even if she went back,
they would have their own lives.

But what could she do in this time? Guard the jewel and play at being a priestess? Refusing to lie to herself, she admitted that she didn't have the devotion to the gods necessary to work at a shrine. And she had a kitsune son. What shrine would take her? What village would allow her to stay? The only place she could think of was Kaede's village. The option appealed less than working in a demon slaying village with Sango. Too many memories of what could have been but never would be. Inu Yasha's ghost would haunt her there, her own version of hell.

'I'll figure it out when I get to it,' She thought, sighing into the dragon mane that whipped around her.

It was a surprise when the fires came into view. Hinting at a group the size of a small army, Kagome relaxed, knowing the group of bandits she and Sango had been kidnapped by had been much smaller. Releasing a breath she hadn't known she'd been holding, she looked over to Sango, who was also visibly loosening up.

"It's not them," Kagome whispered to her friend as they landed just outside the perimeter of the camp. She didn't even look at Sesshoumaru, didn't think about his ability to hear. If she had been looking at the daiyoukai, she would have noticed tension leaking from his posture as well.

Sango dismounted first and moved to help Kagome, but was surprised when Sesshoumaru came forward to help the miko off of the dragon. Surprised, Kagome allowed herself to lean against him as he guided her forward. Sango followed a few steps behind between the twin dragons and a still transformed Kirara, who seemed intent on guarding the taijiya.

"Halt!" A voice called out. Sesshoumaru kept moving, and Kagome had no choice but to shamble next to him or be dragged. Briefly she wondered if he would allow her to fall if she resisted at all.

"Halt!" It called again. Suddenly they were surrounded by men, all of them armed to the teeth and looking as if they hadn't bathed in a week. Looking up, she tried to see if their smell bothered Sesshoumaru at all. Ever impassive, he stared them down, as if offended they didn't realize who he was.

"I am Sesshoumaru. I am here to see Shinzuru."

"If you're Sesshoumaru I'm the dragon's father," One snapped angrily.

"Bring Shinzuru to me then."

"And if we don't?"

Kagome could practically see the daiyoukai counting to ten. When a giggle escaped in spite of itself, everyone's gaze came to rest on her, and she flushed before ducking her head into the giant fluff wrapping itself around Sesshoumaru's arm.

"This Sesshoumaru employed you. It would be unfortunate to kill those within my employ. The others might revolt, and many would die."

"Please," Kagome said, smile gone as she brought her face back into the open. "Just get Shinzuru. If he says it's not us, you can just kill us," She offered. "It would take just a minute to make sure."

One bandit turned mercenary nodded and another ran into the camp, practically flying. Kirara and Ah Un had closed the space between themselves and Sango, both alert and ready for an attack.

Minutes later a demon was walking towards them sedately.
"Oroka, drop your weapon, the rest of you as well. That is Lord Sesshoumaru, and you risk your lives threatening him and his party."

Ignoring the guards, Kagome took in the sight of the youkai that stopped several feet away. Unable to tell what kind of youkai he was, she saw an eyepatch covering his left eye and crows feet wrinkling the edges of the other, which proved to be deep red. Other than the eyepatch, his face was unmarred except by slight signs of aging. Auburn hair was pulled back into a braid, and she was reminded briefly of someone from her time, although he she couldn't quite figure out.

"My apologies Sesshoumaru, but you understand?"

"This Sesshoumaru does. The sentry is acceptable," Sesshoumaru intoned, beginning to move forward again. The guards moved to the side, eying Kagome and Sango suspiciously.

"We have food from a fresh kill being cooked now. My akunoya will be donated to you and your companion's this evening," He told them as they moved to the center of the camp. Kagome kept her eyes ahead, uneasy with the stares being directed her way.

"The women will make use of it. This Sesshoumaru will stay outside."

"Indeed, Sesshoumaru," Shinzuru replied as he held the tent flap back, allowing them to enter first. Kirara and Ah Un, too big to even think of going in, hung back, taking positions on either end, as if to keep anyone they didn't know out.

Kneeling gratefully on the pelts thrown on the ground to create a soft sort of floor, Kagome murmured her thanks to Sesshoumaru.

"I will return in a moment," Shinzuru acknowledged as he left, tent flap falling back down.

"Why did you do that?" Kagome asked. The event was strange enough that she didn't need to be more specific.

"You would be angry if he spoke down to you or the slayer. I wish to avoid issue while here. By helping you into camp, he knows to conduct himself with respect to your person."

"Oh, thank you," She answered, looking down to the pelts. Sesshoumaru moved from the tent, and Sango and Kagome looked at one another, incredulity apparent. Their shock only grew when Sesshoumaru brought in their packs, dropping them at one end and moving to seat himself at the small table. Shaking herself of the surprise, she studied the akunoya, taking in the subtle stripes and the crest painted on each side.

"Is that your crest or his?" Kagome asked, pointing to the painted silk. It looked like a butterfly doing, well, she couldn't quite figure out what it was doing.

"It is Shinzuru's. He is a moth youkai. Illusions are his forte. The moth is shifting a sword into a flower. It is a warning."

"Oh," Kagome replied, looking at the crest again. Now that she knew what she was looking at, she could see it. Or maybe her brain was just supplying her with the image. It was a rather distorted image. "What is your crest?" She finally asked, turning back to the daiyoukai.

"The moon."

"Oh, you mean, like on your forehead?"
"It is as you say."

Before she could make further comment or ask any more questions, the tent flap was pulled back and two women came in, one carrying a large tray with bowls and another carrying a tea service. Silently they sat them down and left, never looking Kagome or Sango in the eye. Seemingly satisfied, Shinzuru made a satisfied noise and let the flap fall as he came to take a place at the table.

"Both of you can eat with us, I will not bite," Shinzuru joked, smiling at Sango and Kagome. Both mumbled, embarrassed they'd been so reticent in the face of his charm. Her legs still stiff, Kagome tried to hide her discomfort as she moved to cross them. Tea was poured by Shinzuru as he waved a hand for them to avail themselves of the bowls.

"It's simple fare," He began.

"It's fine," Kagome assured.

"Niceties aside, what do you have to report?" Sesshoumaru asked. Wanting to admonish his rudeness, Kagome was stopped short by a long, drawn out sigh.

"You'd think that those evil children of his would do him in. We've heard reports from others that they've been doing anything they can to undermine him."

"And how many are there?"

"Well, as far as we can tell, there are two left, although we don't see them much, been lucky. One flies around on a big paper crane, uses illusions. Sounds like someone from my branch, but smells fishy," Shinzuru replied, sipping his tea calmly, although Kagome could see the worry in his eyes. "The other, well, we've heard rumors, not much else. Only a couple have escaped his attacks, humans no less. He took out Namigashira and Urame's groups, we only found the bodies. Looked like they'd been savaged." With a sigh he sat the teacup down and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"It hasn't been that bad for us. We came across a couple, but it's been mostly youkai trying to take advantage of the fall of the three houses. We tangled with one of his children and took him out, but others haven't been so lucky. The one that uses illusions is bad enough when he has a mind to fight, but that other one? I don't know how we're supposed to stop it. One of the survivors said that he just kept regenerating, couldn't die, like some ghost."

Silence reigned over the akunoya, everyone absorbed in their own thoughts of the youkai's revelations. Kagome chewed her lip thoughtfully, eyes resting on the Tenseiga as it lay resting across his lap, one end showing past the corner of the low table.

"If it's a spirit, Tenseiga should be able to take care of it," She offered. Stifling down exasperation at Shinzuru's shocked gaze, she resisted the urge to roll her eyes. "Tenseiga cut's things not of this world. If it really is a spirit, then Sesshoumaru should be able to beat it, right?"

"That is correct," Sesshoumaru supplied. At his declaration, Shinzuru burst into loud guffaws of laughter.

"I see why you keep this one around Sesshoumaru. Smart, even for a human. Don't understand the other one though," He added thoughtfully, flicking a glance over Sango. The taijiya silently fumed, setting her bowl on the table with an audible bang.

"She is the shikon miko, and is the only one who can purify and guard the jewel. The other is a taijiya. You would do well to remember your manners, Shinzuru," Sesshoumaru reminded the moth youkai in a glacial voice. Shinzuru had the grace to look abashed before giving Sango a longer, more
"A slayer huh? And a miko? Well, never let it be said you didn't live dangerously. So, you going to track the spirit?" His tone and topic changed quickly, and Kagome sighed, grateful. She did not want to deal with this stranger's assumptions about her and Sango's choice of traveling companion.

"It is not my concern. Once Naraku is gone, he will either perish or I will find him then. The first priority is destroying the hanyou."

"If that's the way of it, well, I see your point. Now," He said, standing and stretching lazily. "I am going to go find some shut eye. We head out early, and I take it you all will be set on your own path at dawn." It wasn't a question, but it seemed the only goodnight he was going to offer as he left the tent, still chuckling and muttering something under his breath.

"Sleep, we will be heading out at dawn," Sesshoumaru informed them. Kagome noticed he hadn't touched any of the food presented. His own farewell just as terse as the moth youkai's, he left them in the tent alone. That was when Sango finally let go, bursting out as if she'd been unraveling at the seams.

"That arrogant, brainless-" The taijiya started.

"Sango, don't, they can probably hear us, and I don't want him to burst in and start doing all the normal things angry youkai do," Kagome sighed, knee walking over to her pack and pulling out her blankets. The akunoya was cold, and she had resisted shivering throughout the meal by holding her tea and thinking of tropical beaches. But now that the youkai were gone and she was alone with her friend, fatigue held in check came full force and the cold was only making her more sleepy.

"How can you sleep?" The huntress demanded.

"Because I'm tired, and because dawn isn't that far away. We need to be on the alert. Naraku's going to find out, one way or the other, that we're on the way. He'll send something at us before we get to him, and I want to be fully alert," She added, arranging some pelts to overlap thickly, providing extra insulation between her and the ground. Once satisfied, she threw down her blankets and slid the pack holding her clothes to the top, a makeshift pillow.

"You really think so?" Sango asked. Kagome refrained from shooting a sour look at her friend.

"I know so. Something's going on that we don't know about, and this spirit, if it is in fact a ghost, is just part of it. I can feel something, and it bugs me because I can't put my finger on it!" She growled, punching the pack as if it were an especially stubborn pillow.

Sango was quiet as she put down her bedroll and blankets, watching her friendly warily. Kagome had become more tense throughout the day, and she couldn't blame the bandit camp for it.

"Kagome?" She finally asked as the miko was blowing out the lanterns around them, leaving a single one lit. Shadows danced over the interior of the akunoya, and Kagome forced her thoughts away from those ephemeral beings in her own mind.

"What is it Sango?" She asked, climbing under her own blankets.

"You can talk to me, you know that, right?"

"Of course Sango. I'm just frustrated. It'll all be over soon, within a couple of weeks. It's just not soon enough, and being so close is just, well, I don't know what it is. Scary, I guess, but I want to just get it over with too."
"We'll make it," Sango promised confidently. "We've got Sesshoumaru on our side, and if nothing else, he can glare Naraku to death," She joked, hoping to make her friend smile. Kagome, remembering a similar joke Kouga had made, let out a halfhearted chuckle.

"You're probably right. Sesshoumaru has perfected the glare. And the way he can look straight through you sometimes, brr, just cold," She sighed, closing her eyes. Sango, content that she had made the miko smile, allowed her eyes to close.

"Still can't believe he helped you on the way in though. Thought I was going crazy," Sango admitted, voice slurring as sleep began to creep up on her. Kagome's last conscious thought was about the daiyoukai's strange actions and possible implications.

'He said he was making sure I wasn't disrespected. Maybe he really does see me as pack. When this is all over, maybe I can stay at the shiro or in the citadel and take care of Shippou and Rin and the orphans.'

A/N: I'm sorry this is a rushed chapter. My brain sort of imploded when I was writing it. (I remember a can of energy drink rolling towards me of it's own volition, and there are witnesses to this). My muses are devilish creatures.

An akunoya is a tent. Plain and simple. The sides could be pulled up or let down, and they're fairly simple structures, sometimes decorated with a crest, or striping, sometimes just plain cloth. Ta-da!

As for everyone's reviews, thank you so much. I adore each and every one of them and the people that post them. Your encouragement is keeping my muses from devouring my brain. Seriously.
Dawn came earlier than she would have liked. Sango was shaking her gently, calling her name. The smell of roasted meat and tea wafted under the covers, and Kagome finally poked her head out, immediately regretting it. The temperature had dropped considerably during the night, and the last thing she wanted to do was leave the little pocket of warmth she'd created.

"Come on Kagome, we need to hurry and eat. They're breaking up camp, and that youkai wants to pack up everything in the akunoya and head out," Sango urged, eyes still bloodshot from sleep.

"M'kay," Kagome mumbled, grabbing the bowl from the table and eating still wrapped in her blankets. Both wolfed down the rice and meat (completely unaware of what it was, but too hungry to care) and gulped down the hot tea. Breakfast done, they packed their blankets and bedrolls and filed outside, surprised to see the camp almost completely packed.

"Sorry we took so long," Kagome began as the moth youkai ambled over to them.

"Nah, you're fine," Shinzuru assured. "It'll take ten minutes to break this down and get it packed up. Lord Sesshoumaru's over that way, getting the animals some water before you all head out. I'll have one of the men take your belongings that way while you two attend to your, ah, business. Was good to meet you, good luck." His red eye twinkled as he nodded and turned away before either woman could offer her own farewell, and Sango began fuming again at his lack of manners.

"Sango, I have to pee, and I need a lookout," Kagome grumbled. Sango nodded, still muttering about coarse youkai as they walked into the woods. Once satisfied they were far enough from the camp, both stood lookout for the other before they made their way back.

"So, do you think you can attack a spirit?" Sango asked as they searched the sea of faces for Sesshoumaru's distinctive silver hair.

"I don't know. I could try, but I think Tenseiga will have it covered," Kagome admitted. "If it's a spirit, the Tenseiga should be effective against it. Bokusenou told me a little bit about it." Sango giggled. "There's Kirara and Ah Un. Sesshoumaru's talking to Shinzuru," Sango said, pointing at the very obvious heads of the dragons and firecat. Kagome took in Sesshoumaru's stiff posture and Shinzuru's flying hands and angry expression and decided to walk more slowly. By the time she and Sango arrived, Shinzuru had moved off and Sesshoumaru nodded in greeting.
"What was that about?" Kagome asked, glancing at Shinzuru's retreating back.

"He wishes for us to detour and find the spirit. It has killed several of the bandit armies, and he worries."

"I take it you told him no," Kagome guessed.

"Correct."

"Well, let him worry, he's an idiot," Sango snapped, jumping on Kirara's back. Her legs sore, Kagome accepted the inevitable and climbed onto Ah Un's saddle and gripped the saddle horn.

"His concerns are valid, and as his lord I am responsible. But Naraku is priority. It is likely that when we destroy the hanyou, this spirit, if it is such, will vanish," Sesshoumaru explained, and Kagome had a feeling he was directing the toneless comment at Sango, who had insulted the moth youkai. Sango said nothing, but threw a sidelong glance at Kagome. For her part, she was silent and trying not to look at the ground as they took off.

The cold winds numbed her, and after an hour, her own exhaustion and the gray, sunless sky were taking their toll on her and she began to doze lightly in the saddle, her grip never loosening as she leaned further into Ah Un, shifting every once in awhile to keep her seat. Another hour passed and the cold didn't even matter anymore. If she had looked down, she would have seen the world below blurring by; if up, Sango's concerned face.

Just as her dozing was giving way to true sleep, Ah Un jerked, and she brought her head up, glancing blearily at first the dragon, then the daiyoukai.

"What's wrong?" She asked, glancing around.

"Something is near by," Sesshoumaru growled. Kagome cast her senses out, forcing herself into wakefulness as she tried to sense whatever it was. When something brushed against the tendrils of power she searched with, she almost recoiled.

"It's one of Naraku's," She confirmed. "It's coming closer."

They waited in tense silence, and when Sesshoumaru's aura flared, she took it as a silent signal that he had seen whatever was coming their way, and prepared herself. But when the speck gained definition, she almost laughed.

The giant origami crane was definitely a novel mode of transportation, but it wasn't intimidating in the least. Features came into focus and for a moment she wondered if she was looking at a woman. The youkai was beautiful, and it seemed unconcerned as he drifted lazily toward them, completely ignoring Sesshoumaru.

"Ohayou," He called, raising his hand in greeting, his voice giving away his gender.

Sesshoumaru lunged, his claws dripping poison.

The image shredded into pieces of paper as he tore through it. The papers floated away, twirling mockingly as they spun to the earth.

"An illusion. At least we know which one it is," Sango said, her boomerang gripped in her hand. "But where is he?"

"He's on the ground," Sesshoumaru growled again, making a steep dive for the earth below them.
Kagome clung to Ah Un's saddle as the double headed dragon followed. For a moment she felt her butt lifting from the seat, and she was afraid she'd lift over the heads in front of them and land first. At the last second they pulled up, coming even with the ground and touching down gently.

"I don't feel anything," Kagome whispered, trying to find that signature energy. But there was nothing in the area except the trees and a lake. She couldn't feel anything, not even the wildlife. The silence felt unnatural, and even Kirara and Ah Un seemed spooked. When Sesshoumaru's head snapped to their left, Kagome focused in the direction he was staring.

"Something." He began, when a huge splash interrupted him. Beyond the trees was a lake, and Kagome wished she hadn't closed her eyes on their descent.

"What is that?" Sango gasped, her eyes widening in horror.

In the center of the lake a creature was emerging, unfurling and growing all at once from something sitting in the middle.

"A mirror," Sesshoumaru stated calmly.

"Kanna," Kagome breathed, fear gripping her. She vividly remembered being sucked into the mirror, and more than that, remembered Kanna being told to replay the death of Inu Yasha again and again in front of her while she had been chained in Naraku's fortress.

But the giant appearing from the mirror snatched her attention. Despite the clouds obscuring the sun, it glistened and shimmered, as if an internal light shone forth from it. The facets reflected the color of the lake, casting dancing blue light over them.

"It's Kanna!" Kagome cried out, right as the giant's fist came crashing down toward her. Ah Un darted out of the way, showing more speed than she had thought possible for the lumbering beast.

A white blur shot into the air, and a resounding crack echoed in the quiet clearing. Sesshoumaru stood before the giant, eyes watching it tip back. Despite the 'wound' that ran down the length of it's torso, the giant righted itself and began moving towards them once again.

Kagome notched one of her arrows, allowing her power to gather in it. Surely, even if it was Kanna's, the glass demon would fall to her newfound strength. But the arrow flew, a burst of light that reflected off of the crystalline surface of the giant's skin, and lodged itself in the youkai's throat.

Still nothing. Kagome turned, only half aware of the sounds of Sango and Sesshoumaru doing battle. Fantically she searched for any sign of the small child that was Naraku's detachment. Trees blocked her line of vision and she cursed herself for not being able to feel the petite youkai.

A fluttering of white flashed in the corner of her eye, and she looked to the sky, finding a giant paper crane hovering over them, it's smaller passenger almost blending in with the strange craft.

"Sesshoumaru, the sky, Kanna's controlling it!" Kagome shouted, pointing to the paper aircraft. Sango threw her boomerang once again and the bone crunched against the mirror demon, the noise making Kagome cringe, although she refused to take her eyes off of Sesshoumaru's flying at the two youkai floating above them. A snarl tore itself from his throat as the craft lifted higher, just short of his claws.

A ring of light appeared from the sky, and Kagome barely had time to shout the daiyoukai's name before he was slammed into the ground, cuts appearing all over his body. An angry snarl erupted from deep in his throat, making itself heard over the sound of the ground beneath him giving way and breaking as his body was repeatedly pushed down. Blood seemed to fly from his wounds,
covering the ground in a macabre pattern of swirls and dots.

"Kagome!" Sango shouted in warning. Too stunned by the sight of the daiyoukai struggling under an invisible force as his skin was littered with long gashes, she didn't see the hand sweeping out at her until it hit, knocking her several feet in the air. She landed several feet from Sesshoumaru, trying to get up even as her ribs screamed in protest. Each inhalation felt painful as she struggled to breathe. She had barely got herself standing once more when she saw the giant hand flying at her, swatting her as she would a fly and sending her hurtling through the air once again.

The water was colder than anything she'd felt in her life, the sensation akin to thousands of tiny needles poking into her skin and deep into her flesh, reaching bone. The lake was dark, the clouds obscuring any light that might guide her to the surface as she fought to orient herself. The wool hakama and kimono felt like they weighed a hundred pounds, and her lungs burned.

Forcing herself to calm, she stilled, trying to determine which way the bubbles of air she released escaped, and once satisfied, began kicking for the surface, black spots beginning to dance in her vision. Her head felt ready to explode as she released the last of the stale air and watched the bubbles precede her to the surface. Despite being so close to the top there was barely any light to give her hope. Once she broke the surface she gasped in air, ribs screaming as she dragged in oxygen, heedless of the pain.

She glanced at the shore and saw Sesshoumaru and Sango breaking the glass demon into parts, one extremity at a time. Already a hand was gone, the glass stump a glittering, dangerously sharp point. Half of it's face was shattered, and a chunk was missing from it's shoulder.

Searching for the paper crane, she found it to be missing, but saw Kanna watching dispassionately. It was her injuries that gave Kagome pause. The little girl reflected the injuries of the glass monstrosity, the scene all the more eerie for the fact that there was no blood, only sharp, jagged lines where parts of her were missing.

"Kanna!" She called, pulling herself onto shore and taking one step at a time, shivering as the wind further chilled her soaked, wet clothing. "Stop this, if you keep attacking you'll die!" Kagome screamed, voice beginning to go hoarse. "Please, don't do this!" Any memory of the girl standing in front of her with that hellish mirror faded, and she saw nothing but a child, another Kagura, being cut down bit by bit.

Tears started as another piece of the youkai was cut off, and Kanna's right arm fell away and shattered as it hit the ground. "Please, Kanna!" Kagome screamed again, tears rolling down her face. The child's empty eyes haunted her, staring at her as the giant battled in the background.

"Sesshoumaru, you're killing her!" Kagome screamed, turning her pleas to the daiyoukai instead. He paused only to level a glare at her, his eyes red and filled with fury. Pushing the youkai away and watching it fall over, he came to the miko and looked as if he was doing his level best not to transform into his true form.

"Kanna, please, we don't want to do this. Don't, don't do this for Naraku. You're free to do as you want!" Kagome begged, falling to her knees, the cold numbing the pain that had been lancing with every breath only moments before, the tremors making her body shiver so violently it was jerking unnoticed as she stared into the empty eye of the pale girl.

"Look out!" Sango shouted in warning, and Kagome ducked as the broken stump came flying at her, the point of glass shining with it's own light.

The giant shattered, and Kagome looked up, unable to close her eyes as the scream of rage and
denial tore itself from her throat. Kanna, who looked so like a little doll, a little girl playing dress up, shattered in front of her, the shards glimmering from an inner light, reminding her of the day the jewel was shattered.

A shard flew into her eye, and the force of the sadness that washed over her had her holding her stomach, cradling herself as the message was voiced over the torrent of despair.

'The light will destroy Naraku,' It whispered in Kanna's quiet voice. But the emotion swelling in that whisper was as profound as the apathy the girl had exhibited in life. Sobs wrench themselves from Kagome's chest, turning into deep, rattling coughs as she tried to breathe.

"Kagome, Kagome!" Sango begged, shaking her friend.

"She, she was alive!" Kagome cried, throwing herself into the demon exterminator's arms. "She was so sad!" The miko bawled, allowing herself to feel for the tiny incarnation that had let herself be destroyed by Naraku's orders.

Sango sighed, rocking her friend and trying to calm the tears. "Why are you crying? She was one of Naraku's creatures."

"She told me, there's a light in the shikon jewel, she said it would destroy Naraku," Kagome choked out in a voice hoarse from the cold and shouting, forcing herself to calm. As the tears stopped, the wheezing began, and her tremors only worsened.

"She must get warm, or she will fall ill," Sesshoumaru intoned as flat as ever. "I will gather wood, get her changed and under blankets," He commanded, turning to the forest. Sango set about her task, as if suddenly realizing her friend was not only soaked but freezing. She went to her pack and pulled out her blankets and rushed to the miko's still bent form.

"Your lips are blue," Sango gasped, trying to force Kagome's stiff limbs out of the heavy kimono. Once it was removed, Sango stifled an anguished cry at the sight of the woman's torso. Distinctive scars wrapped around her upper arms, like ugly bracelets, and another circled just under her breasts, keloidal flesh that looked as if it had been burned by something.

"Kagome, what are these?" Sango demanded, looking at the ridged lines that had until now been hidden from her.

"Don't w-w-want to talk about it," Kagome muttered, shivering violently. Shaking herself, Sango pulled her friend's hakama off, biting her tongue when she saw the same scars wrapping her friend's stomach and thighs. Ignoring etiquette in the name of saving her friend, she removed her underwear as well, then began wrapping the blankets around her. By now Kagome was barely able to move or even think, but her body convulsed spasmodically as waves of cold wracked her.

Once satisfied that the miko was as warm as she could get until a fire was made, Sango sat behind her friend and tried drying her long hair, shivering as she rung the freezing water from the thick mass. When she had gotten the better part of it out, she let the damp locks fall back to the blankets and wrapped her arms around her friend and began babbling, her worry keeping her from focusing on anything but the woman ion her arms.

"We're going to be okay. It's just cold, we've survived worse," Sango whispered furiously, rocking herself and the miko. "When this is over, you can come live with Miroku and me and Kohaku, and we'll all start families and be happy and someday it'll be like this never happened," She whispered desperately into the damp hair, tears beginning to burn her eyes.
Sesshoumaru came back into the clearing and dropped the dead tree he had been lugging behind him. Within minutes the trunk was cut into pieces and he was arranging branches torn from the main body in a pile. Five minutes later there was a blazing roar as the fire shot to life, consuming the dead branches and leaves he had arranged as kindling and licking along the surface of the bigger logs at the bottom.

"Bring her closer to the fire," He commanded. Kagome was asleep, her body still twitching and convulsing in Sango’s arms, and the taijiya found it hard to drag the uncooperative body closer. Finally succeeding, she laid the miko down and went back to the packs, intent on getting both bedrolls beneath the miko. But when she turned, a strange rush of air disturbing her focus, bedrolls and extra blankets in hand, she almost dropped everything.

Kagome was surrounded by a big white fluffy thing, and Sango was dimly aware that it was the strange looking pelt that was always wrapped around the daiyoukai's shoulder. But what was even more stunning was the presence of a very big white dog, watching in shock as it positioned itself around the miko, forming a windbreak.

Walking cautiously to the two of them, she tried to think of anything that could be said. Anything would be better than the oppressive silence as she watched her friend shivering in the blankets.

"Sesshoumaru?" She finally asked. That giant head swung toward her, the red eyes focusing and pinning her beneath it's stare. Gulping, she continued on, her worry outweighing her own fear of the daiyoukai. "If I could get Kagome closer to you, she'd be warm from your fur, and the fire's big enough moving a few feet from it won't matter. Your heat will also be more consistent," She remarked, trying to break her staring contest with those vivid crimson eyes.

His head dipped, the only answer he was able to give, and the one she had hoped to receive. Pulling her friend closer to the daiyoukai's body, she positioned the miko in the curve of his stomach, making sure she could absorb as much warmth as she could from the giant's flesh and fur. Quickly checking the woman's forehead, she pulled it back quickly, worry lining her face.

"She's feverish. I think she might have been sick before we left, and the winds and the fall in the lake made it worse. You shouldn't be pushing her so hard!" Sango accused hotly, turning an angry eye to the daiyoukai, heedless of his glare. Despite his canine face, Sango could feel the weight of his glare as easily as she could see that he did not appreciate being yelled at by a human.

"She's not like you, or even me. This isn't her life, a few months of training doesn't put her on par with someone used to this. I know that this is important, but you'll kill her before we even reach Naraku at this rate!" The taijiya snapped, tears beginning to mist her eyes.

Sesshoumaru cocked his head in what could only have been called a mocking manner, and whuffed, the expelled air knocking Sango backward. Staring up at him from the ground angrily, she dashed tears from her eyes and stood again, moving to set up her own bedroll, closer to the fire. She'd be damned if she'd sleep anywhere close to the beast.

Once finished and under her blankets, she tried to get in one last shot.

"Someday, all the youkai will be gone and humans will finally be safe," She muttered, eyes glittering angrily.

When an image of a bandit camp flashed in her mind, she turned her back to Sesshoumaru, unsure if he had been responsible for the image or if her own mind had supplied it.
The next morning brought slightly warmer weather and the clouds had broken, allowing the sun to shine down on the small camp. Kagome woke surrounded by something soft and warm. Ignoring the sounds of the world, she shivered and coughed, then snuggled deeper into the fluffy mass, determined to stave of waking for a few more minutes.

"You're awake," A voice said, calling her from the dark recesses of slumber.

"Five more minutes," She mumbled, her hand working itself into the fur beneath it. She didn't remember the pelts forming the floor of the akunoya being so soft and thick.

"I think you might want to stop pulling on his fur, Kagome. He doesn't look very happy," Sango's voice warned. Kagome's eyes shot open, and she blinked several times to clear her vision. Her head pounded unmercifully and for the first few minutes she could only see white.

When her brain began working enough to realize that the white wasn't light, but the fur of an unusually large dog, a daiyoukai to be precise, she jerked away, eyes widening. The events of the previous day came crashing down on her, but none of them explained why she had woken up, cuddled into his side!

"I slept next to you?" She screeched. As his youki flashed angrily, Kagome was blinded long enough for his form to appear in front of her, his eyes staring down his nose imperiously.

"You would be useless to this Sesshoumaru if you were dead," He declared in a deadpan voice before stalking off to the treeline and disappearing into the woods. Kagome watched his stiff form, still shocked by her wake up.

"He originally transformed to serve as a sort of windbreak to keep you from getting worse. I suggested that laying next to him would provide more warmth," Sango apologized.

Blushing, she tried her level best to keep the blankets wrapped around her as she stumbled to her pack, determined to get into some clothing before the daiyoukai came back. "Just tell me you were the one to undress me," She begged as she pulled out fresh underwear and more of the woolen miko garb from her bag.

"I was. There's something I wanted to talk to you about," Sango said, remembering the strange scars on her friends body. "You wouldn't talk about it yesterday, and you were sick so I wasn't going to push it, but what are those," Sango said, gesturing to the miko's pale arms.

"I still don't want to talk about it," Kagome muttered, pulling the clothing on beneath the cover of blankets, trying to retain some of the warmth that had been present before and failing miserably. Muttering to herself angrily she let the blankets drop and tied the kimono closed around her form before tugging on the hakama.

"Too bad, because those look awful, and I don't remember them from before. When did you get them?"

"Naraku," Kagome spat, wanting more than anything to avoid this conversation, or derail it, anything.

"But they're so strange, I mean, what was he-'"

Kagome saw the realization dawning in the taijiya's eyes, saw the rage washing over her face as she stilled, then tensed angrily.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Sango demanded quietly, her tone only hinting at the anger she felt
boiling up from somewhere deep within. "After everything we've been through, why didn't you tell me?"

"Because you've got other people to worry about. I'm fine," Kagome replied, trying to find the right words to placate her friend's sudden rage. "After everything happened with Miroku and Kohaku and the bandits, I didn't want to make it worse," She replied meekly. "You were hurting so much, I couldn't, I didn't-"

"We're supposed to be friends!" Sango roared angrily, her fury cresting and breaking out, angry tears burning down her cheeks. "You're supposed to tell me when things like that happen!" She accused hotly.

"What, when we were half dead and heading for Sesshoumaru? Or after the bandit attack? When was a good time to have a nervous breakdown and tell you what happened?" Kagome snapped back, her own anger rising. "When you were agonizing over Miroku and Kohaku? What point would there be in giving you more reasons to be angry Sango? It happened, and it hurt, but it doesn't matter!" Kagome finished, her words peaking in a shout.

"It doesn't matter? How can you say that?" Sango shrieked, staring at the miko as if she'd lost her mind.

"Because I can't let it matter right now," Kagome bit out, sitting herself next to the fire and staring into the flickering depths. "If I think about it, about everything he did, I'll start crying and never stop. If I allow it to matter, I'll never be able to face him, and it has to be done, before he destroys Japan. I can't let it hurt right now, can't you see?" Kagome asked, not even looking at the other woman.

"When he's gone, I'll cry. But I can't until this is over. I won't break before this is over," She finished in a growl.

"The miko is correct," Sesshoumaru said, walking into the camp with a deer slung over his shoulders. He ignored the glares shooting in his direction and flung it to the ground. Kagome was relieved to note that he had already gutted it, and all that needed doing was cutting the meat free of fur and bone.

"You are a heartless bastard!" Sango screeched at the daiyoukai.

"Sango, stop it!" Kagome insisted, standing. Her breath was beginning to come out in wheezing puffs, and she felt the ground beneath her tilting strangely. "Sesshoumaru has done everything he can to help us!"

"A few months ago you would have agreed with me!"

"A few months ago Inu Yasha was alive and everything was different than it is now. We don't have the luxury of feeling sorry for ourselves at the moment," Kagome explained, hoping to diffuse the rage crackling in the camp. She could feel Sesshoumaru's aura spiking dangerously and feared for Sango's safety.

"Is that what you think I'm doing, feeling sorry for myself?" Sango snapped.

"No, Sango, don't twist my words like that. Look, I'm sorry didn't tell you, but you've just been so messed up with Miroku and Kohaku still being trapped that I didn't want to add to it, and I'm sorry. I made a mistake, I should have told you," Kagome lied, knowing that if it hadn't been for the scars, the taijiya would never have known.

"I don't like how you've changed, you're not the same anymore," Sango sighed, deflating.
"I'm never going to leave you. We'll always be friends," Kagome promised. "And from now on, I promise to be one hundred percent honest with you. No more holding back, ever," Kagome swore.

"You were right too, we can't break, or else he'll win," Sango admitted. They gave one another a nod and the noticed the daiyoukai watching impassively. Flushing, they began busying themselves with the deer. Sango speared several long pieces to smoke for the journey and Kagome set about cooking two steaks over the fire, readying a third when she chanced a glance at Sesshoumaru.

"How do you like your meat?" She asked, remembering the untouched bowl of rice and meat in the akunoya.

"I do not require anything."

Taking the dismissal for what it was, she turned back to the fire and watched the venison cook over the open flames. When they looked like they were in danger of burning, she shifted them and began humming.

"What song is that?" Sango asked as she took a seat next to the miko.

"It's a lullaby my mother used to sing to me, something her mom sang to her, that sort of thing," Kagome laughed, blushing.

"Do you miss her?" Sango asked. Kagome took the venison from the fire and handed one stick to Sango and blew on hers to cool it before answering.

"I do, but I don't want Naraku to get to them, you know. I'm scared the jewel can help him get through the well, and even though they know there's danger, they don't really know," Kagome explained. "And I don't think I'd want my mom to see me right now anyway. She'd probably demand to know why Inu Yasha isn't feeding me more or why I haven't been home in months."

"Will you go after Naraku is gone?" The question was spoken in a light tone, but Kagome could feel Sango's stare and knew without looking the taijiya was looking for a promise.

"I'll visit, explain that I have to stay for Shippou. But I'd be as awkward there as I was when I first came here. If I returned I'd be stuck playing shrine maiden at a decent temple if I was lucky, or acting for tourists at my own if I wasn't."

"Sounds pretty grim," Sango sighed in an offhand manner, and Kagome felt a little angry at her friend's sudden ease. Sango wanted her to stay, and she understood that, but the slayer's seeming lack of concern over what was a big issue to her hurt.

"I do miss them though. And hot baths on command," She chuckled. "I still have no idea what I'm going to do here."

"You'll live with me and Miroku and Kohaku," Sango supplied before taking a bite of the deer. Sighing happily, she quickly devoured the steak and tossed the stick into the fire. "I mean, what else would you do, except maybe go to Kaede's?"

"I can't go back there. I love Kaede, but there's too many memories," Kagome admitted. "And no offense, but I'm not sure how comfortable Shippou would be in a village of demon slayers. Not all of them are going to be as understanding as you."

Sango nodded, although she didn't want to think about that 'small' detail. Kagome finished her own food at a much more sedate pace, coughing into her hand every few minutes. When she had finished, Sango put a hand to her forehead and frowned.
"The fever's not totally gone. We should probably wait another day before traveling," she admitted slowly.

"No! We're not stopping because I have a cold. I'll be fine," Kagome insisted.

"You'll only get worse, the cold up there is worse, not to mention the winds adding to it," Sango rebutted.

"We will travel on land for the time being," Sesshoumaru commented, cutting both women off. "Until the miko is better."

"See, a compromise," Kagome said with a smile, noting Sango's frown.

"We must also find you more suitable clothing before we travel above land. A cold front is coming. Your weapon is gone as well."

"Maybe if you fly, you can find a village close by, or another camp, and we can get some supplies there?" Kagome asked, turning the jerky she was trying to make. Sango huffed, going to her pack, and Kagome wondered what had upset the taijiya. She was concerned by her friend's almost bipolar mood swings, but had no idea how to broach the subject with her.

"It is a sound plan. Once the meat is done, we move on."

It was two days before they spotted another camp, and Kagome let out a quiet sigh of relief when, once again, it turned out to be a different band than their captors. Once more she and Sango were given the akunoya of the youkai in charge, and again they heard rumors of the strange youkai on his crane and the spirit.

"I don't like it," Sango said as they bedded down for the night. "Something strange about a spirit working for Naraku. I think it's a youkai like Kanna, they can't sense it's youki. And Naraku's forever regenerating, maybe it's a replacement for all the others." She suggested.

Kagome's fever hadn't worsened, but was still present, and the only thing she wanted was a good night's sleep without waking up to the mass of white fur that had greeted her the past few mornings. She always fell asleep close to the fire and always awoke snuggled into Sesshoumaru's side, and it bothered her more than she cared to admit.

"Maybe he's getting serious, giving that much power to a detachment. After all of the others turning on him, I mean, why else would he create a child like that?" Kagome guessed. "If he had to absorb or kill all of the others, maybe he's just got the two, and wants them to be stronger to keep us away until he makes his wish." She coughed and rubbed her chest, trying to soothe the cold hollowness of it. Suddenly she felt something strange at her foot, and when she looked she saw something slithering in the lamplight.

A shriek pierced the night and Kirara and Ah Un ducked their heads under the tent flaps and lifted the sides up, looking for the threat. Kagome was clutching the blankets to her chest and inhaling as deeply as her sore ribs and ailing lungs would allow.

"Kagome, what is it?" Sango asked, staring at her friend, concerned. She followed the miko's line of sight and almost burst out laughing.

In the flickering shadows of the lantern light, that strange pelt Sesshoumaru always wore was lying at her feet, as if it had always been there and hadn't scared the miko half to death. It also explained why Sesshoumaru had not come rushing in.
"It will keep you warm, the fever is close to breaking," He intoned from outside the akunoya. Sango, unable to hold back any longer, broke into peals of cackling, holding her sides as tears of mirth escape from behind clenched eyelids.

"That's just creepy!" Kagome accused, making sure her voice was more than loud enough for the daiyoukai to hear. "It can move on it's own? They have a subgenre of anime for things like that in my time!"

"Huh?" Sango asked, wiping a tear from her eye as Kagome grabbed the fluff and arranged it on top of the pillow.

"If you move at all in the night, I'll take it as a sign that you're doing something creepy, and I'll purify all of the fur off of you, got it?" Kagome demanded. When nothing happened, she turned and allowed her head to be pillowed by the soft fur. Really, it was comfortable, but for it to move on it's own? Too close to ecchi things from her era.

"What did you mean by anime and subgenre?" Sango asked, face full of questions.

"No," Kagome said, resolutely closing her eyes and bringing an end to the discussion. Seeing that her friend was determined to ignore her questions, she let out one last chuckle and let herself drift off to sleep.

The next morning Kagome awoke wrapped up in a warmth and softness she definitely hadn't felt the night before. Opening her eyes, she gasped and tried to untangle herself from the embrace of the fluffy pelt that had, at some point in the night, wrapped around her. Mortified, she flew from under the blankets and tripped as the pelt itself tried to move from her, sensing her sudden anger.

"I'll kill it!" She shouted, blushing madly.

"Miko, you will refrain from harming it," Sesshoumaru's voice rumbled from outside of the tent. Sango, awakened by Kagome's spastic drama in the tent, was watching, merriment dancing in her eyes as the miko, holding hiraikotsu, lowered it and glared at the entrance to the tent, as if willing her gaze to melt the flaps and hit the daiyoukai waiting outside.

"I told it if it did anything, I'd purify the hair off of it. It broke the deal," Kagome began.

"Kagome, I've seen you with your blankets before, you tend to cuddle anything close by in your sleep. Maybe it was a mutual cuddle?" Sango suggested, ducking her head to hide the smile splitting her face when Kagome's narrowed eyes came to rest on her.

"Sango, I want you to imagine Miroku has a furry thing on him at all times, and you suddenly woke up with it wrapped around you," Kagome muttered as she dropped the giant boomerang back onto Sango's pack.

"I'm not sure how to answer that," Sango choked out between peals of laughter. "How do you feel?" She asked, finally calming down.

"I'm fine," Kagome snapped, grabbing the fluff and stalking to the front of the tent and lifting one of the flaps aside.

"Take this!" She snarled, throwing it at the daiyoukai, who was looking at her as if she'd lost her grip on reality.

"Your fever has broken," He told her.
"Thank you," She muttered, the words dripping with sarcasm. "That means I don't need that-that thing!" With that, she turned smartly on her heel and let the flap close behind her. Sango was still trying to contain her laughter as they changed and packed their things.

Once out of the tent, Kagome refused to look at Sesshoumaru or the pelt wrapped around his shoulder once more. It was only when the youkai in charge of the bandits came forward with a folded coat did she speak, bowing her head and murmuring her thanks.

"Sesshoumaru-sama said you'd been sick, this should keep you warm, might be a bit big though," The youkai (Kagome couldn't determine a more specific species than that) offered. "Good luck on your journey," He told all of them, heading off. Kagome wondered again why the camp leaders always seemed so distant, and shrugged it off as she unfolded the coat and pulled it on. Immediately she felt twice as warm, thanking the padding sewn between the sturdy light blue linen and the silk lining. She tied it closed and pulled herself onto Ah Un's saddle, feeling better than she had in days.

"Are we flying today?" Kagome asked. Sesshoumaru responded by taking to the air, the dragon and firecat following suit.

"The wolf's tribe is not far," Sesshoumaru informed them as they flew along. Kagome stretched lazily, for once almost completely warm. Their last night at a bandit camp had yielded not only a good night's rest, but mufflers for both herself and Sango. Each night it seemed they stopped at a camp, and Kagome had begun to suspect that Sesshoumaru was either trying to be kind, or determined to avoid the sickness that had plagued their first few days of travel. Not that she was going to complain. Anything beat having a giant daiyoukai guarding you while you slept. His breathing alone was enough to keep her awake. She'd hate to think of how hard sleep would be to get if he snored.

"About how far off?" Kagome asked, looking at the world below for signs of the tribe. Seeing nothing but the tops of trees and occasional pond or lake, she tried to cast out her power.

"An hour, maybe less."

Kagome nodded happily, hoping they'd stop and rest for the day. Since she'd gotten well, they'd traveled nonstop for three days, and even though she wasn't doing anything physical, she was still exhausted, and knew Kirara and Ah Un had to be. Even Sango was showing signs of fraying at the edges.

"You missed it last time, I accidentally blasted Kouga into a wall," Kagome told Sango, making conversation.

"Oh kami, really?" The taijiya gasped, laughing from behind her muffler. "Inu Yasha was probably cursing a storm from beyond. He always wanted you to do something like that."

"Well, Kouga promised not to claim me anymore," Kagome offered. Sango kept chuckling, but the sound was almost completely lost as they traversed the distance between themselves and the wolf clan. Not for the first time, Kagome wished she had something to read, anything to distract her from her own thoughts. Communication wasn't easy while flying, the winds often rendering anything they said inaudible.

"You know Ah Un," Kagome whispered. "I don't know how you came to be Sesshoumaru's, but you're a really awesome set of dragons. And I know I haven't said it before, but thank you for carrying me," She whispered. Both heads made a noise from behind their bits, and Kagome took it as
an affirmation. She could easily understand why Rin loved them so much. Like Kirara, they seemed to understand what she was saying without issue, and responded no less.

'Another awesome thing about this time I guess,' She thought to herself. 'The pets are bigger, and definitely more awesome.'

It hadn't even been an hour when they spotted the wolf pack through the breaks in the trees. They were running, and Kagome guessed that they might be making for Naraku's fortress, despite what Kouga had told her before.

"Ah Un, let's surprise Kouga," Kagome whispered. There was an affirmative snort as they dove down, startling Sango and Kirara, who only watched as Kagome, who had been terrified of flying on them a week before, laughed gleefully as she plummeted to the earth.

Ah Un pulled up just as they were about to hit the ground and flew forward, parting the clan into two groups as Kagome looked for Kouga. Easily spotting him at the head, she guided Ah Un to circle around him, hiding her smile behind the muffler protecting her face.

"Holy shit!" Kouga shouted, jumping back and eying the dragon. "Kagome?" He demanded. Kagome nodded, then burst into laughter at his pole axed expression, hopping down from the saddle and unwrapping the muffler from around her neck and face.

"Hey Kouga, it's good to see you again," She told him, smiling.

"Little sister!" One voice called as she was tackled by two bodies. Their weight slammed into her, knocking her down. For a minute she couldn't breathe, remembering the press of a bandit's body as he had pushed her face down into the dirt. Kagome felt the panic wash over her before she had a chance to quell it, causing her reiki to rise in defense. Both wolves jumped back, not even offering to help her up as they stared, first shocked, then contrite.

"Sorry sister, Kouga told us you didn't like being touched anymore, we forgot." Ginta began.

"But we haven't seen you in so long, we were just so excited." Hakkaku picked up.

"Both of you shut up!" Kouga snarled, obviously losing patience with the pair. Kagome giggled in spite of herself, finally relaxing.

"Seems some things never change," Sango quipped as she landed. Sesshoumaru remained silent as Kouga, Sango and Kagome exchanged greetings. Once they had finished, Kouga turned to Sesshoumaru and inclined his head, the closest the wolf would ever come to bowing.

"You're heading for Naraku's fortress," Sesshoumaru stated more than asked. Kouga nodded tightly, a muscle in his jaw ticking as he clenched his fists.

"He got most of the northern wolf tribe," Kouga told them in a hushed voice.

"Oh Kouga, Ayame," Kagome began.

"She's safe. She was injured, but we got her and the survivors into the western lands. We're heading for the fortress now."

"And what were you going to do when you got there?" Sesshoumaru inquired, his tone impassive but the words enough to raise the wolf's hackles.

"Find the fucking thing that did it. It's another detachment. Ayame said he can regenerate over and
over without even getting winded," Kouga snapped. "I know I'm not an all powerful daiyoukai like you-"

"That is correct, you are not," Sesshoumaru told him, looking over the ookami that were watching them warily.

"Damnit, we all have a stake in this fight, so you can shove your-"

"Guys, calm down. Maybe we should just take some time to think, maybe come up with a plan. We're not that far, are we? A day or two?" Kagome asked, coming in front of Kouga and glancing between him and the daiyoukai.

"It is unnecessary. Most of the wolves are already injured and will be unable to fight."

"And just who are you to go around saying shit like that?" Kouga growled.

Kagome wished desperately that she had two rosaries to subjugate the pair with. Not for the first time did she want to smack the both of them, although it was the first time she had seen them together. Groaning, Kagome shot the wolf youkai an apologetic glance and began searching her mind for anything that might be useful.

"Kouga, most of your men are wounded," Sango affirmed, her eyes scanning the crowd of ookami and finding tired eyes and bandaged wounds that were showing signs of bleeding through the cloth covering them.

"I have to-"

"Then travel with us, but let your clan rest, or they can begin the journey back to the west," Kagome told him gently. "I understand the need to fight, but if you force them along with you, they'll end up dying."

"I can't make them leave me alone!" He snapped. "I tried, and they won't stop following me!"

"Packs stick together," Ginta muttered, the pain from Kouga's words showing clearly in his tone.

"Maybe we should sit down and eat something, talk and figure something out," Kagome offered again. Kouga nodded, his teeth still clenched so tightly she could hear his teeth grinding together, and everyone else started backing away, gathering into small groups and leaving their leader and the two betas with the miko.

"Tell your pack to follow your betas. As their alpha, they must obey you," Sesshoumaru commanded.

"You don't get it, do you?" Hakkaku snapped.

"We're not just going to leave Kouga, he wouldn't leave us!" Ginta finished.

"This is about more than me guys," Kouga sighed. "Everyone's exhausted, they can't keep up, and if that demon is what Ayame said, everyone could die. I won't let that happen. I need you to take them to the west, and meet up with what's left of the northern tribe."

"But what about you?" Ginta insisted.

"I'll be with Kagome. She knocked me out, remember? And I've got the Goraishi, I'll be fine," He insisted. "But I need to know the pack is safe. I need you guys to take care of them for me."
Sesshoumaru is right, you're both my seconds, and I don't want to give an order, but I will if I have to."

"The wolf speaks the truth. It is considered an honor to be entrusted with such," Sesshoumaru cut in, shocking Kagome and Kouga both.

"It doesn't feel like it," Hakkaku muttered.

"Honors given during war rarely do," Kagome sighed softly. "But some things have to be done. I promise we'll take care of Kouga," She added warmly.

"Hey, I'm not five years old," He snapped, temper flaring. Kagome chuckled and smiled at them, eyes bright.

Ginta and Hakkaku turned to their alpha and searched his face for several minutes before groaning in unison.

"There's nothing we can do to change your mind?" Ginta asked.

"Nope."

"Guess there's not much choice then." Hakkaku this time.

"Nope."

"Can we at least rest for the day, and camp here tonight?" Kagome surprised everyone.

"No," Sesshoumaru started.

"Oh come on," Kagome whined. "Ah Un and Kirara are both tired and could use a day to get their strength back. Us too. If we run ourselves ragged getting there, what kind of shape will we be in when we face down Naraku?" She demanded, resisting the urge to stamp her foot. Sesshoumaru stared at her, eyes hard, and she refused to break the gaze. She had learned that at times, if she won their little staring contests, he would capitulate.

"We rest for the day and make camp here. Make no mistake, we wake at dawn," He warned. She resisted the urge to do a victory dance, instead allowing herself a grin.

"Thank you."

"I will go hunt." With that, he turned on his heel and walked away, leaving a silently fuming Kouga and chuckling Kagome.

Knowing dinner was on the way, Kagome offered to go gather firewood, but Ginta and Hakkaku fell over themselves offering to do it, and she laughed as they raced deeper into the woods, looking for deadfall.

"You're doing the right thing," She assured Kouga. "At least by making them ago away they'll be safe."

"Right now I'm more interested in how Sesshoumaru got his arm back," Kouga said, casting a speculative glance her way. Kagome blushed hotly, remembering the ordeal she had put Sesshoumaru through.

"Umm, well, it's sort of a long story-"
"I think we got time," Kouga rebutted as Kirara and Ah Un sat, the three of them using the beasts as backrests. Once comfortable, Kagome started in on the story, leaving out who she had been dreaming of, instead leaving part to the youkai’s imagination. Ginta and Hakkaku came in midway in the story and built a fire up, eyes glistening with hero worship as they listened to the miko spin her tale.

When she got to the part about healing him, a stag fell in front of her, making her jump up and glare at the daiyoukai that in turn was staring down at her impassively.

"Why do you always do that?" She demanded.

"Do what?"

"Just throw it in front of me like that? It's gross!"

"It is a male's job to hunt, a female's to prepare the meat," He replied flatly, eyes narrowing. Kagome, taken aback by the expression, almost tantamount to shouting for the daiyoukai, backed down, wondering what had caused his displeasure. Mumbling about male chauvinism, she was grateful it had been gutted before being brought back.

"I've never seen those two cry like that," Sango murmured as they were flying the next day, turning back to Kagome, who was seated behind her. Kirara was bearing the extra load easily, refreshed from a day of rest. Ah Un seemed much less enthusiastic about his own burden, the sullen ookami.

"They'll be fine. They're heading west, and besides, the northern tribe can take care of them. I'm sure Ayame's not happy about all of them going off to find the youkai," Kagome replied, imagining the red haired wolf throwing tantrums about not being able to join them.

The cold wind seemed to grow even more cutting as they got closer to Naraku's castle. Sesshoumaru had decided they would stop short and rest the night through before heading in if given the option. Kagome had wondered at the addendum, if given the option. Would Naraku try to attack them? Or would he draw them back into the fortress?

A million possibilities were racing through her head, each more frightening than the last. The tug of the jewel grew more insistent as they approached, and beneath the feel of it there were a sliminess that made nausea roll in her stomach. When her arms tightened around Sango, the taijiya said nothing.

"We're so close," Kagome whispered.

"Soon this will be over, and we'll be free," The taijiya responded, steely determination making her words unforgiving. "Naraku will pay for everything he's done." Kagome ignored the chill the slayer's words inspired and buried her face into her friend's back.

Camp was silent that night. Kouga, determined to prove he was still valuable, demanded that the women stay with Ah Un and Kirara while he went to get wood for the fire as Sesshoumaru hunted. Kagome and Sango were both quiet as they arranged their bedrolls. Both knew it was pointless, because sleeping would be the last thing on their minds. But going through the motions brought a small measure of comfort in it's familiarity, and they snatched what pieces there were to be had. Even Kirara, still in her transformed state, allowed herself to be petted and brushed by her partner while Kagome gently pulled snarls out from Ah Un's mane.

Kouga came back carrying two small trees that looked as if they'd fallen from sickness, and Kagome wondered if it would be safe to cook anything over them as they burned.
"Everything in the area looks like this or worse. Something's killing off the wood."

"The hanyou's blight," Sesshoumaru replied as he came into the circle, empty handed. "There is nothing in this wood to hunt. Everything has fled or is too poisoned for consumption."

"Well, we're less than a mile from the fortress. Maybe his miasma has killed everything?" Sango offered.

"There are no bodies left behind, no bones," Sesshoumaru rebutted.

"So it had the good sense to get away, why is that a problem?" Kagome asked.

"Food has become more scarce the closer we've gotten," Kouga interjected. "We've seen some bodies, but not enough to account for a complete lack of life."

"There is a water source close to hear, it is contaminated," Sesshoumaru responded.

"That explains part of it," Sango sighed, looking at the fire, morose. "If we'd been better fighters, or less sympathetic to Kagura, do you think this would have happened?"

It wasn't an accusation, and Kagome didn't want it to be, and she knew Sango wasn't trying to be cruel. But it hurt all the same. She had been the one to feel badly for Kagura. She had been holding the jewel around her neck. She hadn't reacted to the hand shooting up and ripping the necklace away.

Everything was her fault.

"Taijiya, there is no point in wondering what if. You do nothing but upset the miko with your speculations. Tomorrow Naraku falls, and there will be no need to guess," Sesshoumaru rumbled. For a moment, Sango and Kagome both looked as if they'd been slapped. Kagome because the daiyoukai was being kind, in her defense no less, and Sango because she hadn't realized how her words, thoughtless in retrospect, would hurt her best friend.

"Kagome, I'm sorry, I didn't mean it like that," Sango started.

"It's alright. Once this is over, it's over, and we start our lives. After tomorrow, we're free," She lied. But the poorly worded musings of the slayer wormed their way into mind and refused to be banished. Even if a hundred years passed, she knew she would wonder if her kindness had been responsible for the jewel being stolen, and more importantly, Inu Yasha's death.

However, when her head hit her pack, growing accustomed to it as a pillow, she surprised herself by promptly passing out, a small blessing she would have thanked the kami for when she woke.

A/N: Okay, so it's late. I totally forgot about my boyo's vacation time. And we had to take full advantage of it. And we did. Also, we've been busy with family, since (being the pagan heathens we are and my mom's recent diagnosis) Halloween has been bigger than normal.

So, as another note, spirits were still considered youkai. I'm trying to keep a line between them in the story, however the kind Bokusenou is straddles that line (as opposed to a person that died and then became a spirit, he was just...a tree spirit to begin with, I suppose).

And as for Sango...erm...Well, I'd like to say that she and Kagome are fine, but they're not. It's just reality, in it's fashion.
And I'm sorry, but I had to write in something funny, or else Dressi (my comedic muse) would have withered and died.
"I feel the jewel, and him," Kagome whispered into Sango's back. When the fortress had come into view, she had retreated, not wanting to look at it despite knowing she should be on guard. It looked evil, as if it had taken on the personality of the hanyou within. The press of memories rose, threatening to swallow her, drag her back to that place in her mind.

"Something's off," Kouga muttered as they landed. "There's no barrier, nothing. I smell a trap," He snapped while dismounting. Kagome and Sango followed suit, feeling even more vulnerable at the loss of flight.

"We have been expecting a trap. The only question is, what kind?" Sesshoumaru answered, looking around sharply, as if expecting a literal trap to snap shut, caging them in. When none presented itself, he seemed to grow even more wary.

"If we expect a trap, we know what to look for, and to be prepared. He likes illusions, and he has a child that uses illusions. I think that's what he's most likely to use," Kagome told them as she stared at the giant doors. When she and Sango had escaped, it had been through a narrow tunnel in the cellar-turned-dungeon they had been thrown in together. The doors loomed, dark and heavy. Despite knowing that there was a trap waiting on them no matter where they entered, she suddenly wanted to sneak back in through that tunnel instead of facing the foreboding doors.

As if reading her thoughts, the doors slid open soundlessly. When nothing emerged, and she sensed nothing, she looked to Sesshoumaru.

"We have been invited in," He replied tonelessly as he began walking forward confidently. Kagome followed, determined to stay close enough to combine their powers. The wolf and slayer walked behind, Kouga still muttering under his breath.

Once they had stepped within the dark hall, the doors slid shut, clicking together just loudly enough for Kagome to jump, startled. On cue, ghostly balls of light sprung from nothingness, like sickly yellow foxfire strung along the ceiling. A mist covered the floor, obscuring their view of their own feet.

"The perfect setting for a haunted house," Kagome mumbled, wondering at the cheesy theatrics.
Naraku was fond of showmanship, she knew that, but this was different. It was almost tacky, more vaudevillian than anything else.

"Which way?" Sango asked.

"I smell him in both directions. It's like the whole place has been smothered in his scent," Kouga snarled as he darted a glance first to the left, then to the right.

"It'll take longer if we stick together, but I don't want to chance finding him separately," Kagome sighed.

"This Sesshoumaru knows the way." Kagome chanced a glance at the daiyoukai's expression to see if his statement had been pure bravado or the truth. Unable to tell, she nodded.

"We follow Sesshoumaru," Kagome told them. Their companions nodded dutifully, despite a certain mutinous glare from Sango. They followed Sesshoumaru, the yellow light casting dull pall over them, most noticeably their leader, white becoming the strange yellow. Kagome decided immediately that it was not a color she favored on him. Despite his fairly blood soaked history, white suited him.

Shadows flickered on the paper walls, and the unnatural silence, broken only by their footsteps, unsettled Kagome, who felt like something slimy was rolling down her spine each time she deigned to look anywhere but at the daiyoukai's back.

It felt like they had been walking in the same hall forever when a resounding crash echoed, the sound of wood splintering and paper tearing as the walls shifted. When Kagome looked behind her, there was a wall, as if it had been moved in seconds, between her and her friends.

"Sesshoumaru! Sango and Kouga, we have to get to them!" Kagome gasped, moving to the wall.

"It is an illusion. We have been led through the shiro, and the youkai is determined to separate us. They are being led a different way," He replied flatly.

"What? How do you know? They could be on the other side of that wall!" She shouted, trying to force her panic down and failing. Suddenly dizzy with fear, she started trying to tear through the paper of the walls, around the wooden frame. Instead of tearing, it resisted her clawing hands, strong as steel.

"It will not work miko. The illusion is well built."

"You sound like you admire it!" She snapped hotly, angry and afraid.

"No, but we must move on. It will try to separate us, then take us down when we are alone."

Reluctantly she moved from the wall, eyes still on it for any sign that hers friends were on the other side, trying to get through. Finally she turned, deciding that despite the narrow width of the hallway, that she was going to walk beside the daiyoukai instead of behind. She hoped they wouldn't be separated that way.

If Sesshoumaru minded, he said nothing, continuing to stare ahead as he strode forward, his eyes considering the path before them carefully.

A strangled scream came from in front of them, an animal sound that Kagome only dimly recognized as human. Before she could be stopped, she began running forward, determined to find the source, hoping against all odds that it wasn't Sango.
She was stopped short by the tableau before her, the blood draining from her face and her heart pounding furiously. Sesshoumaru stopped just behind her, and had it been anything else, the sharp intake of breath would have surprised her, would have made her wonder. As it was, she couldn't think, couldn't do anything but watch the cruel vision they had walked into.

Inu Yasha was held by several tentacles, each wrist and ankle wrapped tightly, and even though she couldn't see it from the angle they stood at, she knew another was wrapped around his neck. He was silent, but the vision he was watching was not.

Kagome's doppelganger was held very much as Inu Yasha was held, suspended in the air by root-like tentacles, her legs forced apart, another holding her arms to her sides, and the last just under her bust. Naraku’s hands were at her throat, and he was taunting the inu as he raped the miko, occasionally releasing her neck to allow the breath for another ragged scream.

"It's not real," Sesshoumaru snapped, grabbing her shoulder and turning her away from the scene. "It is a foul illusion."

"But that's what, it's just like-"

"You are stronger now, don't let it break you. It is an illusion. You lived through the actual event. Do not let it hold power over you," He commanded, the words clipped, as if he could barely get them out. Kagome looked up and saw him studiously avoiding the scene in front of them. His jaw was clenched shut, and she saw the muscle ticking as he ground his teeth together.

A deep, shuddering breath, and she nodded, steeling herself and turning back to the scene.

"Do we just walk through it?" She asked.

"Illusions like this take great power. If he was smart, he would try to use as little as possible. Perhaps he sacrificed the physical for the visual, hoping to shock you," Sesshoumaru intoned, his eyes fixed forward, but unseeing. Kagome looked forward once more, determined to see beyond the illusion. When she had fixed her gaze on the darkness on the far side of the scene, she took a resolute step forward, and then another.

Each step felt like a small eternity, and her feet felt like they had been lined with concrete. When she moved between the apparitions of herself and Inu Yasha, she made herself keep looking forward, determined not to look into the hanyou's eyes. Another ragged scream was ripped from the not-Kagome's lips and she flinched as it was followed by mocking laughter.

The breath she'd been holding escaped as she and the daiyoukai cleared the illusion. Her hands, tightened into fists, had barely relaxed when the sickening sound of tearing flesh started, and Inu Yasha's screams began.

"Do not look back," Sesshoumaru commanded. She nodded, and noted that even he flinched at the sound of wet flesh hitting the floor and the doppelganger's sudden piercing screech. The sobs that followed began to fade as they continued walking, their backs to the re-enactment of that horror.

"I'm going to kill him," Kagome muttered.

"Though this Sesshoumaru has long wanted that honor, you have more than earned the right," He agreed. The comment surprised Kagome, and she nodded, steeling her resolve. The daiyoukai had been right about one thing, she had lived through the reality, and she was stronger now. Naraku would pay for everything.
Sango and Kouga walked aimlessly through the shiro, looking for any doors that would open or exits. Despite walking straight, both had the odd feeling that they were being led in circles. The strange fog that had once confined itself to the floors was growing, becoming thicker and rising, trying to obstruct their vision.

"You think Kagome's alright?" Sango asked, breaking the tense silence.

"She's with Sesshoumaru. He won't let anything happen to her." The admission surprised Sango, especially so considering the source.

"Aneue!" A voice cried out. Startled, Sango rushed forward through the fog, ignoring Kouga's protest as she shot away from him. The fog seemed to thin, and in the light of the ghostly fire, she saw the crumpled form of Kohaku, heaving with sobs.

"Kohaku!" She cried out, throwing herself at the prone form of her little brother, only to be pulled roughly back by Kouga.

"It could be a trap stupid!"

"That's my little brother!" She snapped, tears running down her face as she struggled to get free of the wolf's grip. Unable to break his hold on her arm, she swung her free hand around, bringing hiraikotsu against his face hard enough to send him stumbling back into a wall.

But when she turned back to her brother, a choked gasp was pulled form her. Kohaku hung limply from Sesshoumaru's fist. The inu's eyes burned red, glowing in the dim light as he smiled, exposing his fangs.

"Let him go!" Sango shrieked, leaping at the daiyoukai, bringing her boomerang in front of her once more. A blast of energy knocked her back, and as she found her footing, she heard a pitiful wail. The daiyoukai's grin grew wider, hateful and mocking as she watched, his hand tightening around the boy's throat.

She rushed forward again, rage obliterating everything but the sight of her brother dangling helplessly as his neck seemed to crunch in the daiyoukai's fist.

"No!" She screeched, trying to land a blow on Sesshoumaru. Another blast knocked her back, and she was on her feet and readying to lunge when Kouga's hand wrapped around her arm.

"He's only got one arm!" Kouga shouted, jerking her away from the scene.

"What the hell are you talking about, he just killed Kohaku!" She struggled, trying to bring up hiraikotsu again. The wolf, more prepared this time, knocked it away and shook her until her teeth rattled in her head.

"One arm. It's an illusion, and whoever created it doesn't know Sesshoumaru has two again," He snarled, losing patience. "Which means that was not your little brother. Whoever did this is trying to fuck with us, and succeeded."

"But it could have been, that could be-" Sango choked out, looking back to the illusion. The fake Sesshoumaru only had one arm. But that didn't mean that Kohaku was an illusion. Kouga gripped both of her shoulders and shook her again, harder this time.

"That is not real. If you let it mess with you, you'll die. Hell, maybe you'll end up killing both of us, and I have people to take care of back home. If you do that again, I'm knocking you out, so don't be stupid," He snarled. Sango looked in his eyes and knew he wasn't bluffing. But still-
"I understand," She whispered. It was not a lie, but if she saw her brother or Miroku, she would act.

They continued walking, the silence becoming more oppressive with each step.

A scream rent the air, and though Sango started violently, neither rushed forward.

"Remember, everything is an illusion," Kouga snapped, his eyes never moving from the path in front of him. As if they'd suddenly stumbled into it, the illusion appeared, and Sango bit back an agonized moan.

Kagome was being held against a wall by her throat by Naraku, who was spewing profanities at her through a twisted sneer.

"It's not real," Kouga said again, as if reminding himself. But Sango saw the strange claw like gauntlet that appeared from nowhere on his hand, saw it clenched, his jaw taut.

"How can you be so sure?" She demanded.

"Because Naraku wouldn't do that. He'd wave her in our faces and mock us," He replied through clenched teeth as he continued walking. When he walked through the apparition, Sango began to follow.

"Whoever is doing this, they're a real bastard," Kouga snarled once they were out of sight of the illusion. Sango nodded silently, wondering at the wolf's fortitude. She knew he felt for Kagome, and for him to hold back at the sight of that...

'Perhaps all youkai can distance themselves from such things. It is a curse, I think,' she thought, the ability one that gained no admiration.

It felt like hours since they had witnessed the violent scene, and Kagome knew they were being led in circles. Sesshoumaru kept walking though, and she followed, determined to keep up. When a sudden flash jolted through her awareness, she almost broke down, tears beginning to slip down her cheeks.

"What is it miko?" Sesshoumaru asked, stopping to look at her.

"It's gone, the jewel, it's moving away from us, and he's going really fast," She whispered, her world retracting to the small pinpoint of the jewel's energy dimming as Naraku made his escape.

"I expected nothing less. We must be getting close, and the taijiya and the wolf are still alive. They must have overcome the illusions as well."

Abruptly the scenery changed, and Kagome shivered. It was as if the entire fortress had disappeared, and they were left standing in a barren field covered in a deep blanket of snow. Her breaths came out of steaming little puffs and she hugged herself tightly to ward off the pervasive cold that seemed to find every opening in her clothing and brush against her.

"Sesshoumaru, did the building disappear?" She asked, looking around. It looked like the outside world. But then, where were Ah Un and Kirara? Or Sango and Kouga?

"We are in another illusion. He's expending more power," Sesshoumaru said, turning a small circle and looking for the enemy.

"How long can he continue?" Kagome asked.
"No way to tell," He answered tersely.

"Can we destroy it?"

"Yes."

"How?" She demanded, stamping her foot and trying to ignore that she was freezing, that the snow was soaking her woolen clothing, freezing her skin.

"There is always something, an anchor. If we find it, we can destroy the illusion," He bit out, eyes still scanning the area.

"But this is huge, miles long," She started, then stopped. "Wait, a focal point you mean? For his power?" She demanded.

"Yes," He replied shortly.

"If we find it, can I send his power back at him?"

"You will try when we find it." With that, he was off, and Kagome almost growled when she saw him walking above the snow somehow, while she tramped through gracelessly, stumbling the the ever growing drifts. When it seemed like the gap between them was growing too large, he would pause and stare, as if she could help being bound by the laws of gravity. Ignoring his disapproving eyes, she caught up each time, refraining from grumbling.

"I have found it," He announced at last. Kagome looked around, but saw nothing except snow. When Sesshoumaru bent and brushed some of the snow away, she finally saw it. Perfectly white, a little origami was barely visible, the edges blurred from being covered by the gently falling flakes.

Forcing herself to forget the cold, she focused, trying to see the power around it. When she finally noticed the white threads, almost invisible, she almost laughed in relief. They were subtle and barely there, like spider silk. Ignoring that discomfiting comparison, she looked to Sesshoumaru, who nodded.

"Combine your ki with it, and throw it back," He commanded. She nodded her head and focused on gathering her own energy, trying to be just as subtle as this hidden youkai. If she went too fast, she worried that he would withdraw and end the illusion, making it impossible to attack him in such a way.

When she was satisfied, she sent her own power racing along the strands of energy, forcing them to drag the vestiges of youki with them, a sort of upward yoyo effect.

For several seconds, nothing happened and Kagome worried that she had failed. But when the illusions suddenly dispersed and she heard the agonized cry ringing through the air, she flinched despite feeling victorious.

"All of the illusions are gone," Sesshoumaru stated, his whip suddenly glowing from his fingertips. She followed, almost in awe of the efficient way he cut through walls, creating a direct path for them. It took minutes to find the blue haired youkai she recognized. A part of his own face looked cracked, and she was uncomfortably reminded of Kanna's final moments.

"You smell like your foul creator," Sesshoumaru said in a bland voice. His whip swung out, almost to the fallen youkai when the blue haired demon darted away, some sort of origami in his hand.

"You have a chance to save the monk. If you leave this place without him, he will die. Follow me, or
find him," He offered before throwing the origami into the air. A burst of light and smoke filled the room, and Kagome coughed around it, wondering how he had managed that. When the smoke cleared and the light dimmed, she looked around. No sign of the youkai.

"We've got to find Miroku," Kagome whispered frantically.

"It is a trick."

"If it were a trick, he would have included Kohaku in that, but he didn't. Just Miroku. Naraku would need Kohaku for his shard," Kagome shot back, already leaving the room and heading from the room.

Sesshoumaru followed silently, and she felt the fury radiating from him, as if he were the center of a hot, angry star.

'But he is following,' She mentally cheered, thanking the gods that they were allowing her that much. After several minutes she heard arguing, and rushed through a room, opening another set of doors, to find Sango and Kouga shouting at one another in another hall.

"Guys!" She shouted happily, throwing herself into Sango's arms. Sobering, she snapped back and stared at Sango, eyes bright. "Miroku's here! The youkai is gone, but he said Miroku is here!"

"It's a damn trick!" Kouga began.

"No, he used Miroku as a distraction to get away, come on," Kagome demanded, dragging the taijiya behind her. They both began to frantically search, looking in every room and alcove, then moving to the second floor as the two males followed more sedately.

I think he was trying to trick you," Kouga snarled, angry that the youkai had gotten away.

"There is someone here. Whether it is the monk, this Sesshoumaru knows not."

Every floor done, Sango was chewing her lips, on the verge of tears, and Kagome kept pushing her hand through her hair impatiently.

"Where else could he be?" Sango demanded. "We've looked everywhere!"

"Not everywhere," Kagome whispered, remembering. Ignoring Sango's hopeful look, she began walking, finding the stairs and walking down them. When they were on the first floor, memory took over, and as if in a daze, she led the others to a large door in the floor. Sango tried to open it, desperate, but it proved too heavy.

Kouga pushed her aside and started lifting it, grunting under the weight. Once it was up, he pushed it backward. Kouga and Sango both flinched at the echoing crash as it hit the floor, but she remained still, frozen in the face of the darkness looming in front of her.

'Anywhere but here,' She thought to herself. Sango ignored her friend's hesitation and rushed down the step stairs cut into the earth, calling out Miroku's name. Kouga followed, leaving her alone with Sesshoumaru.

"He could be down there, yet you hesitate."

"It's where Naraku killed Inu Yasha," She replied woodenly.

When a cry of joy echoed from within, Kagome knew Sango had found Miroku. However, she was
not prepared for the sight of the pale, emaciated monk. His eyes were dull, as if he barely comprehended that he was free. His hands were held tightly to his chest, curled protectively.

"Miroku," Kagome whispered, moving forward. His dark, dull eyes moved to her, and she saw a flicker of awareness enter them.

"It's not real," He whispered, slamming the lids shut and keeping them clinched, as if afraid they would be pried open.

"Miroku, we're real, I promise. Come on, please," Sango whispered brokenly, tears spilling over and down her cheeks. Kouga bent down and laid the form on the floor, shaking his head sadly.

"They probably used illusions on him, that or he thinks he's gone crazy," The wolf said, eyes still caught on the prone form.

"Miroku, we're not illusions, it's us, Kagome and Sango!" Sango sobbed, throwing herself to the floor, eyes searching the monk's face. "If I were an illusion, how would I know about where you met Hachi? Or that you stole Kagome's bicycle?" She demanded, voice filling with sobs. "Damnit Miroku, we're here!"

They watched, silent, as Sango moved herself into a sitting position and pulled the man into her lap and began rocking him. The slayer was crying, whispering to him, nonsense words as she rocked him, holding him tightly.

After several minutes, Miroku began to cry as well. Great heaving sobs that shook his whole form, and his hands, somehow perfect instead of mangled as the women had last seen them, came to the slayer's arms and held tight, as if afraid that she would vanish if he let go.

The two youkai watched, one impassive, the other slightly uncomfortable with the display of emotion. Kagome however, didn't cry. Instead she darted glances between the crying pair and the door. Unsure whether or not she should turn away, keep watching, or even join her two friends, she hung back, hesitant.

Eventually the two cried themselves out, and Miroku, in his frailty, fell unconscious from exhaustion. Kouga picked him up again, although the monk looked thin enough that even Kagome could have carried him.

"Let's get out of here," Sango rasped, eyes bloodshot from her tears. Kagome nodded, and they followed Sesshoumaru's silent form as he took them out of the fortress. Kagome dashed the last of the tears from her eyes and heaved a sigh. They had found Miroku, but Naraku had gotten away. She knew it was a more than fair exchange. And yet...She had hoped desperately that it would all be over today. But as they exited the fortress, night was falling once more, a testament to how long they'd spent inside illusions, searching for Naraku.

Sango pulled herself onto Kirara, and Kouga helped her place Miroku in front of her. When Kouga hopped into Ah Un's saddle, Kagome hung back, still uncomfortable at the thought of riding pressed against the wolf, despite his promises, especially after the memory that had been forced on her.

"Come," Sesshoumaru called, his own youki forming a cloud. He stood upon it as if forgoing flight, and Kagome nodded wearily, sitting on the cloud instead of standing. When they rose into the air, she curled into a little ball, making herself almost as small as she felt, and unbeknownst to any but Sesshoumaru, she cried.

Sesshoumaru pushed all of them hard, and it was well into the night before they stopped to rest.
When they did, Kagome was relieved to see another of the bandit camps. The youkai presiding over the bandits-turned mercenary was gracious despite looking like they’d just pulled him from his bedroll and given up the akunoya for the humans.

Sango had set about helping the monk as best she could, undressing him and bathing him, then dressing any wounds. In her own single minded intensity, she had snapped at Kagome when she had only been trying to help, and in turn Kagome fled the tent, feeling worse than ever, her own guilt beginning to eat away at her.

Sesshoumaru had been sitting outside of the tent, Kouga had gone to drink with the bandits, needing some release from the events of the day. Uttering a small, silent prayer that Sesshoumaru didn't demand her immediate return to the tent, she sat down a few paces from him, happy in the silence.

As unfortunate as it was strange, he was the one to break that silence.

"You don't like being around them," He observed, startling her.

"It's not that," She murmured, not wanting to face what she felt. "I'm just angry that Naraku got away. And Sango is wrapped up in him, wanting to help. There's no room for someone else," She whispered, angry that the whole situation made her angry.

"It is not unusual for one to keep everyone away from a fallen mate, even if it is detrimental," He added the last as if baffled by the idea. Kagome sighed, knowing that in his way, he was trying to make her feel better.

"Thank you, for the illusion, I mean, well, yeah," She finished lamely, desperate to change the topic. Even that illusion was more welcome than her friend practically yelling at her to go away. Several minutes passed in relative silence, the blowing wind mixing with the distant sound of men drinking and carousing.

"I have known for some time what you experienced, but seeing it was-" He searched for a word, seemingly coming up empty for several minutes. "I would not wish such on anyone, and I do not want to see it's like ever again," He admitted at last, as if to himself. Kagome understood the distinction he was making as he ignored protocol in favor of being blatantly honest with her. And apologizing in the only way he knew how for what had happened.

"Well, you made me remember that I had lived through the real thing, and when you said that, I realized it was just an illusion meant to hurt me, and it only could if I let it," She sighed, shifting a little closer so she could lean back against the tree trunk that had looked more and more tempting by the minute. "So thank you."

She didn't know how long they sat like that before she began drifting off to sleep. One minute she was mentally lamenting the harshness of the bark, the only bad quality about sleeping against a tree, and the next she was asleep, unaware of anything.

Sesshoumaru watched her, although none would have noticed unless they watched his eyes. For over an hour he seemed to be trying to decide something as he regarded her. But she shifted, and a small noise that no one would ever call a snore escaped her, and his decision was made. He moved to her and picked her up gently, then moved into the akunoya, careful not to wake her.

The slayer seemed ready to lay into him, her eyes bleary from lack of sleep and temper flaring just at the sight of him before he silenced her.

"Do not act thoughtlessly toward her again. She was forced to watch her rape acted out today, as
well as the death of the hanyou. You forget the past where the miko is concerned because she hides it from you to ease your burden. Instead of being grateful, you only add to hers,” He said in a quiet voice that only hinted at the anger he felt as he stared down at the taijiya. Her eyes widened in shock, then narrowed in anger, but she only nodded tightly. He left her, more surprised he had moved in the onna's defense than anything else.

He was not often moved to defend others, but the miko's sadness grated at him. The likeness between her and Rin was enough that he could understand his motivation. The little onna had helped him, despite his best efforts to dissuade her, and her own people, humans, had beaten her almost beyond recognition. The miko was enduring with the same determination despite being beaten down by her own people, still trying to help others even when they were hurting her.

His world was one where people didn't help other people unless there was something to gain. But the two human females he had allowed into his pack were always willing, despite the fact that the human world had shown them little kindness. The taijiya's own precarious mental state meant little to him. It startled him to realize that the miko's was beginning to matter.

Just as he was leaning against the tree the miko had formerly claimed, the wolf youkai came stumbling toward him, reeking of spirits and the unwashed bodies of human men.

"He got away," The wolf mumbled as he allowed himself to fall to the ground. Sesshoumaru ignored him, grateful when he immediately heard snoring next to him. If the wolf snored, at least he was asleep and not talking. It was the lesser of two evils.

A/N: I've been avoiding this story. I've almost got it finished, and last night I wrote the part I knew was coming that I really...really...really did not want to write, mainly to get out my angst that Cory Smoot of GWAR died.

I'm hoping now that I've gotten that part written, I can focus more on editing the chapters written.

Also, I know I haven't responded to reviewers like I should have, and for that I'm sorry. Your reviews mean a lot to me (you know the numa numa guy, yeah, I do that dance when I get one).

Last of all, I know this chapter was short and unpolished. I hated writing it, and I'm not particularly fond of the subject matter. That being said, I'm sorry if I made anyone cringe.
Kagome stumbled out of the akunoya the next morning rubbing her eyes and determined to get some air. The memory of Sango's reaction the night before still stung in the light of day, and she was determined to get a semi good start to her morning. When she almost stumbled over Kouga's prone form, she let out a little giggle, taking in the sight of the snoring, awkwardly positioned ookami. For several moments she wondered just how she had gotten to her bedroll, then she stopped short, distracted.

The smell of food cooking wafted through the air, and she realized how hungry she was when her stomach rumbled ominously. Following the smell, she ignored the curious stares of the bandits, so focused on the idea of food that when a hand settled heavily on her shoulder she spun around, dagger in hand before she could stop it.

Sesshoumaru however, could stop the dagger from doing any serious damage, and did, his hand tight around her wrist.

"It is good to see you have not forgotten your lessons," He deadpanned, and she knew her face was burning as he stared patiently, dropping her hand. "You should not be out of the akunoya without an escort," He reprimanded.

"Sango is watching over Miroku, and Kouga is still asleep," She replied, turning her gaze to the ground.

"These men are not honor bound to me as the youkai are. They would be dead the moment they tried to harm you, but the attempt would have been made," He said. She knew he was saying that she could be hurt before anyone knew it, even if punishment was swift and severe. That he wanted her to avoid that warmed her a little after Sango had seemed so antagonized by her presence the night before.

"I smelled food," She admitted. Her stomach rumbled once more, as if to punctuate her statement, and she laughed at herself, her cheeks growing even hotter in her embarrassment.

"I will have food brought-" He began.

"Please, don't make me go back in there. I'll hang around you, I'll be quiet," She promised desperately, the idea of going back to an awakening Sango driving her to such extremes. "Please?" She added, unable to meet the daiyoukai's gaze.
He let out a small sigh, something he rarely did, and she would have missed it if she weren't waiting for him to answer.

"You may," He finally told her. Kagome felt like a child again, allowed a rare treat. She smiled up at him brightly, tempted to hug him. Refraining, she settled on what she hoped was a thanks that conveyed her sincerity.

"Food first," He rumbled when her stomach growled again. Kagome nodded obediently and allowed herself to be led to the cooking area where meat and rice were being distributed. If anyone thought a woman being guarded by a youkai was strange, they said nothing. Kagome was too wrapped up in eating her first meal in over a day to care about anyone staring, and wolfed the food down, offering a polite thank you to a stunned camp cook.

Once her repast was complete, Sesshoumaru wordlessly led her to another akunoya, one that was bigger than the tent she had slept in the night before. When he held the flap back for her, she nodded gratefully and stepped in.

And immediately felt like an animal on display. Or prey. Prey definitely worked as a description. She was so nervous she didn't even realize Sesshoumaru was behind her, waiting for her to move forward until someone cleared their throat. Mumbling an apology, she moved to the side, waiting for him to take a seat.

There was only one camping stool left around the square table that stood low to the ground, and Sesshoumaru moved to take it. Kagome followed, folding her legs beneath her to sit next to him, ignoring the curious glances.

"We have been trying to figure out where the hanyou has gone, and everywhere but the west seems a good option. I don't even know where to start," A bird youkai sighed, looking down at the map. Three other youkai besides the tengu and Sesshoumaru stared down at the map as well, as if it would magically provide answers.

"The jewel is that way," Kagome said in a small voice, pointing at a wall of the tent, at once afraid of attracting their notice and frightened of saying nothing. She rose on her knees and began tracing her finger along the map. "We're here, right?" She asked Sesshoumaru, who nodded. "I feel it pulling me this way," She told him, tracing a line. "It's faint, but I can't block it out, and I don't think he can block it from me," She added.

"Can you estimate a distance?" Another youkai, one of indeterminable heritage, asked her. Kagome shrugged helplessly, angry that she could only guesstimate.

"Maybe a few days? I haven't tried to really tell distance before, just direction," She admitted quietly. "But I know Naraku won't let it out of his sight. Not now."

"What about the boy's shard?" Sesshoumaru asked, staring at her finger on the map.

"I think it's his shard, it's the only pure one left, but it's more faint than the jewel. It's coming from the same direction," She added.

Sesshoumaru considered the map for a long time, and she could practically hear the thoughts buzzing in his head. His eyes seemed so focused she was surprised he didn't burn a hole into the map.

"Is it on the move?" He finally asked.

"It doesn't feel more faint than before, but it's hard to tell. The tug is there, but it's always there, the feel of it, it's just too faint" She replied, casting her eyes back to the map, ashamed that she couldn't
give a straight answer. "I'm sorry," She finished meekly.

"It is more than we had before," The bird youkai piped up. Almost embarrassed at how grateful she was for the stranger's praise, she ducked her head politely with a demure thank you that in no way conveyed the depth of her gratitude.

"If it is on the move, than so should we be," Sesshoumaru intoned. Kagome nodded in agreement for a moment before she realized what the daiyoukai was implying.

"We can't," She whispered, forgetting that the others in the tent were youkai, and would easily hear everything she said. "We can't, they have as much right to come as we do."

"The right, but not the ability. The monk will slow us down, and there is no time to wait. The slayer will choose to stay with him," He predicted.

"But her brother is still with Naraku!" Kagome rebutted, temper flaring.

"And he will die if we do not hurry. The taijiya will have to make the decision. If she chooses to continue on with us, the monk will be transported back to the shiro in the west."

"She'll never agree to that," Kagome began.

"It is her choice," Sesshoumaru replied, his voice beginning to take on an edge. Recognizing it for what it was, she moved back, staring at the daiyoukai reproachfully.

"If you force her to make this decision, she'll never forgive you," She informed him, voice calm and quiet despite the rage flashing in her blue eyes.

"This Sesshoumaru does not need the approval of a demon exterminator," He replied flatly, and Kagome practically saw the wall of ice slam up to keep everyone out.

"I can't do it to her," She whispered. Despite all the little things Sango had been doing, the taijiya was her friend. She had been acting out of fear and anger, and Kagome knew that. She couldn't ask her friend to choose between Miroku and Kohaku.

"This Sesshoumaru will inform her," He replied, standing. "We should be off as quickly as possible. Wake up the wolf, he will need to eat before we leave." With that he left the akunoya without any sort of farewell to the others, and she stood and gave the youkai a hasty bow before running from the tent, trying to intercept the daiyoukai.

He proved to be faster than her, and was already opening the flap to the tent she had slept in the night before. Ignoring anything being said, she looked for Kouga. Not finding him, she set out to explore the camp and hopefully find the erstwhile wolf.

Several minutes later she found him, sitting by the food stall devouring a bowl of rice. Laughing, she replied to his garbled hello with a smile and wave. There was a sudden resounding crash and the bowl almost flew from his hands as he jumped up, the gauntlet appearing from thin air. Kagome looked around fearfully, casting out her senses to see if Naraku had sent on of his evil children after them.

Instead, her eyes landed on Sesshoumaru and Sango. Sesshoumaru was walking away from the screaming taijiya, completely ignoring her existence. Kagome envied him, just a little, that he was able to walk as if he didn't have a care in the world, or an angry demon exterminator following behind him screaming expletives. Sango however, didn't seem to care about his apathy. Instead she continued to follow him, calling him every profane she could think of, making even the bandits
blush. Kouga whistled under his breath, watching the two as Kagome held her hands over her mouth, determined to hide the horrified expression she knew she was wearing.

Finally Sesshoumaru turned and leveled a glare at the slayer, a single word coming out as an authoritative command.

"Silence."

Sango complied, stunned by the pure, quiet fury in that single word.

"You have a choice. It is war. If you choose to come, the monk will be taken care of. If not, this Sesshoumaru will do everything possible to save the boy. not" He added. "Not for you. Rin likes the boy, and he has traveled with this Sesshoumaru before."

"You'll kill him!" Sango accused.

"Stupid human woman. She's going to let Naraku's illusions break her. Sesshoumaru's giving her an honorable out. She's just making it harder on herself."

"Does Kagome know about this? She would never allow-" Sango demanded shrilly.

"She knows. She also knows there is no choice."

Sango's eyes searched the camp, and when her gaze finally landed on Kagome, she began stalking forward purposefully, her rage peaking at new heights. When the taijiya reached her, she was prepared for almost anything. Screaming, tears, begging, almost anything.

She was not prepared for the slayer's hand to strike out, slapping her so hard that her head snapped to the side. Heat suffused her face, and she wasn't sure if it was from the slap or the sudden mortifying realization that her best friend had not only slapped her, but had done so in front of dozens of people, all of whom watched the scene unfolding before them with a sort of glee.

"You're going to take his side, act like them?" Sango demanded, jerking her chin to Sesshoumaru, then to Kouga. "It must be so easy to just ignore your emotions and be a monster," The woman accused, tone biting and eyes filled with bitterness. "You could change this, and you're just letting it happen, just like Inu Yasha."

Self loathing abruptly shifted to a blaze of rage fueled by anguish. Kagome tried to hold on to her temper, and in the face of her friend's accusation, lost.

"You want to know what I let happen? I let Naraku rape me because he said he wouldn't kill Inu Yasha if I did. I gave up my virginity while Inu Yasha was forced to watch, and then I watched him get torn apart, literally. And I live with that every day.

"Miroku looks like he's been starved, and the only blessing is that somehow his hands aren't broken anymore. But he doesn't even believe he's free yet. I'm not disconnecting myself from my emotions. I want to save Kohaku before Naraku decides that he's tired of waiting for his wish. It's war Sango. War is hard. War hurts. War forces us into situations where we have to make the difficult choices. So if me wanting to get to Kohaku before it's too late causes some sort of issue with you, well, frankly, grow up."

She walked away from the taijiya, eyes glistening and already regretting everything she had said. The stunned shock and hurt on the taijiya's face tore at her, demanding she go back and apologize. But Sesshoumaru was right, there was no choice, and Sango had to make a decision.
Before she realized it, she was in the akunoya, staring down at the gaunt face of her other friend, wondering if he hated her too.

"I heard the commotion. Sango is not handling the news well," Miroku said in a weak voice, trying to muster a smile and only managing to grimace instead. "It's not an easy choice. I told her to go," He added.

"You know that won't work on her. But, kami, she hates me so much, and I don't understand why. I've been trying to be a good friend, and every time I turn around something happens to make her angry at me," Kagome whimpered, the tears that had gathered beginning to spill out over her cheeks.

"You want to save Kohaku. For Sango, she's always pictured all of us together saving him, but most especially her. For her, it feels like no one else has the same drive she does to save him," Miroku tried to explain.

"And I've been understanding about that. But you can't travel right now, especially not at the speeds we'll be going, not!" She added after seeing him flinch at her words, "That it's your fault, because it's not. But it's just the way things are. There aren't a lot of choices. And to blame me because of it, I mean-" She choked out, appalled and guilty that she was unloading on the man they had just pulled from Naraku's dungeon the day before.

Several silent minutes passed, Miroku's hand coming to cover Kagome's. She could feel the bones through the flesh, the knuckles that seemed too large as he squeezed her hand gently. His hand was light, as if the bones themselves were hollow, like a bird's.

"So now you're going to try and turn houshi-sama against me?" Sango demanded shrilly.

"Sango, calm down," Miroku wheezed, trying to sit up. Kagome forced him back down, turning to glare at Sango.

"My best friend is accusing me of being a heartless demon, so I had to talk to my other friend, because, oh yeah, the heartless demons out there wouldn't understand," She snapped, glaring hotly at the taijiya. "I'm not trying to make him play sides. I just asked him if he had any idea what I've done to make you hate me so much! Since he doesn't, I guess I'll leave you two alone so you can tell him how evil I am," Kagome snapped, standing and stalking past Sango, tears starting anew.

Sango caught her shoulder and pushed her back into the center of the tent, pushing a finger into the miko's chest.

"This wouldn't be a problem if you let Miroku travel with us and we took it slow, like we did for you," Sango accused.

"I had a cold. He's been imprisoned for months. Do you want to kill him and Kohaku at the same time, because that's exactly what you're suggesting!" Kagome finally snapped, trying to hold onto her sense of logic, determined to show the taijiya that she was being unreasonable.

Instead, she felt her cheek stinging almost the moment she heard the cracking noise of being slapped once more.

When she looked up however, Sango was staring at Kouga, who was glaring down at her as he held her wrist in a tight grip. Kagome could hear the bones moving against one another and flinched, moving forward to stop the ookami.

"No," Sesshoumaru rumbled, moving forward. Kagome had barely noticed him, and seeing him move so purposefully, so gracefully, she was reminded of a cat hunting. Red was bleeding into his
eyes and for a moment she allowed herself to be grateful he was on her side.

"I told you not to act thoughtlessly toward the miko, as you have been doing constantly on this journey. She must be of sound mind to battle Naraku, and you do as much, if not more, to undermine that peace than the hanyou. I have stood by, allowing her the space to resolve this on her own, despite my right to interfere as her alpha." Sango looked ready to protest, but his eyes hardened even more, if that was possible, and Kouga's grip on her wrist tightened, forcing her to close her mouth.

"She is pack, and has acknowledged that. Until she or I decide otherwise, she will continue to be under my protection. I had been content to let this issue resolve itself, but you have moved to physically harm her twice, and that is not something I will allow," He finished, voice a smooth, cold command.

"The monk will be taken to my shiro to be cared for by a healer. I will send him with one of my own, and you will travel with him. I will not allow you to cause further conflict."

"You can't just make decisions for everyone," Sango snapped.

"Incorrect. As lord of the west, it is either my lands you go to, which puts you under my rule, or you stay outside of the west, in the lands Naraku has taken over, in which case the monk will most likely die."

Kagome flinched at the callousness with which those words were said. Suddenly unable to meet Sango's gaze with her own, she moved her eyes to Miroku, who had somehow propped himself up throughout the course of the conversation.

"Sango," He murmured, voice weak. "This is the best way. Accept it."

"But-" Sango began.

"They're trying to save Kohaku. I know you want to be there, but you blamed Kagome because you had to make a choice you didn't like. If Kagome's mental well being is linked to her powers, and you keep blaming her, it will keep her from fighting," He said in a soft voice.

"And she's more valuable than me?" Sango half demanded, half sobbed.

"She is the one responsible for breaking the illusions in Naraku's fortress. She sent the demon's power back at him after combining it with her own. Yes, she is infinitely more powerful and valuable as a fighter than you," Sesshoumaru informed the taijiya, who suddenly seemed at a loss. Swinging her gaze between Kagome and Miroku, she wiped her face of the tears that refused to be held in check and let out a small hiccup that wasn't quite a gasp and wasn't quite a sob.

"Fine. We'll go back to the shiro."

Kagome withdrew from the bitterness in her friend's tone, from the anger that flashed in her eyes. Instead, she moved from the whole group, determined to put as much space between her and the tent as possible.

When she exited the tent, she ignored the sudden cursing coming from behind the flaps as she strode away, more determined than ever to get air. As she drew in the cold, her dizziness faded and for a moment she felt blessedly clear. Then she realized that she would be traveling alone with the two youkai.

She spent several minutes in a quiet panic, wondering how she had arrived at such an impasse. When she felt him standing behind her, his aura unmistakable, the sorrow radiating from palpable, Kagome
turned, eyes shimmering with tears to ask him why everything was going so wrong. Instead, the words stuck in her throat, unable to move past the lump forming there.

"I'm sorry," Kouga said, looking distinctly uncomfortable. "I didn't know Sango was so--" He couldn't think of a word that wouldn't offend the miko and stopped, looking to the ground. Instead, he shuffled his feet, suddenly as shy as he was uncomfortable. "Look, I know you don't like being touched by men, but, well, I mean, I'm here for a hug anytime. As a friend," He added.

His shock mingled with a sense of anger as the miko flew into his arms, sobbing quietly, her shoulders jerking as she tried to keep from wailing into his chest. His arms went around her and he held her gently, as if she would break under the least bit of pressure.

"Why is it happening this way?" She hiccuped several minutes later, pulling away and wiping the tears from her eyes. He could see her visibly steeling herself, pulling herself up straighter. Her chin came up and he marveled at the difference between the soft onna he had known and the woman standing before him.

"I don't know. I never thought Inu Yasha would die. I didn't know about Naraku, either," He added softly, feeling seven sorts of foolish for not thinking the evil hanyou would have done something like that. "I'm sorry that happened to you," He finished.

"It happened, and I'll be able to think about it soon. I can't now. Yesterday, whoever that demon was, he tried to make me and Sesshoumaru watch that scene. Sesshoumaru reminded me that it wasn't real, and I lived through the real thing. I survived. I have to keep surviving," She added, eyes on the tent. "If I don't, Shippou and Rin and Kohaku, everyone will die." The last came out as a strangled whisper, and she blinked several times, trying to keep the tears at bay.

"Your things have been packed into Ah Un's saddle. It is time to leave," Sesshoumaru's voice broke in, shattering the illusion of solitude Kagome had wrapped herself in. She nodded gratefully, thankful someone had thought to gather her things for her. Going back into the akunoya was something she wanted to avoid at any cost at the moment.

"The monk is being transported today, by one of my own. I've left orders that he is to be taken to Tenka."

"Thank you, for Mikey, for-" She didn't finish, noticing that he was looking distinctly uncomfortable, for him at least. His back was stiff and his shoulders thrown back, his eyes looking above her instead of at her.

"This Sesshoumaru was remiss for not stopping it sooner," He replied blandly, walking away.

"Did he just apologize?" Kouga asked, flabbergasted.

"Sesshoumaru never apologizes," She chuckled, amused at the wolf's reaction. But Kouga was correct, Sesshoumaru was apologizing. After months in the daiyoukai's presence, she was beginning to understand what he was saying when he spoke, and the myriad of meanings in his terse words were beginning to become clear to her.

'Or I could be imagining everything,' She mentally sighed as she and the ookami began to follow. Ah Un was saddled, and Kouga hopped on. Kagome sat on the little cloud Sesshoumaru was standing on, waiting patiently as she crossed her legs and braced her arms. She allowed herself one last glance at the akunoya and started when she saw Sango staring at them, angry tears escaping eyes that held nothing but bitter accusation.
The sky was gray, and the wind bitterly cold, and she was thankful. The biting gusts dried her tears before they could fall.

Snow had started falling by the time they made camp that night. Kagome shivered violently despite her warm clothing and buried her face behind her muffler, trying to warm the air before breathing it in. Instead, it felt like she was breathing broken glass, the air was so frigid.

Kouga called out, suggesting a cave instead of sleeping in the open as they had been doing. When Sesshoumaru said nothing, the wolf had pulled away from their little group and was gone for half an hour before returning, a victorious smile flushing his features.

"I found one big enough for everyone, even Ah Un. About fifteen minutes that way!" He called, pointing his finger in a general direction. Sesshoumaru said nothing, didn't move a muscle to acknowledge the wolf, but the cloud suddenly shifted directions, beginning to follow the wolf, only a 'pace' or two behind the dragon.

Twenty minutes later Kagome was gratefully changing into dry clothes and draping the slightly damp ones over rocks. Kouga was out getting wood for a fire, and Sesshoumaru was hunting. The cave itself was chilly, but as soon as she'd pulled on the kimono and hakama, she felt a thousand times better. Her jacket and muffler were damp from snow that had melted onto it, and she wished she could use them.

One glance at Ah Un, and she sidled up to him, eyes wide in an approximation of Rin's expression. After a few minutes of politely requesting, the dragon laid down, curled almost like a cat, and she was cuddling up next to his stomach. Cold blooded the dragons might be, but once she had her blankets situated around her, she began to feel warm and surprisingly cradled and safe.

The events of the day had left her emotionally and physically drained, so it wasn't surprising that she fell asleep so quickly. Kouga, once arriving back at the cave, had given a surprised snort, then chuckled at the sight of the miko curled up as if she were the dragon's own hatchling. He set about making a small fire, determined to keep everyone warm in the night.

When Sesshoumaru stepped in, he spared a moment to stare down at the strange ningen who had, like his ward, adopted such an unusual resting place. After dropping the rabbits by the fire, he shifted the pelt off of his shoulder and circled it around the miko's shoulders loosely as he had often done with his ward. The parasitic youkai moved on it's own, snuggling around her more closely and tucking itself into the areas where the cold could seep in. Kagome mumbled something unintelligible in her sleep and shifted, cuddling the fur to her and rubbing her cheek against it.

"I thought her being pack was a formality?" Kouga asked as he watched Sesshoumaru set about skinning the rabbits and cutting them into strips. When Sesshoumaru didn't deign to answer the question, Kouga huffed noisily.

"I'm not going to ask her to mate me. I can't anymore. The northern tribe, it needs an alliance with someone to protect itself, and mating Ayame is the best option. So you don't have to worry about me claiming her anymore. Besides," He added with a boyish grin, "She hugged me today. I'd say she's making progress."

"It will be a long time before she is ready to mate anyone, if ever," Sesshoumaru finally replied, staring into the fire. His tone was flat, but Kouga saw the rage there. But when the emotion was gone in an instant, he shook his head, wondering if the flickering reflection of the fire had caused him to imagine it.
"If she's pack, what will you do after this is over?" Kouga asked, genuinely interested. "I mean, if there's no place for her with you, she's welcome among the wolf tribe," He added.

"She is responsible for the kitsune pup, and also the orphans at the shiro. If she chooses, she may stay and be a mother to them. It seems she attracts strays."

"That's a really weird way of saying she's pack and she can keep her own little pack of beasts around. Seems to me you both have a tendency to attract the strangest little creatures," Kouga observed. He chuckled when the daiyoukai only sent a glare in his direction before spearing the rabbit strips and hanging them over the fire.

"She's a natural healer," Sesshoumaru intoned several minutes later, just as Kouga was beginning to think he had pissed off the daiyoukai with his observation. The comment was so quiet the wolf was almost certain Sesshoumaru hadn't meant to say it aloud.

"Yeah, she is. Too bad she can't seem to turn those abilities toward herself though," Kouga lamented. With that observation, silence began it's true reign over the cave, both youkai staring into the fire, lost in their own thoughts.

"Which way?" Sesshoumaru asked the next morning as they left the cave and soared into the sky. He watched Kagome focusing, her eyes closed. Her hand came up and her finger pointed northeast.

"Has it moved at all?"

"It's still traveling, but that's all I get. I can try to keep track, see if it changes directions," She offered. Sesshoumaru nodded his agreement, turning back to stare into the sky ahead of them.

"Can we talk about something?" She asked several minutes later, fidgeting as she did so. When Sesshoumaru remained silent, not even sparing a glance in her direction, she continued. "I don't want to think right now. You know what it looks like inside my head. Just talk about reports or something, anything. I just don't want to be in there right now," She admitted quietly, hugging her knees to her chest.

"Perhaps you should take the time to make the core a more hospitable place," He offered stonily.

"Then I wouldn't be aware enough to fight if something happened," She rebutted quickly. He heaved a sigh, wanting to shake her as he did so.

"What is your world like?" He asked, keeping the question broad.

"It's different from here, a lot different," She began, and he noticed that she relaxed a little, her knees falling as she crossed her legs once more. With half a mind he listened to the fantastical stories of cars and electricity. Toasters seemed a particular vexation to her, although why he couldn't quite fathom. Each story seemed more unbelievable than the last, and he wondered if he would live to see such inventions.

"My time has a different concept of honor though. Parents push their kids really hard to get into good schools, and there's tests all the time. It's considered dishonorable to fail at anything. It's a miracle my mother didn't disown me when I flunked out and got expelled."

"It is dishonorable to 'flunk out'?" He asked, unfamiliar with the term.

"Yeah, it means failing. I was gone so often, and my high school didn't accept the excuses of me being sick, not like my middle school did. It probably doesn't matter anyway. I don't think I'd be of
any use in that world, except maybe as a fry cook." She laughed, but it was a mocking, bitter sort of laughter.

"This journey has taken much from you, it seems."

"It's my fault to begin with, I shattered the jewel in the first place. So, I mean, I guess it's karma. The shards have brought misery to everyone it's come into contact with. One stupid mistake, a butterfly flapping it's wings and all that," She sighed.

"A butterfly flapping it's wings?" He asked, once again confused.

"It's an old saying. Somewhere a butterfly flutters it's wings and causes a tsunami. It's a sort of chaos theory, ripple effect quote. Like dropping a stone into a pond, the ripples reach out."

"The two do not seem the same," Sesshoumaru offered.

"They're not. The butterfly effect is more apt, at least to me. One stupid mistake, and I was trying to save a child too. Another old saying is, the road to hell is paved with good intentions. I'm beginning to believe it," She sighed.

"This Sesshoumaru does not believe so. It is unfortunate that your journeys have led you down such a path, but it speaks of your character that you have not chosen the path the taijiya has."

The reminder of Sango and her bitterness still tasted sour to Kagome, and she pushed a hand through her hair, managing to pull some of it free from the leather thong holding it back. For several minutes she didn't speak, and Sesshoumaru wondered if he hadn't pushed her back into the dark place inside of herself.

"Sango has lost a lot more than me. Her whole village was destroyed by Naraku. The man she loves has been tormented by him since birth by the wind tunnel in his hand. He's used her little brother against her at every turn," Kagome tried to explain. "She was a demon slayer before this even started. She hasn't had many reasons to trust them in the past few years, and she's scared of being abandoned. What I did probably seemed like I wasn't just siding with you, but trying to leave her at the same time."

"What she did was dishonorable."

"But it's my fault. If the jewel hadn't shattered, she'd still have a family!" Kagome cried, looking horrified.

"Her village was based around slaying youkai. Who is to say if she would or would not have lost them. Very few make it into old age, especially in such a profession. And make no mistake, they accept that before they enter into it. Family honor or no, there is a choice. Her family made their decision, just as she did, knowing that death was probable. Humans thinking they are unbeatable is a fallacy," He rebuked, growing tired of her willingness to excuse the slayer's behavior.

"She dishonors herself and her family by acting in such a manner. As you said, this is war. She has been trained to ignore her emotions while hunting. There is little difference now."

Kagome absorbed the daiyoukai's words, finding that as logical as they sounded, she still didn't, couldn't, agree with them.

"Maybe we should talk about something else," She muttered darkly. "Like if we're going to take Naraku's head back with us and parade it for the world to see."
"This Sesshoumaru has no intention of leaving that much intact," he replied, voice flat. Kagome shuddered, knowing she had been joking in a macabre sort of way. She had not expected such a response from the daiyoukai.

"Sesshoumaru, I feel something strange," Kagome whispered, looking around frantically. Once the jewel had settled into one place, and presumably Naraku with it, Kagome had been able to lead them more easily, and the feel of the taint wrapped tendrils around her, making her feel sick almost constantly.

When both the jewel and Kohaku's shard felt close, she tried to cling to the purity in Kohaku's shard. Despite that, they had landed often so she could empty the contents of her stomach, the darkness a living thing that seemed intent on poisoning her.

But it felt as if the jewel and the shard were less than a day away, and suddenly a new presence just appeared, as if out of nowhere, to her senses, coming at them fast.

"To the ground, the wolf has a better advantage," Sesshoumaru commanded Ah Un, who dove to the ground, following the daiyoukai and miko. Kagome, having replenished her arrows at the last camp, pulled an arrow from her quiver and allowed her power to encompass it. Despite the tar like darkness that was determined to cling to her, an invisible second skin, she felt the light washing it away. Breathing easily for the first time in two days, she allowed her focus to narrow to the strange aura heading their way.

"That's exactly what Ayame described," Kouga breathed, his eyes wide as the youkai flew down at them.

Instead of crashing into the earth, he touched down gently, and Kagome felt his aura reaching out to her, oily fingers trying to find a way to sneak past the power she projected.

"Are you one of Naraku's incarnations?" Sesshoumaru demanded, staring the strange youkai down. Kagome could sense youki, and yet something was incredibly off. Releasing a gasp, she realized that he was the source of the strange feeling she'd had when the two larger parts of the jewel had joined together.

"He escaped the jewel!" She called, the pieces of the puzzle joining together.

It was the wrong thing to say. The youkai's eyes snapped to her, widening in anger.

"Your powers should have been sealed!" He snarled, his malformed armed flying at her. Kagome released her arrow, hoping it would hit the strange appendage and purify it. She was knocked out of the way, stunned eyes still watching as the arm touched the arrow and somehow nullified her power.

"Sesshoumaru, he's from the jewel, but he, how did he-"

"Now is not the time for questions," Sesshoumaru intoned, moving from her and speeding at the enemy. Kagome watched, rapt, as the youkai shifted the shape of his arms, trying to trap the white blur that was Sesshoumaru.

His fist entered the demons stomach, punching straight through. Kouga gave a cheer as he sped at the demon, intent on getting his own blows in as well, when spikes erupted from the youkai's back and wrapped around to pierce the arm still caught in his guts.

"You...are weak," The youkai taunted with a smile.
Kagome saw the miasma at work, saw the flesh of the arm beginning to putrefy, as if taken over by rot.

"Sesshoumaru!" She screamed, as the spikes withdrew and Sesshoumaru leapt back, glaring at the youkai before him. Kagome notched another arrow, forcing her own power into it and letting it fly. Once more, she watched in horror as it touched the flesh of the demon and lost it's light.

"We gotta kill this thing!" Kouga shouted, the goraishi on his hand glowing as he ran forward, jumping and slashing down at the youkai. "Go get Kagome to heal you!"

Kagome stared as Sesshoumaru held his arm up, looking at it speculatively, as if slightly fascinated. Then a surge of power erupted in the air, and it was healed, looking as if it had never been harmed at all.

"Seems I'm not quite done with you yet," It cackled, a parody of a smile twisting his lips. Sesshoumaru lunged, and Kagome saw the transformation, awed by the sudden surge of youki that crashed through the field, like a wave cresting and breaking over her. His face lengthened, and once again she was reminded of how the beast always lurked just beneath the surface. His true self, not remotely human. As if gaining momentum, he seemed to blink in and out of existence until a roar resounded through the field, echoing as a fully transformed inu youkai emerged from nothingness.

The giant canine flew at the pale haired youkai, taking his head in it's jaws and moving to the air, almost grinning, but the faint impression faded quickly as the body dropped and miasma exploded, followed by a sea of oni.

"It is but a borrowed body," The head cackled from it's place in Sesshoumaru's jaws.

"What are you?" Kouga demanded, slashing through one oni after another, only to see them come back together. Kagome charged her arrow and released it into the mass, panic rising like bile in her throat as the multitude of youkai pieced themselves back together, resisting her holy power.

A strangled growl resounded, pulling her attention to the youkai. Desperately she notched another arrow, hands shaking so violently she fumbled twice as she watched tentacles wrapping around the daiyoukai.

"Sesshoumaru!" Her scream pierced the air as she finally managed to get it notched. Praying heavily under her breath, she released it, hoping for a different result than before.

Once again the light was snuffed out, as if the youkai was darkness itself.

"I am the dark soul of the jewel, Magatsuhi," It cackled. "It seems there was never any reason to worry," The head finished, wrapping it's tentacles around Sesshoumaru even more securely, enveloping him and hiding his form from sight.

"What are you talking about?" She demanded, notching another arrow to aim at the sea of oni swirling around them, as if waiting for the command to devour both her and Kouga.

"I worried that you would purify us, and sealed your powers when you were but a babe. I have been with you always, Ka-Go-Me," He mocked. "You may have broken the seal, but your rape seems to have diminished your powers, or you were never very powerful to begin with. One never can tell with these things."

"Let Sesshoumaru go!" She demanded shrilly, watching as another arrow was wasted on the constantly regenerating youkai. The taunts only raised more questions, and she tried to push the distractions away as she fought, coming back to back with Kouga as they faced the swarm circling...
around them.

"I don't think I will. Once he's fully absorbed, he'll be a part of Naraku, or maybe a detachment, or perhaps the little hanyou will honor him and take on one of his traits, those strange stripes for example?" The head taunted, it's laugh grating on Kagome more and more.

"That's what you think, Sesshoumaru will beat you!" She boasted with a courage she didn't feel. "He's the strongest youkai alive, and even if you could subdue him, he'd kill himself before letting someone so weak use him!"

"Enough!" The head snarled, as if struck by her comment.

She felt the surge of raw power, waves of it, before she saw the explosion of light. The tentacles wrapped around Sesshoumaru fell away to reveal a humanoid looking daiyoukai once more, a blaze of energy blocking the sight of most of his left side.

Not wasting any time on pleasantries, he almost glided forward, eyes still tinged in red and a chilling smile lifting the corners of his lips as he blurred forward, cutting through the youkai swarming in defense of the head. What the sword touched crumbled, turning to ash and floating away before it could even touch the ground. Kouga let out an angry expletive as Sesshoumaru completely bypassed the head, bringing Tenseiga up and slashing down violently.

"You worthless mongrel!" A face screamed, appearing in the air. Sesshoumaru brought the sword up again and was bringing it down when the youkai surrounding Kagome and Kouga surged up to him, forming a solid sphere around him.

"You'll regret being the mutt's bitch Ka-Go-Me!" The disembodied head snarled, leveling a look at the miko. Despite being awed by the sword slashing through the youkai as if they were paper, she allowed her eyes to meet the deep red.

For a moment it felt like the ground was swimming beneath her, and she fell to her knees and clutched her head, trying to still the sudden throbbing as the roar of her blood pulsing blotted out any other noise. Several different shades of purple and black were pulling themselves down over her vision, almost like lowering blinds on a window, each shade darker than the last.

"No, Kagome, wake up!" Kouga snapped, shaking her. Belatedly she thanked her brain for allowing her to faint, the pain was only getting worse with the wolf's worried, snapping movements.

So far gone was she that when Kouga was pushed aside and Sesshoumaru shook her, she didn't even notice. Nor did she notice his power trying to provoke her own, an action that had become all too familiar.

"Do not sleep miko, there is no time," His voice commanded.

She gave in and passed out, allowing the darkness to swallow her.

"Why does her ki not respond?" Sesshoumaru demanded, staring at the old youkai that was staring worriedly down at the still form of the miko.

"It's sealed. Hell of a seal too, haven't seen anything like this in a long time. You said the thing called itself the dark spirit of the jewel?" Totosai asked, still staring at the woman asleep on the ground.

"Yeah, he said Kagome's powers should have been sealed, then kept laughing about how it wasn't necessary. He called her weak, like he did Sesshoumaru. Then toward the end he said she'd regret,
well, it doesn't matter. He just made eye contact with her, and she fainted," Kouga explained, his eyes darting back and forth from the blacksmith to the miko, then to Sesshoumaru.

"Why are you here then?" Sesshoumaru demanded. "If not to be useful."

"That sword, Bakusaiga, needs a sheath. I've been waiting awhile for you to get your head out of your ass and free it."

"Does the old man always speak in riddles?" Kouga asked the air, not really expecting an answer.

"That sword isn't a fang or a bone or anything normally used to create a sword. Bakusaiga is an expression of Sesshoumaru's power, of his desire to win, and his ability to stand on his own. It even takes it's traits from his personality. It's poison to anything it touches, disabling regeneration and completely obliterating every trace of it's mark. Truly a sword for the killing perfection," The blacksmith explained, the last bit said in an almost mocking tone.

"A true extension of myself," Sesshoumaru mused aloud, looking to the blade, eyes dancing over the strange markings.

"It is that. Everything in my shop started a-singing, and I knew it was time to find the pup. The sheath is a gift from Bokusenou. He knew this was coming up, donated one of his older, stronger branches for the purpose. Remember to tell him thanks next time you see him," The elder admonished.

"What of the miko?" Sesshoumaru pressed, handing the sword to Totosai, who took a moment to admire the blade.

"You've surpassed even your father, and you no longer have need of his legacy," He answered instead, making Kouga stamp his feet impatiently and begin stalking in circles around the field.

"Blacksmith, answer me, or I will test Bakusaiga on you," He threatened quietly, doing his level best not to growl.

"Her powers have been sealed. Until you can destroy Magatsuhi, the seal will stay, unless of course, he suddenly decides to be generous and remove the seal himself, and I'm pretty sure Naraku will hand over the jewel and sing praises to your name before that happens," Totosai grumped. "For now, get her someplace warm, have some food ready for when she wakes up. We'll, she might get sick first. Awful lot of darkness lingering. Don't want to think about what it's doing to her mind," He observed, moving to the three eyed oxen and rooting through the bags.

After several minutes he came back, the sword sheathed in glossy wood that shone brilliantly even in the dim light of the cloudy afternoon.

"Is she trapped in the core?" Sesshoumaru asked quietly.

"Now how would you know about that?" Totosai asked, throwing a sideways glance in the daiyoukai's direction. When no answer was forthcoming, he continued on, more intrigued by the current turn of events than he had been by anything in a long time. "Even if she was, what would you do about it? She's there, you're here."

"I will bring her back."

"You know, I'd heard from your mother that you went into hell and brought those two kids back, but the core's a little different. A place and not a place, you understand. You can't just go-"
"This Sesshoumaru has before," The daiyoukai replied coldly, cutting the old man off. Totosai eyed the inu warily, wondering if perhaps the pup's father hadn't gotten everything backwards when making his will.

"You've been there? Alright, that's just dandy. But she might not be trapped. Sometimes being forced into that place is a good thing, gives the body time to recover. With her powers sealed, her body's probably going to feel a bit strange for a few days."

"Magatsuhi will be dead within days. It will not matter," Sesshoumaru intoned, still staring down at the miko, remembering the hell her core had been. But her powers did not respond anymore, how could he find the pathway if her powers were sealed? How could leaving her in that place hasten any sort of recovery?

"There's a cave not too far off from here," Kouga called out, walking back to the group. The daiyoukai berated himself silently for not even noticing the wolf's absence.

"Let's get her in there, I'll start a fire. Someone needs to go hunt, that and get some snow together to melt for water, she'll need it," Totosai sighed as he hopped on the ox and began moving in the direction Kouga had pointed. Kouga moved forward, but his intentions were cut short when Sesshoumaru picked up Kagome as if she weighed nothing and began walking in the wake of the ox, his eyes seemingly vacant.

Once they were inside, Sesshoumaru ordered Kouga to hunt, and demanded that Totosai go find wood for the fire. The wolf fled, the daiyoukai's aura becoming too oppressive for him to bear, and the blacksmith grumbled about disrespectful youngsters before taking his leave of the cave. Ah Un moved into the cave, and the ox seemed cowed by the presence of the twin headed dragon and shied away, letting out a plaintive lowing that only served to shorten the daiyoukai's temper.

When the dragon positioned itself just so, Sesshoumaru understood the intent behind it, and moved quietly, arranging the woman's bedroll and blankets and then laying her in it, still disturbed by the sickly pallor of her face and the tense muscles that seemed ready to snap like a too tight bowstring.

He was aware of Totosai even before wood clattered to the cave floor. Small sounds served to further irritate him, and just when he was about to turn and snap at the old youkai, he felt the fire spring to life, warmth washing over his back.

"Come to the fire for a second pup. I haven't finished with you yet," The old man mumbled, sitting himself within a foot of the fire. Sesshoumaru sat further away. Though he knew after so many years in a forge Totosai was completely safe, he did not wish to singe his own clothing or hair.

"Yes?" He finally intoned, eager to get through the demented ramblings of the elderly youkai.

"When I agreed to reforge Tenseiga, I did it knowing that you had changed a little bit. You were still an evil prick, and I'm not sure that'll ever change. But you haven't tried to kill me yet, which is a good sign anyway. But let me make something perfectly clear. I know you have a habit of helping out those you deem fit for your help, even if you don't like anyone realizing it. And I'm not saying I even know how you pick those people. But even with the seal, that woman is a powerful miko. Making her pack is asking for trouble," He admonished.

"You did not seem to protest her place in the hanyou's life," Sesshoumaru replied blandly, although rage was beginning to spiral it's warm arms out, spreading fire in their wake at the reprimand.

"He was half human, and even then it was inadvisable. Just what are you thinking?" Totosai demanded.
"She was to be the half-breed's mate. She came to this Sesshoumaru for protection and it was granted."

"Well, whatever your reasons for all that, be careful. She's strong, stronger than even she knows. A false move and she could kill you, even if you don't think so."

"We have combined our power, and we can manipulate the other's with our own. It will not be an issue," Sesshoumaru ground out, determined to end the ridiculous conversation.

"Can you? Huh, now ain't that something? Guess I got nothing to worry about," Totosai said, shrugging it off in such a blithe manner that Sesshoumaru wanted to throw his head clear of his body. Instead, the daiyoukai chose to ignore him and close his eyes, feeling the fires flickering warmth dancing on his skin and listening carefully to the onna's breathing.

He barely acknowledged when Kouga came back and began cutting and spearing meat over the fire, and said nothing when Totosai bid them all farewell.

The afternoon slipped into evening, and the evening into night. When there was still no sign of the miko waking, he told the wolf to sleep. Once the ookami was out, he released a sigh and finally glanced back at the ningen that was causing so many problems. His despised half brother's almost mate, a human, and a miko to boot. Totosai had been correct, although for the wrong reasons.

And now she would be unable to use her powers until he took care of the shikon spirit. He damned his luck, for he had ignored the problem several times despite the requests of his own men. All of them had begged him to take down the spirit that decimated their ranks. He had considered it unimportant.

'Perhaps the kami are laughing at me,' He thought sourly as he moved to the entrance of the cave and stared into the night, briefly lamenting the lack of moon in the sky and the clouds that almost obliterated starlight. A bleak, dark night of little hope, so he allowed himself none. Instead he chose to think it absolutes, and began preparing for every eventuality, including the miko's demise.
Despite all appearances otherwise, Sesshoumaru was focusing on the onna's heartbeat and breathing patterns. When morning night shifted into false dawn, the time when all the world seemed washed in blue, he first heard her heartbeat speed up just a fraction, and then her breathing shifted, and a small groan escaped as she began moving, rustling the blankets around her. He took some of the water, snow that had been melted and set from the fire to cool once more, over to her in a small stone bowl Totosai had carved out before leaving.

"Where am I?" She asked groggily, looking at the cave around her, then staring up at him blankly.

"A cave. Yesterday Magatsuhi put a seal on your power, and you passed out," Sesshoumaru informed her blandly as he handed her the bowl, only to jerk it back when she almost dropped it on herself, eyes wide and hands beginning to shake violently.

"He did what?" She demanded, eyes losing any trace of sleep and focusing on him with a single minded intensity that had before formerly been reserved for opponents in battle.

"Your powers as a miko have been sealed," He repeated.

Several minutes passed as she searched his face for the truth, hoping that perhaps he had taken to lying. Her obvious distrust of his word stung, for he prided himself on being honest in his dealings with others, if not forthcoming.

"So I'm useless," She whispered. He could smell the tears even as he heard the strange wobble of her tone.

"You weep too often. It is easily remedied," He informed, wondering for the umpteenth time why he was being nice to someone that had been an almost constant thorn in his side. When her eyes, shining with unshed tears and a seed of hope, swung back up to meet his, as if he could solve the
problem then and there, he held up one hand in a gesture to keep her from speaking.

"This Sesshoumaru will kill Magatushi," he informed.

"But, he's a spirit from the jewel," Kagome gasped breathlessly, face falling as if his plan was not only unacceptable, but thoroughly disappointing as well. "Kill him, that's the plan?" The incredulity in her tone bothered him more than he cared to admit.

"You predicted that Tenseiga could defeat him, and you were half correct. But this Sesshoumaru's new sword is the other half of the solution."

"No protocol, not now, just speak plainly," Kagome groaned, trying to figure out where he was going with everything. Given the situation, he allowed her the concession, although why protocol would bother her at such a time was a mystery to him.

"I have been informed by Totosai that anything the Bakusaiga touches will die. It is an extension of my will and power."

"So it's your fang?" She asked, confusion evident.

"No, it was supposedly hidden within this-within me. I was told I released it."

"So, it's just yours, not a memento or something left by your father?"

"Correct."

"And it shaped itself completely out of your power and will?"

"That is also correct."

"Does this mean you've surpassed your father? I mean, his swords were forged from his fangs, you just sort of, well, gave birth to one, I guess," She replied, astonishment quickly outstripping confusion for dominance in her gaze.

"Totosai said as much," Kouga cut in, effectively breaking the illusion that it was just the two of them in the cave. Despite himself, Sesshoumaru felt a little irked. The miko's power had grown in leaps and bounds, and Sesshoumaru had allowed himself to feel proud that he had accomplished such a feat and was able to share it with one who would, in a limited way, understand. The wolf's interruption however, destroyed any feeling of a confidence between himself and the miko, and he handed the bowl to the woman and moved back, expression once more indifferent.

"That's pretty amazing. Congratulations, Sesshoumaru," Kagome murmured before tilting the bowl and sipping the cool water. The moment it passed her lips, she groaned and darted from the pile of blankets encircled by Ah Un and dashed for the mouth of the cave, stumbling as she untangled herself. Both youkai watched as she ran, Kouga beginning to go after her only to stop when the retching sounds reached the both of them.

"Totosai said she might get sick," He sighed, then flinched as a particularly vicious gasp echoed back to them.

"Prepare more water and food. She will need it. This Sesshoumaru wants to find the spirit and destroy it," He commanded, his thoughts already on the path they would take. The spirit's scent still hung in the air, faint, more faint than he would have liked. But he was determined to destroy it.

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"We're heading for the village," Kagome murmured, eyes on the horizon three days later. They had been making good time, amazingly good time, but at the expense of sleep and proper food. What little had been eaten had been provided by the bandit camps at night, and even Ah Un was beginning to show signs of wear. "We should stop for rest," She added, although the idea of being anywhere near the village made her feel physically ill.

"Village?" Kouga ventured, staring at the miko in askance.

"It's where the well is, and Kaede's village. It's next to Inu Yasha's forest," She finished quietly, trying not to choke on the name. "Magatsuhi said he'd always been with me, do you think he can travel through the well?" Kagome asked, curiosity shifting to panic.

"No. Your world would be much harder to conquer and control. He would stay here, where he already has a foothold in Naraku," Sesshoumaru replied after several minutes.

"You think so?" She breathed hopefully, painfully aware that the daiyoukai never said anything just to comfort, and he never lied, but still craving the reinforcement.

"It is not logical," He answered. "And we will stop in the village for the night and allow Ah Un to rest," He added. Kagome nodded, nonplussed despite knowing that the dragon needed the downtime, not to mention Kouga and herself as well.

Dusk faded into darkness, and she was sure it was past midnight when they finally reached the village. She noticed villagers peeking out of their huts, only to be cheered as they fully emerged, greeted by smiles. Wary glances were cast at the daiyoukai and the ookami, but after Kagome explained the shared blood of the half brother's, and Kouga's position in their group, they too were welcomed warmly, much to both youkai's surprise and consternation.

"Kagome?" A voice asked, coming up behind her. She turned, eyes widening in shock and confusion before stumbling over the name.

"Miroku, what are you doing here?" She demanded, noting that while he looked better, he did not yet look well. His cheeks still seemed hollow, his skin stretched too tightly over bone. He was leaning heavily on his staff as he moved toward her, his eyes the only thing that had returned to normal. She could see the rapid fire thoughts racing behind them, and worry lined his brow.

"Sango brought us here," He replied.

"Us?" Kagome asked, confused.

"Shippou and myself, she said that Kaede-" But the monk was stopped mid sentence by the angry miko stalking away, toward the hut the village priestess shared with the group when they stopped to rest. Uncaring if she tore the pelts hanging in the door down as she pushed them aside roughly, glaring at the taijiya staring dully into the fire.

"You selfish, cruel, thoughtless, completely callous monster!" She shouted, fury washing through her and spiking her temper. "How do you do it? Do you just not care about anyone but yourself? Does it matter to you that you put Miroku in danger, or that he could have had better care at the shiro?" By now the slayer was standing, and opened her mouth to begin shouting at the miko, but Kagome plowed on ahead, stopping any response.

"You know what, you don't care about anyone but yourself. You're acting like a petty little girl who can't control her temper. Well fine, if you want to hurt yourself and be an idiot, go ahead. But you dragged my son into danger, away from the safety of the shiro and from his friends. You had no right
to bring him here, no right to make any decision regarding him," Kagome finished, her voice carrying from the hut into the night.

"If you want to battle Naraku all by yourself, go ahead and die and leave Miroku alone. Leave Kohaku without a sister, if he manages to survive. Go ahead and keep blaming everybody for things they didn't do and they can't help. Someday, if you live long enough to see it, you'll end up as bitter and twisted as Naraku!" She finished, every angry thought she'd had spilling out like poison before she could stop them. She listened to herself, almost horrified but unable to close her mouth, the fury and anger forcing out the darkness present in the thoughts of the woman that had once been her best friend.

"Take it back," Sango snapped, astonishment giving way to anger, she rushed forward, pushing Kagome. The miko stumbled back, outside of the hut and into the cold and snow, where a crowd had gathered to watch. "Take it back! I'm not like him!" Sango howled as she pushed Kagome again. Kagome shook her head, still riding the cresting waves of anger.

"You keep putting people in danger because you're angry, you're trying to hurt me because you think I did something wrong, and you're using people I care about to do it. That's exactly what Naraku does!" She accused.

She saw the fist coming this time, and angry and determined as she was, she called on every technique she'd been taught by Sesshoumaru, praying for the speed she'd earned through bitter training, and caught the taijiya's fist and used the momentum of her punch and swung her around. When she released the slayer's hand, Sango went stumbling back into the snow, eyes filled with rage.

"You're just like them! You keep talking about not letting yourself care. That's what separates us from them!" Sango shouted as she stood and charged again. Waiting, Kagome hunched herself just as the approaching body was about to slam into her, and brought her fist up into Sango's stomach.

Sango crumpled to the ground, gasping for breath as Kagome stood over her, looking down sadly.

"I don't want to fight Sango. Naraku's always trying to separate us, and we're doing it for him," Kagome sighed, kneeling down into the snow. "Why do you hate me so much?"

"You always act like you know best, like you have the answers. You're trying to keep me from my brother," Kagome whispered brokenly, the humiliation of being defeated by a girl she had never even considered strong sapping her will to fight.

"I'm not trying to keep you from Kohaku. I want this to be done as quickly as possible, and Miroku needed someone to be with him, and the natural choice was you. Just because it seemed like the best option doesn't mean I thought it was the right one," Kagome sighed, pulling the taijiya up and into her lap, ignoring the snow beginning to seep through her clothing. "But Sango, you had to know taking Shippou from the shiro was wrong. How could you have put him in danger like that? He was finally safe, and he had friends his own age," Kagome admonished, her voice neutral of the rage that thought still evoked.

"Ever since we went to Sesshoumaru, you've changed," Sango began, an accusation Kagome knew was coming.

"I changed before that. Naraku, Inu Yasha, the bandits. Neither of us talked about anything when we went to find Shippou and ask for Sesshoumaru's help. I don't think we could talk, not really. And you've begun to work through it. Someday I'll be myself again, but I can't yet, I'm sorry," Kagome whispered into her friend's hair.
"It wasn't fair of me to demand that you keep acting happy go lucky, like you used to. Or to say you don't care," Sango admitted.

"No, it wasn't," Kagome answered, refusing to lie and give false forgiveness. "I care. I'm doing all of this because I care. Please try to understand from now on," Kagome commanded more than asked. Sango nodded, little sobs jerking her form.

Kagome looked up and saw the crowd had dispersed, the only people present were the two youkai that stood together, and Kaede and Miroku, who looked pleased at the resolution.

"Now that that's solved, maybe you'd like to come in from the cold," The old miko suggested pragmatically, her tone dismissing everything that had happened as she walked back into her hut. Ah Un stationed himself beside the hut, laying down in the snow. Kagome watched Sesshoumaru remove the bridle set to leave the beasts mouths free, and she was surprised to see the dragon breath fire onto it's hide after the daiyoukai removed the saddle.

"It is how he will keep warm," Sesshoumaru intoned as he walked into the humble hut, eyes curiously blank. Kagome followed, one last pitying glance directed at the dragon before she let the pelts fall behind her.

"Now that you two have vented your spleens, perhaps you could tell us what you're doing this far west?" Miroku asked, moving closer to the fire. Kaede was boiling water for tea, going to her stores and pulling different herbs from their little pouches and mixing them together.

"We met up with the youkai that's been killing the bandits and attacking randomly. He calls himself Magatsuhi, the dark spirit of the jewel," Kagome said quietly.

"I thought you said going after him wasn't priority," Sango asked the daiyoukai, barely looking at him.

"He sealed the miko's powers. We must kill him to break the seal," Sesshoumaru answered, watching them carefully beneath half lidded eyes.

"Magatsuhi, the dark spirit of the jewel. It makes sense, I suppose, the jewel is composed of light and dark. My grandfather said the jewel held both Magatushi and Naohi. Naohi is balance and purity. Magatushi is the corrupt," Miroku offered.

"So why are you here?" Sango demanded, ignoring the revelation.

"He's close, perhaps within a day's journey," Sesshoumaru responded, still keeping his eyes glued to the taijiya, as if awaiting another outburst.

"And what about the jewel, and Kohaku's shard?" She demanded, this time looking to Kagome. "Can you even feel them anymore?"

Just when Sesshoumaru was about to remind the taijiya of the consequences of yelling at the miko, he was interrupted.

"I can still feel the jewel, and even the shard. I don't understand, why can I do that, but not be able to do anything else?" She asked, brow wrinkled in confusion.

"You were born with the jewel in you, correct?" Sesshoumaru asked. When Kagome nodded, he continued. "Then perhaps it is a bond, as with my sword. It is of me, and I know it's location at all times."
"That makes sense," Miroku nodded, accepting a cup of tea gratefully. Sango took her own and blew on it while Kagome passed two cups to the youkai sitting silently. She thanked Kaede when she accepted her own cup and sipped daintily, testing the temperature.

Sesshoumaru, content that Kouga was watching the taijiya as avidly as he had been, allowed himself to follow Kagome's gaze. The blue orbs rested on the small lump still asleep, swathed in enough blankets to look as if he had created a den around himself. Quietly he wondered at the pup, having to live with such chaos on a constant basis.

"He must be returned to the shiro," Sesshoumaru said aloud, more to himself than anyone else.

"If you're suggesting I take him back, you can go to hell," Sango muttered quietly in response. Her temper might have cooled toward the miko, but it seemed her hatred of him was obviously alive and well.

"Old woman," Sesshoumaru rumbled, his eyes narrowing as they rested on Sango. "You will take the priest and the kit to the shiro. It is not far, and save Magatsuhi, there should be no trouble. They will recognize the kit there."

"I appreciate the offer Sesshoumaru-sama, but I cannot leave behind my own charges in such a difficult time. I'm sure you understand," She added gently, bowing her head slightly.

"And if I told you, you'd just leave them here and go on to fight Naraku on your own," Sesshoumaru said, finally addressing Sango, who looked ready to explode into another rage.

"Sesshoumaru, don't antagonize her. I'm sure she's sorry for dragging Shippou so close to the battle," Kagome said, not looking at the taijiya. Her words had not been meant spitefully, but they left little room for interpretation. "We'll have to figure out another way to get them to the shiro."

"I'm not going anywhere," Miroku cut in, his tone brooking no argument. "Shippou is a child, and as such he may be relegated to the shiro. I have a stake in this. I will not have my choice taken from me."

"We need someone to take Shippou back-" Kagome cut in.

"He may stay with me," Kaede interrupted. "He will be safe here, the villagers know and love him. I am sure he will be fine until you come back," She said gently, acknowledging the fear in Kagome's eyes.

After several minutes she hung her head and her shoulders slumped in defeat as she nodded.

Sesshoumaru noted with no small satisfaction that the slayer looked distinctly uncomfortable, especially under the monk's hard gaze and Kouga's glare.

"We rest then, and tomorrow find the spirit," Sesshoumaru commanded, setting his cup down and moving for the doorway. "And taijiya, you'd do well to remember that as the miko's pup, the kit is also pack, and under my protection. Should anything happen to him, you will be held responsible."
With that, he left the hut to find Ah Un, who had, by some kindness of the strangers in the village, been given enough wood to keep a small fire going.

"That asshole," Sango began.

"No," Kagome said, holding up a hand to stop the other woman's tirade. "Not now, not tonight. Maybe not ever. I am part of his pack, and so is Shippou. We've covered this before. You remember
Inu Yasha and what being part of his pack felt like. Sesshoumaru is acting on the same rules, the ones you never faulted Inu Yasha for. Now, I'm done with arguments and yelling for the night. Tomorrow is going to start early, and I want to rest," She finished, moving from the light of the fire and to the pallet the kitsune slept on.

Moving him gently, she shifted the blankets around enough to where he was cuddled to her stomach, curled almost like a cat. After several long minutes of tense silence, she heard someone rustling around, and felt the chill air from the door coming in before the pelts shifted back into place, blocking it. More rustling, and the clatter of he wooden cups, and everything went quiet.

'Soon this will be over, and I can figure things out with Sango,' She sighed, taking comfort in the feel of Shippou nestling in closer to her and his tiny hand moving to grab her kimono, fisting it tightly as he shifted.

It was her only comfort.

The next morning she woke to Shippou happily bouncing, the turquoise of his eyes flashing happily.

"You're here, you're here!" He squealed happily over and over as her eyes opened and tried to focus. Light filtered in from the door and she groaned, desperate to gain five more minutes of blessed sleep. Instead, the kitsune child burrowed under the covers, bringing cold hands and feet with him as he snuggled into her, desperate for affection. Kagome laughed, bringing her arms around him and shifting to her back, letting him sit on her stomach.

"You are getting way too big for this Shippou," Kagome laughed, playing at struggling to breathe. The kitsune huffed indignantly before smiling and bouncing off, zipping around the hut and talking at speeds that Kagome knew her friends in the future would envy.

"Slow down kiddo, what are you trying to tell me?" Kagome demanded.

"Sesshoumaru said I'm supposed to protect you while he and Kouga hunt! Isn't that amazing?" Shippou asked, his eyes bright as he puffed out his chest. Reminded a bit of a bullfrog, Kagome laughed and stood, shaking her head as she walked to the door and slid on her traveling boots. Easily her favorite part of her current garb, the boots themselves were much like Sesshoumaru's, only lacking the pointed toe. Much more sensible than the sandals most seemed to favor in this time.

"Your hair is a mess," Shippou commented. Kagome stuck her tongue out and went to the saddle bag that had been a backrest for her the night before. After digging out a brush and attacking the knots in her hair, she braided it and tied it off with a strip of colorful linen, choosing one that matched her son's eyes.

"Better?" She asked, twirling in front of the boy. Shippou nodded and allowed himself to be picked up and cuddled to her side before they went out into the cold morning. Snow had covered the ground with a thick blanket of white during the night, and those that were forced outside came and went quickly.

"Hey Ah Un," Shippou called to the dragon, waving. Kagome waved her free hand and smiled at the pile of wood that had accumulated near the fire the dragon was encircling with it's body. The villagers rushing through their tasks each took a moment for cheerful greetings before rushing off again, eager to get by their own fires once more.

As she moved further from the center of the village and to the outskirts, she spotted Kaede and Sesshoumaru on the hilltop. Wondering what he could be saying to the old miko of all people, she
began trudging up the hill, breath coming in steaming pants as she struggled with the snow.

"Mind if we interrupt?" Kagome asked as she came near.

"Not at all child, ye are most welcome. I had expressed curiosity about Lord Sesshoumaru's arm and new sword, he was kind enough to explain it to me," The priestess said with a smile. Sesshoumaru turned slowly, his eyes distant as he took in the sight of her and Shippou.

"You forgot your jacket," He rumbled. Kagome blushed, realizing that in her haste to find him, she had in fact left without her jacket.

"I'll be fine, it's just a few minutes," She assured, waving the comment off.

"Pup, fetch your mother's jacket," Sesshoumaru said sternly. Shippou, instead of blowing off the command as he would done with Inu Yasha, beamed and jumped from Kagome's arms, scampering off through the snow, careening wildly when he tripped over some unseen obstacle. Kagome allowed herself to chuckle when he shook himself off and his own infectious laughter echoed over the hill.

"I was explaining something to Sesshoumaru, Kagome. It was not for Shippou's ears," Kaede said suddenly. Kagome turned, gaze askance.

"Is everything alright?" She asked.

"In Naraku's home, Sango was shown a vision of Sesshoumaru killing Kohaku. It is a vision she suffers in nightmares."

"But it was an illusion, she knows that," Kagome insisted.

"Aye, but it haunts her. I trust Lord Sesshoumaru's honor, and he has given his word to save the boy if possible. But Sango will not trust it. The illusion took root, and her mistrust only grows. I think perhaps that is why she has been so hostile," The miko explained, looking to the sky with a single eye, contemplating her own thoughts.

"Then there's nothing we can do but bring Kohaku back then, I guess," Kagome sighed, rubbing the bridge of her nose.

"It is as you say. Though this Sesshoumaru doubts she will ever trust, even if provided evidence contrary to her own beliefs."

Kagome stamped her foot and crossed her arms angrily, trying to blink back tears. "This is so unfair," She muttered. "We're trying to save the world and it feels like we're being punished for it."

"It was never going to be an easy path, especially not once Naraku involved himself," Kaede rebuked, turning her gaze back to the miko. "This is but another obstacle you must face. But your alpha will help see you through it."

Kaede's faith in Sesshoumaru rocked Kagome. The old woman had never had a reason to trust the daiyoukai, and yet she believed that Sesshoumaru would protect her. It was humbling, especially in light of the fact that it had taken Kagome so long to see that he was a youkai of his word, a being of honor.

"Mama, Here's your coat!" Shippou cried happily, running up the hill, trying to keep the jacket from dragging on the ground as his short legs tried to force a path into the snow. Kagome took pity on him and met him halfway down, donning the coat and tying it before picking him up again and cuddling
"When do we head out?" She asked once she had rejoined the others, changing the topic of conversation.

"Soon. Magatsuhi has stopped, but it is still easily a day's journey to him. The taijya and monk are gathering their own supplies." He said the word taijya with such venom that even Kagome was startled, and Shippou seemed completely bewildered by the turn of events.

"Why's he mad at Sango?" The child questioned innocently.

"Sango is just really upset, and she's done a few things that she shouldn't have because she's not thinking straight," Kagome explained, shooting a look over the child's head that told the others to stay silent. Sesshoumaru nodded once, acknowledging the half truth, and letting it slide.

"Pup, your mother will be joining this Sesshoumaru soon. You must give your word to stay here until we come back for you," Sesshoumaru commanded gently. Kagome watched in wide eyed awe as she felt more than saw the kit nodding his head obediently. Sesshoumaru accepted the acquiescence with a nod and added, "Remember our talk."

Leaving Kagome to ponder that little mystery, he began walking away, and once again she noticed he walked on top of the snow, effectively shattering her concentration.

"We should also return to my home, there are things I would have you take as well child," Kaede reminded the miko. Kagome nodded, following the old miko obediently, walking in her tracks from before to try and avoid amassing any more snow on her wool hakama, cursing the weight of them the entire way down.

"I smell him, but I don't see him," Kouga muttered, eyes glancing over every surface, then focusing in the distance, as if his eyes would suddenly provide an answer his nose could not. Sesshoumaru nodded, only acknowledging the wolf's senses were inferior to his own.

"It is a trap," He murmured. Kagome pulled more closely to him, her arrow at the ready. Sango and Miroku watched, seated on a hovering Kirara. A laugh resounded through the ravine they found themselves in, and Sesshoumaru inwardly cursed as he realized that their positions were weak and hard to defend.

"Get on Ah Un," He commanded the woman by his side.

"But-" She started.

"Do as I say," He barked, too angry with himself for being led into the trap. The scent had been strong enough to fool him until he arrived, but it was stale. Old. They had been purposely led away.

His mind worked over the intricate possibilities before he slammed a steel wall down on them, forcing himself breath and anticipate.

As Kagome was being flown into the air near Sango and Miroku, a voice laughed, a bored, mirthless laugh. Sesshoumaru's head barely moved, although his eyes shifted to the source. The blue haired youkai that had eluded them at the shiro seemed to materialize from nothingness, his form taking shape from the air itself. Sesshoumaru caught the smell of the illusion as it faded, forced himself to stomp down the anger at the fact that he had missed the illusion as well.

In the blue haired youkai's hand was a pot, the lid off. Sesshoumaru could smell the stale scent of the spirit emanating from within.
"You had a purpose?" He asked, unsheathing Bakusaiga.

"We all do, at least we're supposed to. I'm just supposed to keep you busy for Naraku. My illusions will be better this time," He sighed, as if bored with the whole situation. His apathy would have sparked a battle with the daiyoukai weeks ago, but Sesshoumaru wanted to know why Naraku was buying time.

"Is Naraku planning something?" Kagome demanded, asking his question for him.

"You know what the problem is with you lot, you talk too much. Let Byakuya solve that," He laughed, throwing out several different origami. Sesshoumaru felt the miko flying toward him, and as he was readying his whip, her arrow shot through a piece of paper that was flying at him. Despite her lack of power, the paper was torn as the arrow ripped through it.

"Do not waste your arrows," He commanded, his whip flying around them. Kagome watched as it sliced through the paper, the pieces fluttering wildly to the ground, and she was reminded of snow as she watched it land.

"You cannot get them all daiyoukai, and your friends are already lost," Byakuya taunted.

"Sesshoumaru?"

"What?"

"If we get caught in it, and destroy the anchor point like last time, I mean, do you think you can do what I did?" She asked.

"I can destroy him," He ended the statement with a snarl, the whip seeming to vanish into the sudden sea of light surrounding them. Without her own miko powers, Sesshoumaru's strength slammed into her, knocking her to her knees as his youki consumed the various papers around them, turning them to ash.

"The power seemed to bubble, straining against a boundary that she knew Sesshoumaru had erected. Once it built up, the ki itself powerful enough to cause a tempest of wind around them, he released it, the resounding explosion deafening as she took in the sight of the ripped earth round her.

"You freed the others," She said, although she could barely understand her own words. The buzzing sound that had hung below the roar of the winds refused to leave, and she smacked her hands against her ears, trying to make it go away and instead making it worse. When she finally looked to Sesshoumaru, she saw his lips moving but could hear nothing.

"What?" She asked. When his eyes darted to her, she pointed to her ears and then waved her thumb upside down and frowned. His arm shot around her waist and pulled her tight right before he took a leap into the air. When he landed, the she jerked hard enough that it felt like her ribs were broken and her lungs flattened. Squirming away, she was getting ready to yell at him when she noticed where he had landed.

Before anything could be said, Sesshoumaru was throwing himself at Byakuya, and sounds began to permeate the buzzing noise. His sword coming down and repeatedly hitting air, the mocking laughter of the blue haired youkai.

She felt a rush of wind and realized that he had taken a position behind her, holding her almost carelessly.

"You don't want to hurt you little pet, now do you?" He asked. Her hair shifted and moved as his hot
breath stirred it, and she felt queasy for a moment before blinking several times at Sesshoumaru. Thankful for his lessons once again, the knife came out of her wrist sheath and she guesstimated, praying she put enough force into the blow to shatter bone or at the least distract her would be captor. As luck had it, her aim was perfect, and the knife plunged into his eye.

Throwing her away from himself, the demon put his hand to the bleeding area and pulled it away, fury washing what little color he had possessed away. Kagome watched, sickened, as he began pulling the knife out, and his eye came with it.

"Seems the bitch has claws," He snarled, his normally bored expression gone and replaced with a mask of rage, twisting his features.

Kagome ran, stumbled as she found the ledge, and praying, called Ah Un and jumped.

The edge of the ravine exploded behind her, knocking her off course and almost making her miss the saddle. She landed on her stomach, scrambling for purchase as the dragon moved down to touch the floor of the ravine.

"It seems Lady Kagome is full of surprises," Miroku commented when she finally got her seat, ironically just as Ah Un touched the floor. Kouga looked a little worse for the wear, but Sango looked stricken, as if the illusion to capture her had broken some deep conviction. Mentally groaning, Kagome prayed it wasn't something else about Sesshoumaru, or even about Kouga.

Before the dust settled, Sesshoumaru came gliding out, white clothing and hair immaculate. Petulantly, she wanted to ask him if his clothing and his hair were both self cleaning or if dirt was just too scared to get on him. When he landed, she was grateful she could hear the slight sound of his boots scraping the ground.

"Is he gone?" Kagome asked.

"Yes. It was a trap. He had part of Magatsuhi's body in the jar, and lured us here. We must hurry to Naraku's fortress."

"What about Kagome's powers?" Kouga snapped.

"Magatsuhi will be there. Naraku may think what he will, but Magatsuhi is using him," Sesshoumaru intoned, preparing his signature cloud of youki. "Have the jewels moved?" He demanded softly, eyes focused on Kagome. She closed her eyes and cleared her mind, but the moment she realized where the jewels were, the blue orbs opened as a gasp of dismay escaped.

"They're moving. Slowly, but they're moving. And Kohaku's shard, it's separate, but it's been tainted," She whispered, looking up into the daiyoukai's gold eyes. He nodded, a signal for her to take her place on the cloud. As she scrambled down, Kouga was moving to take his seat in the saddle, eyes narrowed in determination.

"So we're heading for Naraku?" He asked.

"We will find him. Is he traveling fast?" Sesshoumaru shot at Kagome as they began rising into the sky, the walls of the ravine shrinking as they flew higher and higher.

"Not fast, although not particularly slow. He's coming in this direction though," She added, casting another anxious glance up into the golden eyes that were quickly bleeding red.

"How long can the firecat hold her speed and still be useful in battle?" Sesshoumaru barked at Sango.
"She's got stamina to spare," Sango boasted.

"Point the way miko," Sesshoumaru commanded. When Kagome's finger moved up and pointed northeast, they shot forward, almost unseating Kagome. After several minutes of tense silence, Kouga began speaking, as if to himself. He was close enough to Kagome that she could hear him despite the low tone he spoke in.

"The illusion, it showed me the clans, whole and happy. Safe. I didn't think about it being illusion," He admitted, his voice harsh, as if the illusion had done more than trick him, but broken something in himself.

"Maybe it was meant to be cruel, but you don't have to take it that way," Kagome told him, eyes filled with concern. "You still have the ability to make it a reality. The tribe will still need you when this is over, but you can make the illusion into a prophecy, and heal your people," She assured. His eyes seemed to take on a bit of their former glow, and she was pleased to note that the corners of his mouth were tilting up in a ghost of a smile.

"Thanks, Kagome."

"I saw my father alive, and at my wedding," Miroku told them. His voice was almost lost in the wind as they moved forward, but Kagome was able to catch his statement. "My wind tunnel, his, it was as if they never existed. My father was able to meet Sango and bless us," He finished.

"My father met you, and our village was whole and everyone, Kohaku, my father, everyone was still alive," Sango added, sparing a glance at the monk behind her, his arms around her waist.

"But Byakuya didn't think of one thing," Kagome told them. When they looked slightly perturbed at her observation, she allowed herself a sad smile. "If not for those things, neither of you would have met."

For several minutes the monk and taijiya seemed lost in thought, her leaning further into him, and his arms squeezing her middle gently.

"Kagome is right," Miroku finally said, and nothing more. Sango nodded woodenly, looking as if her world had shifted on it's axis.

"What did you see, Kagome?" Kouga asked.

"Sesshoumaru didn't let any of the origami get close enough for them to trap us," She explained. "I was a dummy and dove for him, and he ended up protecting me as well as himself."

"What do you think you would have seen?" Kouga pressed, honestly curious and determined not to fall into the contemplative silence that had reigned over most of his trip with the miko and the daiyoukai.

"I don't know," She admitted. "Maybe me in my own time, attending high school and graduating. Or Inu Yasha alive. Who knows what he saw? I'm not sure I would have fallen for it, I know he's the guy that tried to make me watch a replay of my rape and Inu Yasha's death," She sighed. Then she glanced up at Sesshoumaru, who looked totally disinterested in the conversation.

"What do you think your illusion was supposed to be?" She asked, watching his face carefully for even a hint of reaction.

"There is nothing this Sesshoumaru wants for," He replied shortly.
"Everyone wants something," She pressed.

"For this war to be over," He admitted. "And for my people to be safe."

"See? And that's not a bad thing either, so don't act like you're less than perfect for having goals. Byakuya's illusions were flawed in different ways. I don't think he really understood people, which is kind of sad. I wonder what he dreamed of," She mused. Despite the youkai's cruelty, she thought of Kanna, and wondered if Naraku's children did feel and were trapped as surely as she was in the game he played, or if they served him happily, knowing what their actions did to others. Quickly growing too melancholy from the ideas spinning in her brain, she pulled away from those thoughts and pursued another line of thinking. She did believe that Sesshoumaru wanted the war to be over, and for his people to be safe. But everyone had a personal wish, a desire for something, anything.

She mused on different options and ideas, turning each one over in her mind over and over before discarding it. The normal things didn't seem to fit, and what he had professed to want didn't seem to apply anymore.

Could someone really have everything? The question plagued her as they ate up distance between themselves and Naraku. For a moment she was reminded of the math problems in school about two trains traveling at different speeds. Where would they meet? What would happen when they did?

Within hours, the tugging grew more and more insistent, and suddenly it stopped. Lightning seemed to strike Kagome. She fell forward, gasping.

"It's complete," She whispered, tears coming to her eyes as she contemplated the implications. "He's absorbing it. I don't know if he made a wish, I can't, but-" She was babbling, and from some distant place in her mind, she knew she was. Sesshoumaru had gone down on one knee and his gaze searched her face.

"Are you sure?"

"I can feel it, somehow Kohaku's shard was tainted, and, Naraku took it," She whispered, visibly slumping as she pressed her palms to her eyes in an attempt to stop the tears.

"Can you feel the boy?" He asked. Kagome shook her head.

"He could still be alive," Sango said desperately, eyes wide and panicked. Sesshoumaru saw the grim set of the monk's mouth and said nothing.

"We must hurry," He intoned, standing back up and pushing himself harder, determined to find Naraku before he made his wish.

**Author's Notes:** I know. I know. Sango fans, I'm really, really sorry. Just give it time, it gets sorted out.

Someone asked me if there will be romance. And yes, there will be, I promise. And tension. But they've got to actually care about each other first. I don't believe love is a magic pill. I don't believe it is a cure all. And I don't believe Kagome is just going to fall into his arms, or him into hers.

So much wangst in the future.

Also, I've started doing exclusives on Dokuga, such as dokuga challenges and lemons. Just go and look up The Hatter Theory. I promise I'm the same person. Dokuga also gets the uncut chapters (seeing as how there is sex(!) later in this story and others I'm working on.) Take that as a promise for
romance. Viola!

If I don't post before Thanksgiving (I probably will) Happy Thanksgiving.
"What is it?" Sango asked as they all stared at the hovering, hulking mass that had come into sights long before. From afar, it had seemed like a floating ship of some sort. Now Sesshoumaru curled his lip in distaste as he realized what Naraku had done.

"It is his body. He has used it to create a shell around himself."

"That whole thing is him?" Kouga shouted, his head jerking wildly as he looked from Sesshoumaru to the floating monstrosity.

"Hnn. We must find a way in."

"You want to go in?" Kouga demanded, staring at the daiyoukai as if he'd lost his mind.

"Magatsuhi awaits within. And so does Naraku. We will kill neither if we stay out here," Sesshoumaru answered as he sailed forward. He noticed the spike of fear in the miko's scent and looked down as they led the group forward.

"You are afraid." It was a statement, not a question.

"I haven't seen Naraku since he- I don't have any powers. I'm useless in there," Kagome whispered.

"You thought you were useless against Byakuya, yet you were not. And I will break the seal soon. Magatsuhi will fall to Tenseiga."

Startled, Kagome finally offered a small smile, wondering why he was going out of his way to be nice, and to encourage her.

'Maybe he's just a good leader. He knows about boosting morale,' She admitted. But she also knew he would never offer false praise, and the thought warmed her, just a little, in the face of the oncoming battle.

He unsheathed Bakusaiga as they approached, and with a deft swing, energy crashed into the side of the mass of writhing flesh and began to disappear, creating an opening for them to enter.

"Remember, we're facing the real Naraku now. He likes tricking people. Don't believe your eyes," Miroku warned. Kagome looked over to him, and tried to ignore the worry gnawing at her gut. He didn't look well enough to battle. In fact, he looked like he was ready to fall over.
"Let's try to stay together," Kagome called out as they flew through the darkness. "He'll try to divide and conquer. We can't let him."

"Keep your eyes sharp for the boy," Kouga added. Sango seemed startled by the command, but kept her eyes peeled just the same, although the darkness, while not absolute, was such that they were only able to see a few feet ahead of themselves.

Sesshoumaru led them through twists and turns, and Kagome wanted to believe she was in a maze of caverns, but the oppressive heat and humidity, as well as the strange, fleshy, wet noises made it impossible to forget they were inside Naraku.

"You don't think he'll try to absorb us, do you?" She whispered, the fear building and leaving her almost mute, the words coming out strangled through her constricted throat.

"No. If he does, Bakusaiga will finish him before he can finish."

She didn't want to think about the possibility that if they were being absorbed, Bakusaiga might kill them all as well.

"I smell him," Sesshoumaru stated several minutes later. If not for the narrowing of his eyes and the sudden eager smirk that tilted a corner of his lips, Kagome wouldn't have thought he cared at all. But she knew that this was going beyond simple battle for the daiyoukai. Magatsuhi was prey that had escaped, and Sesshoumaru wanted to finish his kill.

As they were speeding up, determined to meet their foe head on and running so to speak, a roar filled the dark silence and the air began to vibrate. Naraku's body was shaking and trembling, as if caught in an earthquake. The wet fleshy sounds increased and changed to slithering, and Kagome turned, only to see a wall growing together.

"Guys, come on, get through before it-" And she was cut off by the wall slamming closed, the frightened, panicked looks of her friends sealed away on the other side.

"It is starting. Come, we must finish this," Sesshoumaru commanded calmly. Kagome nodded, gaze still on the wall. She remembered the wall coming up at the shiro, what had happened after. Saying nothing, they moved on, Sesshoumaru growing tense and then moving them to a ledge.

"I smell him, but the smell is everywhere, soaking the air," He muttered, eyes darting around him. Lighting seemed to strike her once more. Kagome let out a strangled gasp as her muscles tensed, feeling as if they were going to tear. Then she was pushed back mentally, as if someone had bullied their way into her brain and demanded to have the wheel.

And with dawning horror, she realized they had.

"Quite a bit of anger at that taijiya, Naraku too. Humans make it so easy," A completely foreign voice said using her mouth. "You know, every miko has a choice. Naohi, or Magatsuhi. It is not hard to turn a human heart to hate," He laughed, the sound so loud and mirthless it was almost a bark. "I think I'll break that seal now. Let's see if we can't use all of that impressive training the mutt gave you against him."

Despite being a prisoner in her own body, she was still in it, and the feeling of her powers swelled within her, a familiar warmth she hadn't been aware was missing. But she was allowed no time to feel relief when, with dawning horror, she realized that Magatsuhi was gathering energy, manipulating it more easily than she ever could, his intent clear within her mind.
'No! No, you won't do that to him!' She screamed mentally, trying to figure out how to escape her prison. That evil cackle filled her mind, taunting her and demanding she watch as she obliterated her ally.

"She cares for you, quite a bit daiyoukai. Oh, not in some silly infatuated way, which is surprising. No, she actually sees you as alpha. Surprising, for a human wench," He snapped, getting ready to throw the energy gathered in her hands. "She really trusts that you'll protect her. Does it hurt to see that you've failed?"

'No!' She screamed, the piercing wail tearing through the walls surrounding her and boxing her in. They shattered, and though Magatsuhi was still in control and let the energy go, it veered off course. Kagome didn't know if it was his distraction or her will that forced it, but focused instead on taking control of her body.

"You won't harm him!" She snarled in a stunning imitation of Sesshoumaru, coming so close to the surface in her rage that her own voice broke through to her lips, ringing through the darkness. She felt the spirit trying to gather more of her energy, searched for him in her head, felt him everywhere around her. How to force out someone that was everywhere when she felt so small within herself?

The power swelled.

"No!" She commanded, willing her hands to face the floor as it exploded out. The flesh beneath her feet gave way and she felt herself falling into the darkness. An arm caught her, wrapping around her waist and tossing her back up onto solid ground.

"Weak little bitch, give up!" She heard ringing in her head so loudly she wasn't sure if the words had left her mouth. Feeling like a bizarre mental patient, she dove in, summoning her power, forcing it to her will instead of the spirit's, and with every ounce of her willpower, pushed.

"Get out, you don't belong in me!" She shrieked, rage suffusing her words. She drew from their strength.

"I do, I've seen that twisted, desolate place you call your soul! I belong there as much as you!" He crowed triumphantly.

"Doesn't matter," She grunted as she struggled to exorcise him from her body. "I have a son and a pack, and I won't let you touch them!" She finished in a scream, thinking of Shippou and the orphans, of Rin and Sesshoumaru and even Tenka and Jaken. When the last tendrils of his essence broke free, it felt like something shattered in her, and her power exploded outward, pushing the alien presence from her.

Sesshoumaru sailed over her crumpling form and she watched as the Tenseiga cut through the face once, twice, and the third time the spirit seemed to dissipate, it's howl of rage echoing through the pseudo caverns.

"Thank you," She whispered.

"You fought him on your own. There is nothing this Sesshoumaru could have done," he intoned. She nodded, swallowing, trying to force the bile down her throat. Instead of succeeding she stumbled away from him and braced herself against a slimy, pulsing wall, and disgust only adding to her nausea, gave up and vomited.

"Do you think they're okay?" Miroku asked as they flew through the dim gloom. Minutes earlier a wave of power had swept through, leaving them shaken.
"Sesshoumaru's one of the strongest I've ever seen," Kouga answered, eyes still staring forward, carefully scanning the dark. "And with those swords of his, well, even the jewel would have a hard time dealing with him. And that power, that was Kagome's, I'd know it anywhere," He finished, thinking on the blow he had received weeks ago. He wouldn't forget that feeling as long as he lived.

"So Magatsuhi's been taken care of. Now we just need to find Naraku," Sango ground out, determinedly searching, straining her eyes against the obscure murkiness below them, for any sign of movement.

It felt like hours passed before the strange rumbling began again. Expecting another wall, Kouga urged Ah Un over to Kirara and watched for the mass of flesh to begin forming any sort of barrier. Instead, they were surprised by tentacles shooting out, aiming to strike them.

"Stay astride," Kouga shouted, reveling in the feel of the goraishi's sudden weight. It was a comfortable solid feel, and he brought his feet up to the saddle beneath him and bent his legs, readying to jump. The tentacles themselves seemed more focused, more intent on attacking the taijiya and slayer, and he lunged forward, adrenaline pumping his blood more quickly through his body.

For a moment he felt as if he were moving at a speed he had been capable of when he had the jewel shards in his legs. The clawed gauntlet on his hand tore through the tentacles, and he reveled in the feel of the weapon rending flesh.

Sango's boomerang flew, slicing through several tentacles as it made it's way back to her hand.

"Move back, I'll take care of this," Miroku called.

"No, houshi-sama! You know what will happen if you use it," Sango cried out as she threw the boomerang again. Kouga wanted to roll his eyes at the battle theatrics. The time for talk was over.

"Haul ass!" He shouted. Ignoring their protests, Kirara and Ah Un shot forward, and he summoned his energy for the instinctive attack his ancestors had allowed him. He almost felt silly, slashing down at the air, but the whirlwinds of energy, like twisters, cut through the tentacles trying to strike at them. The tentacles ripped and tore beneath the onslaught, and no more were forthcoming.

Ah Un caught him neatly as he fell, and took him to the others. He was almost to them when the energy came back, reflected and doubled in it's intensity. Pain lanced through him and he was barely aware of Sango and Miroku screaming one another's names as the power crashed and bellowed around them, tearing at their bodies mercilessly. Kirara let out an indignant shriek of pain and even Ah Un lowed angrily, shaking both heads.

"You guys got any tricks?" He asked, clinging to the saddle horn. When the heads didn't stop shaking, he noticed that the dragons seemed more intent on getting their bridle sets off. Reaching forward, ignoring the pain in his left side as it began to seize up, he found found one catch and watched the bridle fall away, and reached for the other. After almost falling off as his side suddenly began burning like it was on fire, he managed to unhook the twin's bridle.

Blue lighting erupted from the right head of the beast, And Kouga watched the darkness seemed to melt away, the light was so brilliant.

"Sango, Miroku?" He called. When neither answered, he began trying to find their scents.

"Damn," He muttered, realizing that somehow they had been separated, and Kirara was with Sango. Leaving the monk alone.

"Think you can find that pervert?" He rasped, hand going to his side and pressing against the wound
oozing blood. The lightning stopped and he felt himself get pulled into a dive. Clinging to the saddlehorn weakly, he prayed the monk was still alive and that the taijiya didn't do anything to get herself killed.

Sango sat astride Kirara, trying to gain her bearings. The fire cat would breath her fire into the air every few minutes, lighting their way in brief flashes that cast flickering, menacing shadows along the surfaces of the gently pulsing walls.

"Do you think your can find houshi-sama?" Sango asked quietly. The fire cat let out a plaintive noise and Sango slumped. "What about Kohaku?" She tried. Once more that plaintive noise sent her spirits plummeting. Tears started burning her eyes and she sniffled defiantly, trying to push them back. Against her wishes, they began falling, coursing down her cheeks.

"We'll find them," She insisted angrily, dashing the tears away.

"Sango?" A voice called. Starting violently, she looked around herself anxiously. Just as she was beginning to think she was losing her mind, she heard the voice calling her name again. Miroku's voice.

"Houshi-sama!" She called back, directing Kirara in the direction the call had come from. The firecat shot forward, and Sango saw a light growing ahead, could see the outline of a sort of cave mouth. They dove into it, and she stopped the firecat short when the scene registered, shock and horror and joy mingling together all at once.

"Let them go!" She shrieked at Naraku. He was smirking, a head and torso suspended by flesh, flesh that also held Miroku and Kohaku close to him.

"Hello Sango," He greeted, smirking down at her. "I've been waiting for you."

"Let them go!" She snarled.

"Oh, I'll let one go, in just a moment. Tell me Sango, how badly do you want the monk's freedom?"

"I'd give anything," She snapped, flying closer and bringing hiraikotsu to hand, getting ready to swing it.

"What about your little brother's life? Would that be worth it? Or would you rather I let the boy go?"

The ramifications of his words crashed down on her, and the bone weapon slipped from numbed fingers carelessly.

"What?" She whispered, staring in horror at the hanyou holding onto the two most important people in her life.

"You know Sango. Choose," He demanded, the delight in his quiet command unmistakable.

"I can't, you can't think," She stuttered, still staring at the two limp forms in the hanyou's grasp.

"What will it be, the love of your short, pathetic life, or the only other survivor in your family, hmm? Better choose soon, or I'll kill them both," He mocked, sneering down at her.

Miroku stood shakily, wincing in disgust as he braced himself against the slimy, pulsing wall of flesh. Each time he pulled in a breath, pain lanced down his right side. He pressed his fingers
gingerly into his ribs and flinched when barely brushing them sent another wave of pain coursing up and down his body.

Using his staff for support, and thanking the kami for his deathgrip on it during the fall, he began moving forward, gasping for air and trying to block out pain from what he assumed to be broken ribs. Each step felt like a small eternity, and he fell against the wall, completely oblivious to texture as he slid down it and allowed frustrated tears to fall.

"You know," A voice said, breaking the silence. "You can just suck me up into the wind tunnel. It would be ironic, wouldn't it, to kill me with the curse I put on your family?"

Miroku looked up, hate suffusing his features as he took in the sight of Naraku, now nothing more than a floating head and torso supported by the flesh moving and rolling revoltingly.

"Begone abomination," Miroku snapped, trying to focus on Naraku's face instead of the flesh moving sickly, making wet smacking sounds. A disgusting parody of noises the monk didn't want to think about.

"You can end it. Give the woman back her little brother, free them of my existence. Or are you too scared of losing yourself to the wind tunnel? You are, aren't you? Cowardly little man, playing at being brave when really you're just too selfish and afraid of dying," He taunted.

The beads clattered as he unwound them from his wrist and felt the cloth covering the wind tunnel fall away. The sneering face was sucked in, it's laughter mocking him until his fist closed and he angrily tugged the cloth into place and wrapped the rosary back around it.

"Damn monster," He grunted, standing again, determined more than ever to find Naraku. "Should have known better," He berated himself, muttering to distract himself from the pain as he began walking into the darkness.

He offered a prayer to any divine beings that were listening, and offered himself up to them if they would allow him the opportunity to free the woman he loved.

After fading in an out of consciousness for what felt like hours, Kouga finally felt himself being dropped. At least, it felt like he was falling. When he hit solid ground scant seconds later, he opened bleary eyes only to find Ah Un staring down at him.

"I think it's best if you go find Kagome and Sesshoumaru," He whimpered, his hand soaked in blood as he pulled it from his side. The bleeding hadn't stopped, and he wondered how much longer he was going to be able to stay conscious.

Eyes glazed as he thought about the wolf tribe, the people he was supposed to protect. He thought about Ayame and his refusal to mate her, and realized that it wasn't a bad idea. Allowing the flashes of his life to overwhelm him, he exhaled slowly, a small smile dancing on his lips.

Until something that felt like fire lanced up his side and the smell of burning flesh rose, acrid, to his nose. In the distance he heard a wolf howling in anguish, and realized in a peripheral sort of way that the agonized sound echoing through the fleshy cave was coming from him. Blue eyes shot open and caught the sight of the dragon's strange blue lightning aimed for his side just before another burst of white hot pain pulsed through him.

He panted through teeth clenched together, sweat pouring down his forehead completely unnoticed. After several minutes, after the spikes of heat abated into a less intense, dull throbbing, he pushed himself up on his elbows and forced his jaw apart.
"Thanks, real lifesaver. And it's a damn good thing you didn't warn me, don't think I could have gone through with it," He joked. A foot stamped at the ground impatiently and he nodded, claws digging into the wall as he half pushed half drug himself up from the ground. Spots danced in his vision and threatened to swell and doom him to unconsciousness.

"I will be damned if I faint like some girl," He spat as he moved over to the dragon, almost collapsing against the beast when he finally reached it. After several pain filled minutes, something strange happened. A lightheaded sort of blankness filled him, and thanking every ancestor of the wolf tribe, he climbed onto the saddle and gave a snort.

"Let's go find the others."

Sango had long ago dove for her weapon and threatened to kill the youkai. She had tried everything she knew, hoping to gain the freedom of both males. The hanyou however, had stuck to his offer and refused to budge. Contemplating the two faces, relaxed in whatever spelled slumber Naraku held them in, she fell to her knees. Kirara still growled angrily.

"You can have me if you let them both go free," She whispered, heart clenching painfully in her chest.

"I don't think I heard you right, what is it you said?" He jeered.

"You can have me. Just let them go," She repeated. The flesh around her shifted and grew and slithered around her, capturing her. They squeezed her body like a snake coiling around it's prey, trying to strangle her. Just as different colored spots began dancing in her vision from lack of air, the coils eased somewhat, and she was able to draw in a breath.

She turned, looking hatefully at the hanyou. "Release them," She demanded.

The two bodies fell to the ground, crumbling like clay as they fell.

"You tricked me!" She snapped.

"You were a fool if you expected differently," The figure laughed darkly. Any light that had been present extinguished itself, and a clammy appendage coiled around her head, covering her mouth to block out her screams of outrage.

"The monk still lives, and so does your little brother, huntress. Bite into that, and I know you're thinking about it, and you'll end up swallowing miasma," He laughed as she felt herself moving through the dark.

Miroku moved unsteadily through the darkness, the stabbing pain in his side growing steadily worse as he called on his spiritual powers, on the powers of love, of anything really, to try and find Sango. A small eternity had passed and he felt like he was walking in circles.

"You know, I can just take you to her," Naraku's voice broke the silence, all the more infuriating for it's apparent apathy. "She was so foolish, trying to give herself up for you and the boy. Didn't even fight as I took her really," It taunted.

"What are you talking about?" The monk demanded. Light suffused the cavern and Miroku turned to face the disembodied head and torso.

"The woman gave herself up to keep you and the boy safe. Foolishly, she fell for another of my
tricks, and now needs you to save her. Again."

"How do I know you're not trying to trick me?" Miroku demanded several minutes later.

"You don't. But you could just swallow me up and save the woman. Then again, you've already proven that you're too much of a coward to do it. Just like your father. You know he didn't even try to find me? He just went and bedded as many women as possible until you were born."

"Leave me! I will not fall prey to your lies!" Miroku shouted. The head laughed, the hair surrounding the torso and hanging past the body swaying. The sight of it sickened him even more.

"Fair enough. Good luck finding her on your own monk."

It vanished as easily as it had appeared, at least Miroku assumed, since he hadn't seen the thing appear to begin with. The walls around him began to rumble ominously and he watched as they reshaped themselves into a whole new path. In the distance he saw the outline of an entrance and flickering, shadowy light on the other side.

Wary of a trap, he staggered forward. Even knowing that Naraku was setting him up for something, he figured following the path to him would bring him to his goal more quickly. And hopefully, if he was the first one there, he could finish everything, once and for all.

Kagome held tightly to Sesshoumaru, trying to make out movement and shape as they flew through Naraku's body.

"Have you sensed any of the others?" She asked for the third time.

"No," He replied tersely. After they flew along one wall. After tearing through one with the Bakusaiga, Sesshoumaru had been forced to vacate, the miko clutching him tightly as miasma had poured from the wound he'd inflicted. Immune to poisons he might be, but the woman was not, and it was proving to be a distinct disadvantage. Not to mention the repeated question was beginning to grate on his nerves.

He desperately wanted to use Bakusaiga to just keep moving closer to the hanyou instead of taking the longer way. Unfortunately, he had declared the woman pack, she had declared him her alpha on numerous occasions. And one didn't kill pack unless they challenged.

That did not keep him from imagining it.

"I was thinking," Kagome began several minutes later.

"What woman?"

"I don't know if I'd hurt you or not, but I could try to purify the miasma," She started. He stopped and glared down at her, willing himself to hold onto her and not throw her into the darkness below them.

"How long have you been thinking about this?" He ground out.

"Since we discovered the other wall was miasma. But I don't want to hurt you, we need every bit of strength for the battle with Naraku," She insisted when his glare only intensified.

"You will do it. This Sesshoumaru has survived you thus far. I will not allow myself to be taken down this close to the hanyou."
"I know that, I'm just saying, what if it weakens you, or makes you more vulnerable?"

"Do. It."

His tone left absolutely no room for argument, and despite her muttering something about stubborn asses, she called forth her own power. He felt static running along his form when she touched, could feel it sparking and leaping eagerly.

As if to exhibit his own eagerness, he unsheathed Bakusaiga and swung it, cleanly slicing through a wall. Kagome's aura swelled and though the jyaki flooded the area and swirled around them, it was purified before it touched either of them.

He allowed himself a smile as he changed direction, following the scent of the hanyou and cutting through one wall after another, ignoring the flesh that sizzled and turned to ash behind them as he created one opening after another.

It felt like hours as they soared through the caverns and demolished one obstacle after another. But with each one that fell, Sesshoumaru could smell the hanyou and Kagome felt the jewel tugging at her all the more insistently.

"I smell the boy, and the taijiya," He informed her later. Kagome couldn't tell how much time had passed, or how far they were from their goal. Was Naraku creating more fodder for Sesshoumaru so they'd take longer? And why hadn't he tried to trick them by now? Or had Magatsuhi been the one that was supposed to stop them?

"How far away are they, can you tell?" She asked.

"Not far. Their scents are strong."

"What about Miroku or Kouga?"

"The wolf is just ahead. I smell his blood, and Ah Un. The monk has been moving throughout the area as well, but far below us."

"We should find them before we confront Naraku," Kagome tried to persuade.

"If we come across the wolf he may join us, but we will not go seeking anyone. We must kill-"

"No, it wouldn't be right. They aren't your pack, and I get that, but they are part of mine," She insisted stubbornly.

"I don't think you understand what pack means, and when this is over, I will explain it to you."

"Well until then, you'll just have to deal with me and my interpretation. If you don't, I'll zap you. I've got my powers back," She threatened ominously.

He wanted to drop her into the abyss below them. He wanted to keep going and kill the hanyou and just leave. But the woman was essential because of the jewel, and he couldn't in good conscience leave the kit she cared for orphaned for a second time in his young life. And one didn't kill pack, no matter how tempting. He also knew the threats were empty ones, and that she'd no more harm him than he would her, although their reasoning was different.

He also knew that she would hound him endlessly unless he gave in, and that was not something he wanted to endure, especially when ten minutes quick work would quiet her.
"If this Sesshoumaru finds the others, will you cease your foolishness?" He demanded archly.

"Pretty much," She admitted cheekily, flashing a grin up at him. He scowled down at her, angry that she had taken his capitulation as a victory.

Despite the seriousness of their situation, he let himself smile as he sped up, slashing wildly as he traced the wolf's scent. Her squeak of surprise soothed his pride as he tore through the barriers like a madman, barely giving the miasma time to even leak out of the flesh before he was past it, determined to get everything over and done with.

In less than five minutes they were hovering on front of Ah Un and Kouga, who sat astride the dragon with glazed eyes and a furious expression.

"Where the hell have you guys been?" The wolf demanded.

"Kouga, your side, it's-"

"The dragon fixed it for me. We gotta find the others," Kouga snapped impatiently, dismissing her concern. Sesshoumaru studied his face for a moment, recognizing the signs of adrenaline and endorphins. Hopefully they would hold out until the battle was over.

"I know where the monk is. The taijiya and the boy are in a chamber not far. The miko," He added, throwing a glare at the woman clinging to his side, "Refuses to fight without the monk."

Kouga muttered something uncomplimentary under his breath before heaving a sigh.

"Let's go get him," He conceded, hands fisted around Ah Un's mane in lieu of the reins. Sesshoumaru nodded and dropped into a steep dive, barreling through the darkness.

"Someday you'll have to do this when I can enjoy it," Kagome spat as he evened out and began weaving through tunnels, searching for the monk.

"This Sesshoumaru doubts there will ever be another occasion for you to be this close," He retorted shortly, taking a measure of comfort when there were no witty retorts forthcoming. He kept his senses sharp, making sure Ah Un followed closely and followed the scent of the lecherous houshi.

"He is just ahead," Sesshoumaru intoned as they followed a path that seemed too convenient to the daiyoukai. A light flickered through a small entrance, and he was about to fly through it when he came to a sudden stop. Ah Un stopped next to him, reluctant to go in.

"What's going on, isn't he in there?" Kagome demanded.

"Hush!" Sesshoumaru snapped, forcing the sound of the pulsing walls away, the breathing of his companions and their heartbeats. Below all of those, he heard a strange whistling sound.

"I hear the wind," He finally said, unable to make heads or tales of the revelation.

"Miroku's wind tunnel, it must be spreading, come on, we have to hurry," Kagome urged, tugging on his sleeve, eyes wide with concern. Sesshoumaru nodded and shot forward, and Ah Un, despite initial misgivings, followed warily. Once inside the small cave, they watched Miroku, the rosary dangling uselessly from his left hand, his right hand beginning to open.

"Miroku, stop!" Kagome shouted. When the monk didn't even look at her, she looked at where his hand was aimed.
And saw nothing.

"It's got to be an illusion, he wouldn't open it unless he thought he had to. We have to stop him," She told Sesshoumaru. Just then the wind picked up, and the whistling turned to a roar as the clenched fist opened and they felt the pull of the vortex.

Kagome felt Sesshoumaru stiffen himself as he resisted the pull of the wind, and he darted quickly over to Ah Un, throwing her over the saddle unceremoniously.

"Do not let her go," He commanded the wolf. Kouga nodded, even though he was clinging tightly to Ah Un, who was in turn was digging in all four taloned feet, rumbling angrily. Kouga threw himself over Kagome, pinning her down even as she was shouting at him.

Sesshoumaru then moved, carefully, bracing himself against the paths of least resistance less he get sucked in. He stalked closer to the monk, who seemed oblivious to his presence. First he tried striking the monk's head, but the blow, which would normally knock a man unconscious, didn't seem to faze the man. Damning his luck, he moved closer to the black hole that seemed determined to swallow everyone within the cave. Sesshoumaru saw it spreading in tiny increments, knew the illusion's aim was to make the monk consume himself at least, if not all of them.

He dug his boots into the soft tissue of the cave floor, willing himself to stay as if it would make it possible despite the conditions that fought against him. His hand shot out and wrapped around the monk's wrist. Still no flicker of awareness entered the man's eyes. When Sesshoumaru shifted his hand forward, closer to the wind tunnel, he bent the monk's fingers. At first they resisted, but when one finger broke under his insistence, it was as if the spell lifted, and the monk's hand curled and he moaned in pain, dropping to the floor. The winds stopped, and Kagome's shouting rung through the cave.

"Do you know where you are?" Sesshoumaru demanded.

"I was, how did you get here?" Miroku asked, confusion evident.

"Naraku was manipulating you. You almost killed us all, including yourself," Sesshoumaru informed him coldly. Miroku's eyes widened as he glanced behind him, as if noticing Kagome and Kouga for the first time. The priestess had squirmed from beneath the wolf and was running over to them both.

Sesshoumaru watched as she hugged the man and helped him wrap his hand back up, speaking gently the whole time as the monk tried to resist the tears Sesshoumaru could easily smell.

"Damn it Kagome, next time just smack me or something, you hit the damn burns," Kouga shouted from atop Ah Un.

"Monk, join the wolf. I would have this finished," Sesshoumaru commanded, effectively silencing the chaos of the wolf shouting and the monk's erratic scents. Kagome glared up at the daiyoukai and then sighed, her face a mask of acceptance.

"He's right, we need to get this done. Your wind tunnel is spreading too quickly," Kagome told him. "Don't open it again, no matter what you see," She demanded gently. Miroku nodded, still shaken by what he had almost done. He moved, still staggering, and Kagome wove her arm around his shoulder and let him use her as a crutch, even going so far as to use her hands to cup his feet as he struggled into the saddle.

Despite her worry, she said nothing, instead striding quickly to Sesshoumaru.

"Cloud or cling?" She demanded, rolling her eyes. Despite the indignity of her suggestion, her
merely glared and she moved to his side. He wrapped an arm around her waist and they took off, flying low at first, exiting the cave, then picking up altitude.

"Expand your aura to those two. We will be encountering more miasma," He warned as he unsheathed Bakusaiga.

"I don't know if I can-" She started.

"You can. Do it," He demanded.

She only had seconds to create a sort of bubble around the group, all of her focus on maintaining it and purifying the miasma before it could reach them as Sesshoumaru tore through one wall after another impatiently. Kagome could see his growing irritation as the sword flashed, creating one opening after another. Just outside of the barrier she could feel the inky blackness, like a plague, hovering, touching her aura. Despite being purified, she felt the sickness and death it brought, and fought nausea as Sesshoumaru moved faster and faster. They tore through the dark clouds of jyaki and had it been, say, a day in the sky, and the jyaki were replaced with real clouds, she would have been having the time of her life. As it was, she tried to think about that image instead of the oily feeling the clouds of poison produced.

"Only another barrier or two," He murmured, and Kagome could hear the eagerness in his voice. Once again they were close to it all being over, and despite the fear stabbing at her and the feeling of her heartbeat doubling, there was a trill of excitement that ran through her.

Sesshoumaru, despite his eagerness, could not help but feel wary of the ease with which they were finding the hanyou. After the maze of tunnels and caverns his body had become, it seemed too simple. But as they crashed through the last wall, the flesh of the hanyou melting beneath Bakusaiga's strike, he realized why the hanyou had not deigned to move.

Power flowed from his form, and Sesshoumaru could sense nothing human in the body of his foe. In fact, it felt as if the man had become a full demon.

"Foolish hanyou, he has already made his wish," Sesshoumaru proclaimed.

"Sango and Kohaku are down there," Kagome whispered urgently, pointing lower, where the front of the organic platform met the floor. Both the taijiya and the boy were held by coils of flesh that were vaguely snakelike.

"We have to save them," She demanded.

"Welcome," A voice boomed out. Sesshoumaru shifted his gaze to the armless torso, eyes keen for any weakness. "It seems you have regained your powers. It will do you no good," The voice, only an approximation of Naraku's, observed.

"You must have already known that. I bet you've watched everything we've done while you hid, coward!" Kagome called out, face flushed with anger.

Tentacles shot out, pulling Miroku and Kouga from Ah Un and another knocking the dragon into one of the fleshy walls. The limbs coiled around the man and youkai tightly, preventing movement. Kouga, his wound flaring in pain, went berserk, trying to break free as the coils grew tighter.

Kagome heard something break and flinched.

"Well miko, it seems I have everything you want. Your friends, the jewel. I'm even going to destroy that pathetic little village you love so much. I bet the kit is there, waiting," It taunted. Anger rising in her, she pulled her power viciously from herself, throwing it at the youkai. When it made contact, she
watched it explode in a flash of light and felt a flash of triumph. It soon faded however, when the light dimmed and Naraku still hung suspended, untouched.

"I'll make a deal with you. I will trade you for all of your friends, and even the little inu prince. I'll spare the village as well."

"Promise?" Kagome called. She was shaken roughly by Sesshoumaru and looked up into furious golden eyes.

"It is a trick, as with Inu Yasha," He snarled, his arm tightening on her waist.

"Let me say goodbye to my friends first," She demanded. When Naraku only laughed, she turned herself in Sesshoumaru's grip and leaned up to his cheek.

"I'll buy time. You won't let him hurt me and he'll never hurt you," She whispered confidently into his ear as she threw her arms around him in an awkward hug. "Now take me down to the others. We need time," She urged quietly. He obeyed reluctantly, acknowledging the wisdom of her plan.

He had prepared for the eventuality that the miko would die. Had made plans in case Naraku succeeded in destroying her. But he had not imagined himself passively watching as it happened, nor had it ever occurred to him that she would walk towards her destruction with open arms.

Kouga was snarling, losing himself to the instinctual bestial side that existed within every youkai. Kagome moved to him first and cupped his face in her hands. He snarled angrily at her, although he stopped thrashing.

"Stop fighting, he'll hurt you more. You need to live for Ayame and the clans," She whispered, moving to place a kiss on his cheek even though his fangs seemed ready to rip into her face the minute she was in range. But he quieted, and Sesshoumaru saw awareness begin to flicker in his eyes as she shifted away, moving to a crying Miroku.

"Don't do this," He whispered brokenly as he watched her approach.

"I have to. Trust Sesshoumaru," Kagome told him, moving to kiss his cheek as well. "You'll have to take care of Sango after this, she'll need it. Tell her I love her and forgive her. Make sure Shippou gets back to the shiro, he belongs there," Kagome commanded gently as she pulled away. Miroku nodded, unable to speak.

She cast a quick glance at the still unconscious Sango and Kohaku and sighed wearily. Sesshoumaru grabbed her wrist and pulled Tenseiga, sheathe and all, from his belt and pushed it roughly into her chest, gold eyes narrowed.

"What-" She began, but stopped when he shook his head. Confused, she hugged it to her chest tightly, the binding on the handle rubbing against her cheek.

"I'm ready," She called out.

The tentacles burst from the platform and Kagome was yanked from the floor and into the air. Sesshoumaru fought the urge to blindly follow, instead trying to formulate a plan.

"Miko! What is the second defense against human men?" He called up to her as he watched the tentacles relax their coils around the others. Kouga moved to catch Kohaku, and Miroku, despite his broken finger, caught Sango awkwardly, shaking her to wake her up. Coils unwrapped from around a small Kirara as well, and the harsh jolted her into awareness. Shaking herself, she transformed, eyes blazing with fury as she moved to the taijiya and roared angrily.
Sango awoke looking into the mouth of her long time companion and shifted uneasily. "I'm sorry I let myself get tricked," She whispered, looking into Miroku's eyes and throwing herself into his arms.

"Everyone, get out," Sesshoumaru commanded.

"What about Kagome?" Kouga snarled, still treading the line between sanity and the beast.

"What about her?" Sango asked, looking around. When she looked up and saw the miko dangling helplessly, she let out a strangled gasp.

"She traded her life for ours," Miroku informed her sadly, refusing to look up.

"But it's a trick, it's the same thing he did to me," Sango started angrily. "He'll just kill all of us."

"Get out. I will deal with this," Sesshoumaru commanded.

Suddenly the world seemed to rock, and there was a faint groaning, as if somewhere, Naraku's body was caving in on itself.

"Out, now!" He snarled, eyes bleeding red as he swept his arm at the entrance. "Soon the miasma will fill this place. Get out!" He roared. Despite looking ready to protest, Kouga ran to where Ah Un still lay and urged him up, throwing Kohaku over the saddle before hopping on, and Sango and Miroku jumped onto Kirara's back. Each took a moment to look up at the miko dangling several meters over them and calling out to her before both beasts shot forward. Sesshoumaru could feel the walls beginning to collapse, felt the cave in of the structure Naraku had turned his body into.

"What are you trying to accomplish?" Kagome snapped, buying Sesshoumaru time.

"I am poisoning the land that created me. Where my miasma falls, death will follow. I will destroy Kikyou's village and wipe her history from the face of the earth!" He finished in a snarl. Not that Kagome could even see him snarl anymore, his face lost to darkness so absolute, finding any distinctive lines impossible in the dim light.

"Is that what this is still about? Kikyou? God, you're worse than a teenage girl. So she didn't love you, and the jewel couldn't make her love you. Nothing could. You can't force love, it just happens. Has the jewel brought yo any happiness?" Kagome demanded. "Did it grant your wish the first time? Has it this time? Why are you doing this to yourself?" She cried out.

She felt him staring at her, though she couldn't see eyes. But the distraction was enough. The blast felt like heat coursing over her. Energy swelled and crashed. The sword thrummed in her grip, a cool bubble enveloping her, protecting her from the blast. Appendages around her loosened and Naraku howled in rage as she fell, the tentacles crumbling from Bakusaiga's touch. Sighing in relief as Sesshoumaru caught her, she looked up at him, still confused by his earlier words.

"What is the second line of defense, you never told me," She asked, her blue eyes locked on his red ones.

"Finding protection," He answered, accepting Tenseiga and sliding it back into his sash. "I will give everything I have, add yours, throw it back at him," He commanded. Before she could even reply she felt his strength swelling and rolling around her. The wind began as a whistle and exploded in a roar as she watched, awestruck by the massive energy gathering around them.

Refusing to let his efforts be in vain, she quickly began pulling her own power, focusing it to avoid harming Sesshoumaru, and began trying to weave his and hers together. At first the power wanted to just explode from her fingertips, like an unruly child that wanted free. She sternly 'commanded' it to
obey her will, and began weaving the two powers together. When it still refused to obey, she cried out in frustration.

Naraku's own blast of power was hurtling towards them.

"Contain it," Sesshoumaru commanded into her ear. "We will do this," His voice was stern and authoritative, leaving no room for doubt.

She felt more than saw his presence as his own will began to bolster hers. His power, seemingly impervious to her command, began to obey and twine with hers. She looked up to see the darkness flying at them and braced herself, surprised to feel Sesshoumaru at her back. His arms came up around her, his kimono sleeves pushed back by the force of the winds around them. Like two pale shadows, they echoed her own position and she felt him forcing even more of his ki out.

Naraku's jyaki hit, forcefully slamming into the light they were holding before them. Like a small sun, it absorbed the darkness and grew even larger. Kagome clenched her eyes shut, blinded by the brilliance of it. Instead she tried to 'see' with her other senses. Sesshoumaru was there with her, and for a moment she felt as if she was back in his core. Confidence suffused her being and more of her ki flowed into her hands. She instinctively felt it when their reserves were drained, and by that time it felt as if they were holding a star suspended between their hands.

"Now!" She shouted, barely recognizing her voice. She felt his own strength behind her own, throwing their combined efforts at the suspended torso on the platform. She watched their powers hurtle, as if in slow motion, watched them merge completely, surprise shocking through her as the energy combined and doubled.

The star burst, bathing the area in light. Instead of dissipating, the light seemed to expand. Kagome opened her eyes, squinting at their target.

"Take me up there," She demanded. Sesshoumaru's arms wrapped around her waist and he lifted her into the air, flying unsteadily. The light was at it's brightest in the center of the nova, and once more closing her eyes, she let the tugging of the jewel guide her. Shuddering as her fingers came into contact with ash, she dug through the powdery remains, realizing with a sick feeling that it had been where Naraku's heart was. Her fist closed around the jewel and she tugged it out quickly, transferring it to the other and wiping the dust onto her hakama.

"Let's go!" She shouted, flinching guiltily when he jerked his head as if to further his ears from her mouth. The light was still spreading, but noise of Naraku's body caving in only grew worse. Kagome was thankful to note that wherever the light touched, miasma was purified.

They wove in and out of the falling walls and avoided the rain of ash that kept gaining on them as they searched for an exit.

"Bakusaiga," She rasped, the dust settling into her throat. Nausea rolled through her and she tried not to think about eating the charred remains of the former hanyou.

He unsheathed the sword and fell into a steep dive, and once more she allowed a surprised gasp to escape at the cavern floor rose up to meet them. For a moment she wondered why he was aiming down instead of the side and realized that he was taking the easiest way out.

He slashed in a mad frenzy as Naraku's husk was falling apart around them. Sometimes a wall narrowly missed them as she held on tightly.

"Almost there," He snarled, but Kagome could hear fatigue creeping into his voice.
"We'll make it," She assured him, knowing he'd sneer in any other set of circumstances. "You still have to lecture me about what a pack is," She added, trying to project a sense of mirth only to end up sounding sarcastic.

"If that was meant to motivate me, it failed," He snapped. "Perhaps you should try mentioning something this Sesshoumaru would look forward to," He finished. Kagome wondered for several minutes if the daiyoukai had managed to make a joke. A cutting, sarcastic joke, but a joke. Or maybe he was being completely serious and his almost deadpan delivery is what made it funny.

"A warm bath?" She offered. "Decent food?" A snort was her answer. "I know. Rin. The children." He didn't answer, but she felt him begin moving faster, his swings stronger as he tunneled down through the remains of their former enemy.

When she saw the last layer clear beneath his blade, she swore to herself then that dirt and grass were miracles, and that she'd treasure that vision and the smell of fresh air for the rest of her life. A second later however, she was screaming shrilly as the ground rose up to meet them.

"I thought you wanted to experience flight at a time when you could enjoy it," He drawled before he touched down.

"You are a jerk!" She muttered angrily, glad she had screamed in his ear again. She quickly stuffed the jewel into the pocket sewn into her sleeves before she decided throwing something at the daiyoukai was a good idea.

"And you are a loudmouthed, coarse human," He retorted as he rubbed his ear gingerly. "Better than some stuck up youkai," She snapped. He merely glared and began walking.

"Where are you going?" She demanded.

"Naraku is dead. You have the jewel. It is time to fetch your pup and return to the shiro," He replied. Kagome stopped, hands balled into fists on her hips and she began tapping her foot angrily.

"Even you look like you're about to fall over. Now that Naraku is gone, I want to go see my mother. I want to rest before going back!" She proclaimed.

Several minutes passed in complete silence, blue eyes warring with red that was quickly shifting to gold.

"As you say," He growled, stalking towards the village, completely ignoring the light in the sky that was finally fading, ash falling in its wake.

"Jerk," She muttered as she ran to catch up. Once at his side, she matched his sedate pace with her own. After several minutes the huts of the village came into view, and there was one startled shout followed by several. Then a stampede was headed at them.

And heading it were several children the Kagome recognized, and only one that was supposed to be in the village.

"What are you guys doing here?" She asked, surprise coloring her voice.

"When that lady took Shippou without you, we knew something was wrong, so we followed. Didn't take long, but we've been hiding in the forest, waiting. Shippou found us," Tegatai told them, beaming. "He told us what was going on. We got here the day after you left," He added. "Zurui was hiding us, but Shippou, he knew."
"Rin is very sorry, but Sango stole Shippou! He didn't want to go, and you told me pack always comes first!" Rin insisted when Sesshoumaru's hard eyes fell to her.

"It seems," He almost sighed, "That I must explain pack to all of you." Kagome giggled, picking Shippou up and hugged him tightly. She saw the hopeful looks of the other children and dropped to her knees, laughing as they all surrounded her.

The rest of the village came scant minutes later, walking at a more sedate pace. Kagome noticed Miroku's finger was in a splint, and his whole hand immobilized. Sango and Kohaku were walking side by side, Sango's arm thrown over Kohaku's shoulder.

"How?" Kagome asked, staring at the living, breathing teenager.

"Kikyou. When Magatsuhi tainted my shard, Naraku just kept laughing. When he finally took the shard, I felt cold. Then Kikyou, I heard her voice, felt her around me," He said, eyes shining with sudden tears. Kagome gulped convulsively, nodding in understanding.

"How did you two, I mean, that was, it felt like both of you, but-" Miroku said, nodding to the ash covered fields.

"Don't know, don't really care right now," She laughed, standing and allowing her hands to be gripped by Shippou and Zurui. Rin had long since run to Sesshoumaru and grabbed his. Biting back any comment about the strangeness of the gesture, she watched him tugged insistently toward the village, and allowed herself to be led as well.

So this marks the end of the Naraku arc. Only...29 chapters left to go. Think you guys can wait that long for the happy ending? (Because there is one, promise.)

Reviews make awesome birthday present...hinthint. xp

Happy Thanksgiving to those that celebrate it!
"I need to go home, see my mother. She needs to know why I've been gone for so long, and I need to tell her I have to stay here," Kagome murmured as everyone crowded into Kaede's hut. Kouga's side had been seen to, the stinging scent of an herb poultice wafting from the bandages covering it. Two families had offered up their huts for the children to sleep in, and seeing as how they'd traveled hard, they'd all been fed and put to sleep. It hadn't been difficult to persuade them. Warm food and even warmer blankets had done most of the job for Kagome and Sesshoumaru.

But now she faced other problems. The jewel had purified under her touch, once more a perfect pink orb, but it was still in existence. She remembered her grandfather's comments about the right wish and wanted to go ask him if he had any clue about what it could be.

"I'm afraid that will be impossible child," Kaede sighed as she began handing out cups of tea. Kagome accepted one gratefully, letting it warm her hands.

"Why?" She demanded.

"The well vanished," Sango replied bluntly.

"What?" The cup dropped from her hand and hot tea spilled onto her clothing, scalding her as it seeped past the fabric.

"Aye. I was hoping to break the news more gently," The old miko said with a glare directed at Sango. "But it did. Mayhap that was his wish."

"He knew about the well?"

"He knew," Kohaku mumbled from his place close to the fire. "He didn't know how it worked, he tried once, going through it. It didn't work."

"So, I can't go home," Kagome said dully, staring at the tea stain on her kimono. Even knowing it should hurt, she felt nothing on her leg, merely saw the darkening of the red fabric.

"You can come live with us," Miroku offered.
"No, she belongs with the litter, they're hers now. And I heard the slayer talking, you're rebuilding the exterminator village. Youkai and hanyou don't belong in that sort of place," Kouga cut in before Kagome could reply.

"She will stay at the shiro, should she desire it."

Everyone stared dumbly at the daiyoukai, jaws slack with disbelief.

"You'd let me stay?" Kagome squawked, then shook herself, blushing with embarrassment. "Why?"

She demanded next.

"You guard the jewel. Until you are able to figure out the 'right wish' as you called it, it will need to remain safe. There is nowhere safer. And the children will need you."

"Your home, safe?" Sango demanded, voice dripping with sarcasm. "Yeah, let's just leave it sitting in a den of youkai, with one of the most powerful daiyoukai that just happens to hate everyone."

"Sango!" Miroku rebutted, staring at her as if he'd never seen her before. "Sesshoumaru-sama can be trusted. He saved my life, not to mention Kouga's and Kagome's. Even yours," He admonished.

"He's a youkai. Eventually the jewel will get to him and he'll try to use it," She snapped, glaring hotly at the monk, his defense of the daiyoukai only serving to further enrage her.

"The miko will be able to defend it. She is powerful, for a human," He added.

"See?" Miroku demanded as Kouga began laughing wildly.

"What's his problem?" Sango demanded, feeling as if she was being mocked by the wolf's laughter.

"The brew I gave him might make him act a bit-off," Kaede offered tentatively. "Or perhaps he has fallen into a fever."

"He just admitted that Kagome could take him on!" Kouga crowed, eyes bright. Sesshoumaru sent a withering glare in the wolf's direction before turning back to his tea.

"I think Kouga needs to sleep," Kagome ventured, staring at the still laughing youkai.

"The jewel was in my village's care before it was given to Kikyo. I think it should be returned," Sango shot at the miko. Kagome stilled and looked at the friend that had become a stranger.

"No."

"You have no right!" Sango began, moving to stand. She stopped suddenly, realizing that a blade, flashing dangerously in the light of the fire, was posed less than an inch from her face. Looking past the blade and into the cold, almost feral eyes of the daiyoukai, she involuntarily shifted away, her insides turning to jelly.

"I was born with the jewel in me. I've traveled all over Japan trying to set a mistake right. Three years. Everyone else was looking for revenge. I just wanted to put the jewel back together and figure out how to get rid of it. Three years away from home, and now I can't even go back to say goodbye. Inu Yasha died because of this stupid thing. Many, many people have died for it. I'm the only one any of us know of that can purify it. I think we've moved past who has the right to," Kagome said, anger flavoring her words no matter how hard she tried to control it.

"I accept your offer, Sesshoumaru," She said several minutes later. Sango stalked from the hut
angrily, not even bothering to put on any sort of jacket. Kagome slumped, wondering why she let her mouth run away with her. Again.

"I can never do anything right, I just seem to make her even more angry," She moaned, burying her face in her hands.

"She's still out of sorts about youkai," Miroku tried to explain. "And she wants you with us. I know that she realizes an exterminator village won't be a place for Shippou to grow up. But it's been hard for her, more so than the rest of us," He sighed, then paused, searching for words. "I lost my father, I've had years to cope with it, she-"

"She's had three years. I just lost my family, isn't she thinking about that?" Kagome demanded, her voice wavering as tears threatened.

"No, because to her we've been your family for three years, Kagome," Miroku said gently.

"She'll come around. I'll talk to her," Kohaku said, startling all of them. "Sesshoumaru-sama did a lot to help me, and he's been good to Rin, not to mention all those other kids. And the jewel needs to be somewhere safe, so nothing like what happened to my family is able to happen again. Between Kagome and Sesshoumaru-sama, it'll be protected from evil people like Naraku."

He said it with such conviction that it shook Kagome. Would the jewel really be safe? She couldn't even think of the right wish. Didn't that mean that she was unfit to guard it?

"I agree with Kohaku. We'll talk to Sango," Miroku stated. "And thank you Sesshoumaru-sama, for taking care of our friend."

"She is pack," Sesshoumaru stated simply.

"You know, you still haven't told me what that means," Kagome said impishly, trying to forget Sango's anger and the sudden loss of her home. She refused to break down in front of everyone. Naraku was gone, the jewel was whole, and the world was safe. Everyone had reasons to be happy, and more than anyone, the people seated around the fire deserved it.

"I will explain when we get back to the shiro," He rumbled, sparing her a glance from the corner of his eye. She laughed.

"So, when are you and Sango going to get married?" Kagome asked cheerfully, forcing a bright smile.

"After the village is built," Miroku responded, slightly off kilter by the sudden subject change.

"Wow. I didn't think you guys would want to wait after all this," Kagome said, waving her hand in a general manner.

"We've waited three years. A few more months won't matter. Besides, by then she'll be cooled down enough that you and Shippou can come. Sesshoumaru-sama is invited as well."

"This Sesshoumaru will be unable to make it," He intoned.

"Sesshoumaru!" Kagome gasped, mortified at his rudeness.

"It's alright Kagome," Miroku laughed, waving the daiyoukai's refusal off with his good hand. "It's going to be held in a village of demon exterminators. Even after Sango finally comes around, I know there will be others that will find his presence, well, uncomfortable. Besides, someone has to stay
home and watch all those kids," He joked.

"Oh kami!" Kagome gasped.

"Hnn?" Sesshoumaru wondered aloud, seeing the sudden panic on her face and feeling her aura spike.

"Jaken and Tenka, they must be freaking out! Jaken's probably committed seppeku by now!"

"Calm yourself. Tenka no doubt realized what happened. We will speak to them both when they arrive."

"Well, it's not really their fault though, is it? I mean, Zurui can do that hiding thing and Tenka and Jaken don't have your ability to just know when someone is there or isn't. And they were determined to get Shippou back," She finished.

"They were left responsible for the children. That the taijiya was able to take Shippou is more than enough to warrant punishment."

"Actually Sesshoumaru-sama, Sango lied to them. She admitted it to me after we had arrived here. It seems she convinced both of them that Kagome's, ah, experiences with males had caused her to break ties with you, and was uncertain about gathering Shippou herself," Miroku volunteered, blushing heavily.

"They were given the role of protecting Shippou and the others. They made a mistake, one they shall not be making again," Sesshoumaru replied blandly, although Kagome could see the fury simmering in his golden eyes.

"Enough about that tonight guys. We'll deal with everything when it happens, okay?" Kagome murmured. Miroku nodded gratefully, and Sesshoumaru blinked slowly in acceptance.

"Well, that being said, I need some air before I hit the hay," She said as she stood and stretched. Walking to the entrance, she donned her jacket and boots and walked into the snow, delighting in the crunching noise beneath her feet. The moon shone down, reflecting off of the white surface and lighting up the area.

Her feet took her to the clearing, as she had known they would. There was only snow where the well had been, a blank canvas in the dark night. Tears started to gather, and she walked the path to the god tree. Her fingers brushed over the scar in the bark where Inu Yasha had once been pinned, and she allowed herself to remember first seeing him. The texture of his ears beneath her fingers, his gold eyes flashing open to glare at her.

"I miss you so much," She whispered brokenly, her legs collapsing. Heedless of the pain in her knees when they hit the ground and of the cold snow pressing into her skin and melting slowly from her body heat, she felt the sob before she heard it.

"I don't know how to live without you. I don't know what I'm supposed to do now that Naraku's gone. There's no one left to fight, nothing left," She whimpered through her tears. "I don't know how to be a mother, or even how to be in someone else's pack. Nothing makes sense!" Her words grew in volume as she slammed her fists against the bark of the tree, ending in a yell. "I just wanted us to be happy! I wanted to tell my mom we won and to be here with you! I'm so stupid! Stupid, stupid!" She shouted into the clearing, the words echoing in the night.

She didn't know how long she stayed that way. She cried and screamed until her throat was raw, bitterness seeping out as she purged herself of the self loathing and hatred, the loneliness and fear
she'd kept locked within for months. The torrent of tears and sobs quieted into hiccups and silent drops running down her cheeks. "I didn't think I could cry anymore than I already have. I'm scared I'll never stop," She whispered to the tree. Leaning her head against the rough bark, she reveled in the physical feel of it pressing into her flesh. "I feel like I don't have any reason to be here."

"You have the children, and the jewel," A voice calmly intoned. Kagome jerked away, turning to the source of the comment. Sesshoumaru stood, the moonlight reflecting off of his hair. "Come miko, you have been in the cold long enough," He commanded gruffly.

"I just need to be alone," She whispered, her voice raspy as it escaped her abused throat.

"You have been alone miko. But it has been almost two marks. It is time to rest," He ordered. His gaze seemed to soften, for just a moment, before it resumed it's former cold distance. "If you fall ill, the children will worry. And the kit will blame this Sesshoumaru."

"Why would he do that?" She sniffled, standing anyway.

"Because he understand pack. As alpha, it is my duty to make sure you come to no harm, even if it is from yourself."

"Seems silly," She sighed as she began the walk toward the village.

"You once said you wanted to be protected from humans. You are human, are you not?" He reasoned. Kagome threw her hands up in frustration.

"I will never understand inu," She muttered.

"I will never understand ningen," He retorted as they walked together, side by side, into the village. By the time she got back to the hut, Miroku and Sango were both asleep, and Kaede was nodding off as she leaned against the wall, allowing herself to drift in the warmth of the fire.

"Can I sleep with the children tonight?" She asked.

"It is your decision. But first, you will remove those clothes," He stated baldly. He barely had the chance to react as her hand swung out, her ki gathering into her palm as she screamed.

"Hentai!"

He caught her wrist and glared down at her angrily. Her eyes shifted over to Sango and Miroku, who slept so deeply they didn't even move. Kouga, drugged as he was, shifted noisily and snored twice before quieting. Kaede watched, eye crinkled as if she knew a joke no one else quite understood.

"Not in front of me, woman. But you will get sick if you sleep in soaked clothes. Change," He snapped before stalking from the hut.

"Ye both make an interesting pair. A miko and a daiyoukai in a pack together. Methinks the world will be telling stories of you for centuries to come," The old woman chuckled as Kagome went to her pack and pulled dry clothes out.

"If we manage to survive it. Although I'm sure if we manage to kill each other they'll tell stories about that too," She muttered as she tied the dry kimono and pulled the hakama up and tucked the robe in.

"Perhaps. There has never been such a pack in even youkai memory. Who can say what will happen?" The woman shrugged before allowing her eyes to close again. Kagome huffed indignantly
before exiting the hut.

"It is amazing what children can accomplish," Sesshoumaru murmured, shifting Kagome's mind from her anger to curiosity.

"What do you mean?" She asked.

"Two families gave up their huts since there were so many. One hut is empty."

"Oh, they didn't, did they?" Kagome asked, rushing through the village to the neighboring huts that had been offered. The first was completely empty, and all of the blankets and pallets were missing. She moved away and pulled the pelts on the door to the side and almost burst into laughter.

The floor was covered in a tangle of bodies. Barely a space was left free as children cuddled and sprawled all over each other. A chorus of small snores seemed to rise and fall in unison, and she could barely make out the outline of any one distinct form.

"That's the cutest thing I've ever seen," She breathed, staring down at all of them.

"They are your reason, more than anything else miko. Now go to sleep," Sesshoumaru commanded gently. Surprised by his tone more than anything else, she obeyed, toeing off her boots and finding a place among the dog pile of children. A blanket dropped on her and she looked up in askance, realizing that Sesshoumaru had provided it.

"From the old woman. She did not think there would be any to spare here," He explained before finding a clear spot next to a wall and folding his legs gracefully. Kagome nodded, dumbfounded by his shift in attitude, and tucked the blanket around herself. Quickly warmed by both the blanket and the press of bodies, which seemed to gravitate to her instinctively, she closed her eyes, and exhausted, fell asleep.

"Now, promise me you'll all be good for Tenka and Jaken this time," Kagome lectured as she stared down at the children, hands fisted on her hips.

"Only if that woman doesn't come and steal anyone else," Zurui shot back, throwing a dark glance in the taijiya's direction. Sango was standing several feet away, but could easily hear the remark. Already sullen, the slayer's face grew even more grim, if it were possible.

"Zurui, nothing like that will happen ever again. But the others look up to you, Tegatai, Rin and Shippou. All of you need to set good examples for them until Sesshoumaru and I get back," Kagome chided gently.

"Why aren't you coming back with us?" Shippou asked, his own face as grim as Sango's.

"Sesshoumaru and I have to go speak with a few of his men," Kagome began.

"But he doesn't need you for that," Shippou insisted. Kagome sighed. It would be the second time they were having this argument in as many hours.

"Shippou, Sesshoumaru says I need to make my presence known, whatever that means, and for them to know I trust his protection."

"Pup," Sesshoumaru cut in as he stepped closer to the gaggle of children. "There are those I would have acknowledge your mother's place in my pack without delay."
"Why? Why can't they do it when they get back?" The kitsune grumped, crossing his arms stubbornly.

"It is only a few, those who I count as my most trusted. They will swear to honor and protect your mother. In doing so, none may say a word against her."

"Why would they? She killed Naraku and she has the jewel," Shippou insisted.

"Because she is a miko. I rule my lands, but there are those that would doubt her place in my pack and in my court. This Sesshoumaru aims to circumvent that," He told the child sagely. Kagome nodded, only realizing the wisdom in the situation as he explained it. Youkai would be antsy around her, and if Sesshoumaru's men accepted her, then that would take care of half the problem, and it would slow down anyone in court that tried to naysay her.

"I guess," The fox mumbled, looking down to the ground. "I still think it's stupid that you guys have to do it though." Sesshoumaru only inclined his head in agreement before moving back. Tenka's cloud somehow managed to support all of them, although Kagome didn't want to think about the amount of energy the youkai was expending.

Everyone waved cheerily as they took off, and Kagome jumped and waved from her spot on the ground, calling out to them until they were out of sight.

"Thanks for that," She commented, smiling brightly at Sesshoumaru. "He's still worried, you know?"

"The child has lost much to the war against Naraku. He handles it well for one so young," Sesshoumaru replied as she pulled herself atop Ah Un, who had been waiting patiently.

"Still, you didn't have to, and you did. Thank you."

Miroku and Kaede walked over to them, both wearing small smiles. Kouga shuffled behind, still slightly dazed from the herbal tea Kaede was brewing for him every few hours.

"When he regains some sense of himself, make sure he knows to come to the shiro after seeing to his clan. There is much to discuss," Sesshoumaru commanded. Kaede nodded, glancing at the slightly listing wolf and grinning.

"Kagome," Kouga slurred, eyes bright. "I know I said I'd make you my woman, but I think I need to mate Ayame. The clans-" He said in a half garbled voice.

"It's alright Kouga, do what you must for the clans. But you better invite me to the ceremony," She said impishly, trying to hide her grin. He was trying to hard to be serious, and his fierce concentration did nothing but make the situation even more hilarious to her.

"M'kay," He sighed, moving to walk away and succeeding at weaving dangerously through the village.

"We'll send word to the shiro when we've chosen a location for the village. Sango was thinking about rebuilding the old one, but isn't sure if it would be good for Kohaku to be there," Miroku told her, coming forward and taking her hand in his. "But I'll write, and soon everything will right itself. Don't worry," He assured her. Kagome nodded, smiling even though she felt like crying again. Sango hadn't even approached, staring reproachfully from her spot near the hut.

"Be well child. Take the time to grieve, but not too long," Kaede told her, smiling softly. "As the monk said, all will right itself in time."
"Thanks Kaede."

"We must be off," Sesshoumaru broke in. Kagome nodded as Miroku and Kaede stepped back, watching as they lifted into the sky. Sango watched them for a moment before settling her gaze on Sango, who in turn watched her.

"Do you think she'll come around?" Kagome asked softly, not really expecting an answer. When none was forthcoming, she glanced to Sesshoumaru.

"Okay. Well, how about that lecture on being pack and what pack is," She started. His eyes flicked to her for a moment before moving forward again, and she could almost hear the inaudible, invisible, but nonetheless felt, heaving sigh. She imagined for a moment he shrugged mentally and giggled.

"Packs are similar to a human family. In theory, humans do not abandon their family, harm their children, etcetera, but they do. In packs, for the youkai that are instinctively inclined for such a group, it is much more difficult to abandon, neglect, or harm someone else within it.

"Every pack has an alpha," He went on to explain. "In our pack, it is this Sesshoumaru. The alpha is responsible for all others within the pack. I am charged with protecting you and the children, and making sure you are healthy and safe."

"So essentially you're like the father of everyone."

"Never refer to me as your father, miko."

"Touchy," She muttered, rolling her eyes. "But you're in charge, and everyone has to listen to you. You in turn, protect everyone and make sure we survive."

"Essentially."

"I didn't really need that explained to me," She sighed, leaning forward to run her fingers through Ah and Un's twining manes.

"You know what pack is, but you do not yet understand," He told her, still staring forward imperiously, as if talking to air.

"Well, I'm not youkai. I'm a human. I have family. Shippou is my family, and Rin and all the others. You too, although it's really weird to put it that way," She admitted. "I used to think of you as being a future brother in law, one I'd never really see. You hated Inu Yasha so much, so it always seemed like a moot point. But calling you family now doesn't quite fit either," She admitted.

"Because I am your alpha. Human terms are vague at best."

"Because pack is so much more specific," She retorted in a voice dripping with sarcasm as she rolled her eyes.

"As I said, you know, but you do not yet understand."

She stuck her tongue out at him, hoping he could see it. When he refused to react, she sighed and went back to braiding the dragon's mane.

The camp came into view later in the day, and Kagome's stomach was rumbling ominously, demanding some sort of sustenance. As they landed, she moved from the saddle, thankful that she'd gotten used to the damnable thing so quickly.
"Sesshoumaru!" A voice boomed into the chill air. "Didn't expect it to take you this long," Shinzuru called, his smile so big it almost forced his one good eye completely closed. "And the miko managed to survive," He laughed, coming up to them and chuckling at Kagome, who was doing a remarkable imitation of a cat bristling despite not having any fur.

"Come, we must speak," Sesshoumaru commanded, ignoring the stares bearing down on him. Shinzuru only chuckled as they walked to the akunoya. Kagome had hoped not to bring any more attention to herself than was already being paid by the bandits around her, but Shinzuru's chuckle returned to a full roaring laugh when her stomach growled once more.

"Oi, one of you have lunch brought to my tent!" He called out to the gawking men. Kagome flushed as he winked his eye at her and murmured a polite thank you.

Once in the tent, Kagome knelt next to Sesshoumaru, who folded his legs beneath himself carefully.

"So what's this about then? I already know what to pay those louts out there, and they'll be on their way once that's done," Shinzuru said. "And you don't really do social calls."

"I require your aid."

"Whatever you ask, if it is within my ability, will be done," The normally mirthful youkai responded seriously.

"The miko is currently protecting the shikon jewel. She will be staying within the shiro as one of this Sesshoumaru's pack, so that it may be better protected." Shinzuru let out a low whistle, his forehead crinkling with concern.

"There'll be a few with words about that," He said. "No offense, but youkai and the holy people don't mix well, like fire and water," He added with an apologetic glance at Kagome.

"It's alright, I understand," She sighed, looking at the pelts covering the ground.

"I aim to build support, in a sense. If you would swear loyalty to her," Sesshoumaru started. Kagome was startled when he allowed himself to be interrupted.

"I see the way of it. Well, I swore myself into your service long ago, and if she's one of your pack, then she already has my loyalty and protection," He answered. "Kinda strange, protecting a miko, especially one that's strong enough to kill off someone like that bastard Naraku."

"All that is required is your oath," Sesshoumaru stated, his eyes carefully blank and his tone neutral. Kagome moved back as Shinzuru moved over to her and knelt, bowing his head to the ground.

"This isn't necessary," She started, only to have Sesshoumaru put up his hand to stop her flustered babbling.

"I, Shinzuru, swear loyalty to you. You have my blade, and my life," He intoned, rising from his position with a grin.

"This is just weird. I never wanted people swearing themselves to me," Kagome sighed. "But thank you for your help," She added with a bright smile.

"I'll always do what I can. Sesshoumaru is one of the best, and if you've managed to become pack, well, you can't be anything to sneeze at either. Besides, I don't hold with some of those in his court, and it'll be fun to twitch a few tails."
"You must have been a kitsune in another life," Kagome laughed. Then the smell of food wafted in as the tent flaps were pulled back and as before, two servants filed in, each with a tray. Bowls were sat on the low table and the tea pot was placed with care before they silently filed out.

"Thank you," Kagome called, unused to such silent servitude.

"Who else did you have in mind for this little plan of yours?" Shinzuru asked.

"Kasai and Mizu. Urame would have been ideal, but you said he was killed."

"Those twins will do it if for no other reason than to watch the chaos that will ensue, but they're good boys, I trust 'em. Have you thought about Resshin?" When Sesshoumaru shook his head, the red haired moth demon continued. "He's a good choice, despite his history. Heard he's been courting a human too. Kato is the only other one I can think of, at least in the area. You should be able to hit all of them within a few days if you take it fast."

"Thank you," Kagome gushed, staring in awe at the demon, who turned and inclined his head respectfully.

"Sesshoumaru is worth every bit of loyalty he asks, and a good deal more. The youkai I named would do anything for him, and by extension, you. Now, I don't think anybody'll see it coming, especially not since I didn't think I'd take a vow like that until he found himself a mate, but the world works in strange ways," He shrugged, seriousness fading back into his normal cheerful demeanor.

"I will say this though, you should probably find her some better duds before presenting her to those preening birds at court. If she shows up in miko robes when you're trying to introduce her as pack, they'll talk."

"Let them. I won't pretend to be something I'm not," Kagome shot out hotly. "I'm not some fine lady, I'm a miko. If I pretend otherwise, they'll be twice as bad."

"She is correct," Sesshoumaru added. Kagome relaxed at his defense of her. She didn't want to wear layers and layers of kimono, nor did she want to submit to the make up of the era. She hadn't even liked the makeup of her era!

"Fair enough. You two staying in the camp tonight?"

"No, we must be on our way."

Kagome wanted to groan, instead settling for eating quickly and gratefully sipping her tea. Shinzuru and Sesshoumaru mapped out locations, guesstimating since the camps, despite having a set area, moved around within that area.

"Take care miko," Shinzuru said as they stood and made to exit.

"You too. And thank you again," She smiled, trying not to show her dread of the coming meetings. Despite the youkai's assurances, she wasn't sure she could deal with the strange formality of the oaths, especially from people she was meeting for the first time.

"You'll get on fine with the twins, kitsune they are. World traveled about you adopting that fox kit, and it'll only do you good with them. Resshin, if rumors can be believed, loves a human woman, so the only trouble with him will be getting him to see past you being a miko. Kato, well, he's a good warrior and loyal to a fault. He'll do as Sesshoumaru asks and never think of backing down," He assured her.
"Why are you being so nice to me?" She asked baldly, trying to figure out the youkai standing before her. The past several months had proven only too well that most people were not kind, especially for no reason.

"I saw you last time. Looked like a half drowned cat, and that's a fact. But you stuck with Sesshoumaru, and I've known him since he was a pup, served his father. He's not an easy one to get along with. You stuck through it and fought Naraku on top of it all. Either you're crazy or you've got gumption to spare, and I admire that in a youkai. Might as well admire it in a miko," He laughed. Kagome blushed and nodded before exiting the akunoya.

"Shinzuru is one I trust a great deal," Sesshoumaru stated as she pulled herself onto Ah Un's saddle.

"I think I can see why," She answered as they began their take off.

Nighttime brought them to the twin's camp, although the noises coming from the circle of tents and fires was not in keeping with the atmosphere she expected. Music and laughter rang out into the night, and she recognized some of the noises as bawdy songs. When they landed, she moved cautiously from Ah Un, feeling the weight of the men staring at her, their interest sharpening.

"Sesshoumaru!" A voice called out. Kagome recognized the youkai strolling toward them as a kitsune, his shock red hair in a high ponytail and green eyes shimmering with laughter. "Just in time, we've been celebrating Naraku's sudden demise! Everybody, this is the great inu daiyoukai Sesshoumaru!" He called, and Kagome realized he seemed a little drunk.

"Kasai, stop being so rude," Another kitsune called from the fire as he stood and strode over to them. "I'm sorry Lord Sesshoumaru, he's been indulging in some of our father's brew to celebrate." Kagome saw that his hair was braided, hanging down his back heavily. His eyes too were green, flashing with impatience.

"It is alright. Come, we have something of import to discuss. You too Kasai," Sesshoumaru rumbled. Kagome followed the one she assumed was Mizu, whose braid swayed as he walked. She focused on that instead of the bandits leering at her drunkenly. Her skin was crawling and she felt panic swelling in her chest, forcing her heartbeat to double as her breaths came in short pants.

"Miko, are you alright?" Sesshoumaru asked, stopping to stare at her, eyebrow arched.

"It's nothing," She mumbled, looking to the ground. By now the twins had stopped and all she wanted to do was get in their akunoya and away from the eyes of the drunken revelers.

"Your powers are sparking. Do you sense a threat?" He demanded.

"No, it's just, I mean," She struggled helplessly, not wanting to admit that she was afraid of the human men still watching her closely. Gesturing towards them faintly, hoping he would understand, she shrugged.

"I see. Come," He commanded, moving closer to her. His presence shouldn't have helped, but it did, and her heartbeat eased somewhat as they walked at a quick clip to the tent in the center of the camp. Once inside the confines of the tent, she felt her fear ease and kneeled gratefully next to Sesshoumaru.

"So what's with the priestess?" Kasai asked. Kagome eyed him warily, wondering how he would react to the request for an oath while he was drunk.

"This is the miko that guards the shikon jewel. She aided this Sesshoumaru against Naraku."
"Still doesn't explain why she's here," The tipsy kitsune blurted.

"Kasai, stop babbling! Once again Sesshoumaru-sama, my apologies," Mizu sighed as he glanced back at Sesshoumaru. His gaze darted to Kagome and she knew he too wondered at her presence, but was polite enough to wait.

"She is guarding the jewel, and I have chosen to bring her into my pack to aid in that protection. Another situation such as with Naraku would be unfortunate, and she has agreed that the protection of both miko and youkai would best prevent that."

"A wise decision, if a bit strange, if you don't mind me saying so," Mizu answered, gazing at Kagome thoughtfully. "And you want us to give our support of her position, is that correct?"

"It is as you say," Sesshoumaru answered.

"That silly cat's going to go into seizures when he finds out," Kasai chuckled, his eyes filled with eager delight. "You, what's your name?"

"Kagome," She answered, trying to remain unfazed by his rudeness. The slurring helped.

"Well, rumor has it that you adopted a kit, been raising him as your own. That right?"

"Kasai!"

"No, it's alright," Kagome interrupted the rant before it began. "I have. His name's Shippou. He was orphaned three years ago. He tried to steal some of the shikon shards to avenge his parents, and ended up coming with us. He remembers his parents, but he honors me by calling me his mother."

"Outside, your aura spiked, even I felt it. Why? I just want to know if you consider us a threat." Mizu asked, trying to explain.

"I was attacked by bandits before Sesshoumaru found me. I still get nervous around men," She replied softly.

"Human men?" When she nodded he let out a chuckle. "A miko that's comfortable with youkai but twitchy as a cat in water around humans. Well, think you're sober enough to make the oath?" Mizu asked, relaxing enough to make a joke at his twin's expense.

"I am, especially for a miko that's willing to take in a kit."

Kagome watched, embarrassed as they both bowed before her, their voices reciting the oath in unison. The gentle cadence of Mizu's tone mixed with the rougher baritone of his twin, and she found it strangely comforting. Once they shifted up, both seemed to be sharing some private joke as they moved back to the table.

"Well, I take it you two will be staying in the camp tonight?" Mizu asked. Kagome marveled at how informal they were with Sesshoumaru once they were at ease, and wondered if perhaps the daiyoukai didn't always adhere to protocol as strictly as he would have her believe.

"We are. Tomorrow we go to Resshin and Kato for their oaths."

"Have you fed the woman? Looks a bit pale to me," Kasai asked, his voice still a little louder than it should be. "Want some food Kagome?"

"That would be nice, thank you."
"I'll be back in a minute," He said, standing and listing he exited, Kagome allowed herself a laugh.

"Find something particularly funny?" Mizu asked her, eyes sharp.

"I've never seen a youkai drunk before, especially not a kitsune. But he reminds me of someone I used to travel with, and I just imagined him drunk," She explained. Sesshoumaru made an almost pained sound and she turned to him. Seeing his slightly nauseated expression, she burst into full laughter, clutching her stomach.

"The idea of Inu Yasha drunk really messes with you, doesn't it?" She asked, wiping a happy tear from the corner of her eye.

"He was graceless and clumsy enough without intoxication," He replied tersely, as if the idea still bothered him.

"He was not! You've just had centuries more practice," She replied, adding extra emphasis on centuries.

"I think she just called you old," Mizu laughed. The tent flaps opened and Kasai stumbled in carrying a tray of food in one hand and a jug and a stack of small cups in the other. Miraculously, despite listing heavily to and fro, the tray didn't spill, although Kagome could swear it came close twice in the walk from the entrance to the table.

"You two have to make a toast with us," Kasai slurred, earning a glare from Sesshoumaru and a blush from Kagome. "Naraku's dead at last, and a miko is taking a place in Sesshoumaru's pack," He said, pouring the liquid from the jug into the four cups. "If ever there was a time to toast miracles, this is it," He guffawed as he pushed the cups to them.

Kagome looked to Sesshoumaru, and he nodded, although why she couldn't fathom. They both lifted their glasses with Mizu and Kasai's, and she noticed an approving smile from both twins before Kasai called out, too loudly even for her, "To miracles!" They brought their glasses to their mouths. Expecting sake, she took a sip accordingly.

She was wrong. Sputtering harshly as the liquid burned down her throat and all the way to her stomach, she gasped for breath and coughed, feeling the after burn scorch her nostrils.

"What was that?" She demanded once she had finally quieted down. The twins were smiling broadly, and even Sesshoumaru was allowing the corners of his lips to tilt up, his eyebrow arched so-highly she knew he was laughing at her.

"Our father makes it, won't tell us the secret, not until we settle down anyway, says it gives us more incentive to visit him and ma," Kasai gasped, holding his laughter in. She saw Mizu biting the inside of his cheek and threw her hands into the air.

"Alright, let it out, I can tell you're going to burst if you don't," She muttered. They both exploded in peals of laughter, and she looked at the cup. Deciding that she had to prove to them she wasn't just some human woman, she grabbed it and took another sip, this time better prepared. The liquor still burned all the way down, but she inhaled and the burn turned to a tingling cold. Ignoring the sudden silence, she took another sip. She glanced over the edge of the cup and eyed them shrewdly. Encouraged by the stunned, almost awed looks she was receiving, she finished the cup post-haste and sat it back down, smiling warmly.

"She's going to need to lay down soon," Mizu said worriedly. Kagome turned to Sesshoumaru and once she saw the frustration in her eyes she dared speaking.
"What?" She demanded.

"That was a youkai brew. It's stronger than a human concoction."

"And? I'm fine."

"Just wait a few minutes, and the world will be spinning," Kasai suddenly snorted, still smiling as if delighted someone was going to be more intoxicated than he.

Several minutes passed, and she did feel woozy. The world was not spinning, but it was tilting to and fro quite strangely.

"This isn't so bad," She slurred. "Not as strong as some of the stuff from home. There's this one that's got enough alcohol in it that you can set it on fire. I've never tasted it though," She admitted. "Didn't seem really smart."

"On fire? Really?" Kasai asked, and Kagome could tell he was struck with an idea. "I can think of a few ways that would be very useful."

"Did you guys go through the exam?" Kagome asked suddenly, remembering Shippou's brief internship at the kitsune hotel.

"We did indeed. I take it the kit has gone?" Mizu asked.

"Yeah. He was so silly, got all of us really wound up too. Once everything's settled, he'll probably want to go back," She admitted.

"Won't be safe," Kasai cut in after he threw his glass back and emptied it. "With you being his mother, he's prime hostage material."

"I never thought about that," Kagome admitted, stung by the idea. Had taking Shippou in just exposed him to more danger?

"S'alright. Mizu and I can teach 'im!" Kasai crowed.

"Oh, that would be amazing!" She gasped, smiling brightly, darker thoughts vanishing in the drunk mist clouding her mind. "He really wants to get better with his magic, and if you two could help, that would be fantastic!" She gushed, cheeks bright and a true smile stretching so wide her cheeks hurt.

"Our pleasure," Mizu said, his cheeks flushed from either embarrassment or alcohol, which, Kagome couldn't tell. Kasai began planning all of the things he would teach the kit, and how they would implement the lessons on the citadel. Mizu chimed in occasionally, and despite their volume and tone, Kagome found herself resting her head in her hands, trying to focus on everything they were say. Every few minutes her eyes would close for a second too long and she would jerk back into wakefulness.

"I think it is time for the miko to sleep," Sesshoumaru stated. Both brothers looked form their lord to the obviously sleepy miko, then blushed madly as they stammered out apologies for their rudeness. Kagome waved it off, yawning widely while she tried to tell them it was alright. Both rushed out, calling quick good nights, and Kagome looked around the akunoya, searching for the best place to sleep.

"It was unintentional, but you won their loyalty tonight," Sesshoumaru informed her.

"How'd I do that?" She asked, yawning again. Sesshoumaru left her, and she was about to curl up
near the table, where the pelts on the floor were thickest when he came back in carrying her travel bag.

"Oh, thank you," She mumbled, listing as she accepted the pack, dropping it not two feet away from him and digging through it, pulling out her bedroll and the heavy blanket. Not even aware of his presence, she opened the bedroll and dropped onto it, pulling the blanket around her. After rolling one way and then another, the blanket was wrapped around her securely.

"Thanks Sesshoumaru," She mumbled again, already half asleep.

The next morning came bright and early, and she looked around blearily. Her actions of the night before hit her and she blushed madly, realizing how drunk she'd been in front of the youkai. Surely not impressive, especially for the twins that had taken an oath of loyalty to her. Shifting slightly, she realized that while she didn't have the massive hangover her friends had talked about, her head felt a little strange and the light filtering through the akunoya seemed a little brighter than it should be. Grumbling, she got up, stretching lazily as she did so.

And realized two things.

One, that she had an extra blanket on her. And two, that Sesshoumaru's fluff had curled up with her in the night.

"Sesshoumaru!" She snapped angrily, grabbing the pelt and stalking from the tent only to smash face first into him. Drawing back she rubbed her nose gingerly then glared up at him.

"Yes?"

"What was this doing in the tent? I thought we had this discussion before," She started, completely oblivious to the two onlookers, both of whom looked ready to burst into peals of delighted laughter.

"You were having nightmares."

"It doesn't mean I need your-this,-argh, whatever it is playing teddy bear!" She snapped hotly. "It's creepy!"

Unable to contain themselves any longer, both twins allowed a chuckle to escape, then a snort, which turned into full on cackles. Kagome stamped her foot and glared them, huffing indignantly.

"We br-brought you breakfast," Kasai chortled, and Kagome noticed for the first time that he was holding a bowl of rice mixed with what looked like vegetables and meat. She moved to snatch it from him and once it was safely in her grasp, she held the pelt out to Sesshoumaru, waiting for him to take it.

"Eat your breakfast," He snapped before turning smartly on his heel and moving toward Ah Un, who watched everything blankly, unaware of the joke he was missing.

"You know, we grew up with him. When that thing suddenly appeared, well, he caught a lot of hell for it. No one dares now. Good to see someone giving him a piece of their mind," Mizu chuckled. Kagome huffed again before escaping back into the akunoya.

She ate quickly and changed, then packed her things. The bag was heavier than she remembered it being, and once again she cursed herself for stupidly trying to prove she could drink that stupid youkai brew. Stomping back out, she approached Ah Un and saw Sesshoumaru speaking softly to the twin dragon heads, the offending fluff perched on his shoulder innocently. She remembered
Mizu's comment about the daiyoukai being teased, and flushed guiltily. Moving a lot more slowly, she approached him, noting his sudden silence.

"Look, I'm sorry I snapped. It's just, I don't like the idea that anything can just sneak up on me while I sleep and I don't even notice," She muttered, staring at the ground.

"You were drunk," He stated coolly.

"I know, and it was stupid of me in the first place. But, I mean, it's done it before, I mean, it did it, or, how does it, never mind. I'm sure I don't want to know," She muttered, feeling as if she was mangling her apology.

"It is sentient, and has it's own will, but it obeys this Sesshoumaru. You were crying out last night."

"So you sent the, whatever it is, in to cuddle with me?"

"It often calms Rin in her sleep," He informed her. Kagome sighed, moving past him to shove her bag into the saddlebag.

"I know, it's just, you can understand can't you? I can't protect myself when I'm asleep, and it just suddenly being there in the morning reenforces that," She tried to explain.

"Though I have often stated that I will protect you, I understand your fear and your anger," He admitted finally. Kagome accepted the statement for the apology it was and let herself smile. Mizu and Kasai were walking towards them, legs moving in a curious unison that made her slightly dizzy. Kasai smiled wolfishly and Mizu rolled his eyes at his brother.

"Don't forget, when we get back, we get to train the kit," Kasai reminded her.

"I look forward to it," She laughed as she boosted herself onto Ah Un's back.

"Us as well," Mizu promised. They both bowed slightly to Sesshoumaru, who wordlessly took off into the air. Ah Un followed close behind, and Kagome waved down to the two strange youkai.

"You know, this isn't that bad," She admitted. "I was worried they'd hate me but do it for you. And Shinzuru was so kind. I mean, I didn't really expect it from, well, youkai," She finished lamely, not wanting to admit that she'd never in a million years thought that Sesshoumaru would consider people like that worth trusting. What's more, the three youkai that had sworn oaths to her seemed relaxed in his presence, and friendly to boot.

"The twins and I grew up together. Their father was a friend to my own. They're-" He paused.

"Rambunctious?" She offered, thinking of their behavior, wondering how much of it had been because of alcohol and how much had been their own natural personalities.

"Kitsune," He finally said. "But of those I have known in courts and among the warriors, they are more tolerable than most."

"You can just call them friends," She offered plainly. When he said nothing, she sighed, not wanting to consign herself to silence after such a lively encounter with the twins.

"What's Resshin like?" She asked.

"Strong, quiet," Sesshoumaru answered.

"Must be mute if you're calling him quiet," She observed dryly.
"I speak when there are things worth saying," He replied dispassionately. Kagome stuck her tongue out and shifted on Ah Un, settling herself lower on his back to avoid the wind shear.

A/N: I love Shinzuru, and he sort of took up residence in my mind, and by the end he has his own little plot thread in the story. I developed a lot more than the others, and I'll admit that. The twins (we IY ficcers love our twins, don't we?) are inspired by my boyo Mana and his twin, Skoll. They are the perfect example of the day/night difference theory with twins. (FYI, you marry a twin, you get both of them. This is not as much fun as it sounds.)

Also, the well. I know it sounds confusing now. Just go with it. Trust me, it'll make sense in...well, a while. This whole story has been written, it's just editing it that's a pain, but it will make sense. Promise.

Anyway, I hope you enjoyed the chapter.
"Oh, wow," Kagome whispered. The youkai approaching flew past the boundaries of beautiful and straight into unearthly. "I never thought I'd see green hair," She hastily uttered when Sesshoumaru looked down at her quizzically. And the youkai did have green hair, long green hair that seemed to suggest vines and leaves woven through it, although the way the light hit it she wasn't sure if her eyes were playing tricks on her or not. His skin was tanned a deep bronze, and his eyes seemed to shift colors, from blue to green to brown to blue again.

"Lord Sesshoumaru," He greeted.

"Resshin," Sesshoumaru acknowledged. "This is the miko Kagome, guardian of the shikon jewel."

"I have heard the news. Congratulations on your defeat of the hanyou," He added, bowing to Kagome as he had to Sesshoumaru. Kagome blushed, uncomfortable with the formality of the gesture and that a person so ethereal was doing so to her.

"I have come to request a favor," Sesshoumaru informed him. The youkai only nodded once before turning and leading the way for them. Kagome gasped in awe as the neared the center of the camp. Unlike the others, who had resided with akunoya, in the center of the camp was a cluster of trees, all still relatively young, growing in a circle. Their branches grew close together, forming a solid canopy, and they also hung low to the ground, effectively creating a wall.

The 'wall' bent open, and Kagome almost stumbled over a tree root as she stepped into the grove.

"It's beautiful," She murmured, looking around herself in awe. The sunlight pushed through the leaves, unnaturally large and still green despite the season, and cast varying shades of light and shadows on the ground.

"It is pleasing that you think so. Please, have a seat," He said, moving to a low 'table' that looked like rock, but was unnaturally smooth and flat. A tea set already sat on it, and after opening a wooden box, he retrieved two more.

"To what do I owe the honor of your visit, my lord?" Resshin asked as he poured tea, his movements efficient but graceful.

"As I said, a favor. As you know, the miko guards the shikon jewel. In the interest of keeping it safe,
she has become part of my pack, adding my protection to her own. I have come to ask for your support and an oath of loyalty," Sesshoumaru stated bluntly. Kagome watched the dark youkai's eyes flicker between the myriad of colors, shadows that she hadn't been able to see before, suddenly nervous.

He was much more formal, and despite what Shinzuru had told her, rumors couldn't always be believed. What if he wasn't courting a human woman? Then she'd just be some human miko, sitting there while his lord demanded (however politely) that he swear his loyalty to her.

"Perhaps the lady would consider quieting her thoughts. They are-very loud," Resshin said quietly, setting his cup of tea down and staring at her directly.

"Oh kami!" She gasped, face glowing like a small sun. She felt the heat radiating off of it and buried the sign of her embarrassment in her hands, groaning. "I feel so stupid right now."

"It is quite alright, Lady Kagome. Normally I do not peruse the thoughts of others, but your worry added quite some volume to them, and I find it difficult to ignore it when someone shouts in such a manner. No fault of your own. I understand your fear, and it is well founded. I am a youkai, one of the last of my kind as a point of fact. Miko have been the bane of my race and the executioners of my specific branch of youkai."

"Oh no, I'm so sorry. Why would anyone want to harm youkai that could do this?" Kagome asked, sweeping her hand around her to encompass the whole of the grove.

"Because the forest that was once my home tested the hearts of men and youkai. If they were found wanting, they did not emerge. They burned the forest down after determining it was cursed." At Kagome's gasp of horror, he continued. "I do not find fault with all humans, or even the holy people they take direction from. I am courting a human female, and she in turn was raised by miko. There are some that still consider my kind more than dumb monsters."

"I'm glad you met someone who saw past your blood," Kagome mumbled shyly, still shocked by his revelations. That priests and priestesses had burned his home down, and he seemed so kind! How could he ever forgive them? Kagome knew she would have trouble dealing with anyone that claimed the title of monk or miko after something like that. She was still nervous around bandits!

"In my forest, we were the ones to judge men's hearts, not the wood itself, as they believed. I see to your heart now. There is much light there, but also darkness, wounds that refuse to heal. The light holds them at bay. Do you think that darkness will ever seep into the shikon jewel?"

Kagome felt strange suddenly, as if she were floating a few inches off of the ground. The world around her seemed to grow dim and fade away until there were only his eyes, flicking through colors. The colors seemed to swirl, create patterned circles.

"I won't let it," She answered honestly. "I have to protect the pack."

The dizziness stopped abruptly, and the world came back with crashing force, the sudden vivid colors almost too bright for her eyes.

"That is a good answer. Your heart, for all it's wounds, is strong and sure," He told her. He stood and came to her, getting to his knees and bowing down deeply, touching his forehead to the soft grass, barely an inch from her knees.

"You have my loyalty, miko Kagome, and through me, the loyalty of my clan. Our power and our lives are yours should you have need of them."
Flustered once more by the gesture, and the addition of his clan, which the others had not added, she murmured a small thank you, praying her face wasn't lighting up the grove, as she was sure it was.

"Now, I understand you all must hurry on to your next destination, but perhaps the lady would like to meet my future mate while I have some food brought?" He asked. Kagome smiled brightly, wondering what woman could ensnare such a youkai.

As if summoned from air, the woman stepped into the grove, smiling gently. She was not what Kagome had expected. She might be considered pretty by some, but never a beauty. Yet in her plainness, Kagome saw flashes of a stronger personality. When her eyes met Kagome's Kagome was surprised by blue eyes as vivid as her own, a reservoir of determination and strength beneath them. Understanding what the youkai saw, she stood and went to the woman and held her hands out, taking the woman's hands in her own.

"I feel like I know you," She admitted. The woman smiled and nodded.

"I feel the same. My name is Nanmei," She replied.

"I'm Kagome. It's very nice to meet you."

"And you, Lady Kagome." Kagome huffed and rolled her eyes.

"Just Kagome, please?" She begged. "I'm just a miko, not even a very good one. Just Kagome is fine," She insisted.

"Then Just Kagome," Nanmei teased, "Would you like to follow me and take a walk while we wait for lunch?"

"That would be nice." Kagome glanced over her shoulder and saw Resshin smiling gently, his gaze directed to the woman in front of her, and Sesshoumaru nodded his assent. They walked from the grove, and Kagome shivered and pulled her jacket more tightly around her.

"How does he keep it some warm in there?" Kagome muttered.

"His kind are great sorcerers, and everything that is the earth obeys their will. At least, that's what he told me the first time I asked," Nanmei said, making a funny face and letting out an exasperated sigh. "Someday perhaps, I will understand, until then, I am content to enjoy it. It's like living in a pocket of summer in winter."

"I suppose when it's summer you could always ask for some snow to keep cool," Kagome joked. The woman laughed, the sound like small bells chiming. Kagome envied her. She moved gracefully and seemed so confident and sure of herself!

"I have heard that you've traveled for weeks. Perhaps you would like a few things to supplement your own travel things," She said, moving into another small grove. Kagome was surprised to notice that the grass felt a thousand times softer and thicker in this one, and there were a few small trunks as well.

"I'm fine, we came from my friend's village the day before yesterday," She said, allowing herself to plop down on the grass and luxuriate in the feel of it cushioning her.

"Ah, but that village was not known for it's perfumes and soaps, I bet," Nanmei giggled. "And I know men, they're good with any old thing as long as they're clean," She laughed. Kagome nodded and shrugged. Nanmei opened and trunk and brought out several small bundles in oiled rice paper, each tied with twine.
"I would be honored if you would accept some as a gift. One of the miko at the shrine I grew up in is very gifted with distilling scents."

"It's a very generous offer," Kagome said, eying the packages enviously. "But Sesshoumaru's an inu youkai, I don't know if the perfumes would agitate his sense of smell," She sighed.

"These are very subtle. They haven't bothered Resshin at all, and I doubt Sesshoumaru-sama would mind. Please, they are gift," She said.

"Thank you," Kagome said, giving in and taking each bundle carefully. The scents wafting up from them, light and airy, smelled more subtle than anything from her time, and heavenly to boot.

"Now, care to tell me how a miko and a daiyoukai came to travel together? Resshin found it quite amusing, especially given Sesshoumaru's, well, history."

Kagome set the soaps down and leaned back, her palms flat in the soft grass. Cautiously giving an abridged version of her travels, only saying she'd been captured by bandits on her way to Sesshoumaru. At the end, Nanmei sighed heavily, reaching forward to put a comforting hand on Kagome's and squeezing gently.

"The kami, for whatever reason, gave you a hard path. But you have walked it, and I think you will continue to do so with strength and honor."

The words meant more to Kagome than she could really express, and instead she choked out a thanks, wanting to tear her eyes from the blue orbs so like her own and unable to, despite the tears that threatened.

"Will Resshin come back to the citadel?" Kagome asked after a moment, trying to compose herself.

"No, he prefers the forests to Sesshoumaru's home, and Sesshoumaru is kind enough to allow it."

"Oh. Well, I'll have to come visit you then," Kagome added, smiling brightly.

"I would like that very much. Even though the miko are accepting of my choice to mate Resshin, they don't fully understand, and other humans are less than, well, they don't understand either. It would be nice to have a friend who is at ease with it."

"You can't help who you love," Kagome laughed, remembering her own mother's words when she had ranted about Inu Yasha on more than one occasion. "Besides, I think if I had met him before everything happened, I might have fallen in love with him. He's gorgeous."

"He is that," Nanmei smiled. "And what he sees in me, I'll never understand."

"Hey, he's as lucky as you are, don't forget that," Kagome said sternly. Nanmei, startled for a moment by the sincerity of the miko's words, stared at her, flummoxed, then laughed.

"Come, the food should be ready by now, and the men have had more than enough time to be men. Is there anything else you needed before you head out? A smaller jacket perhaps?"

"No, this one is more than fine, but thank you," She added. "Besides, after we visit Kato we'll be going back to the shiro."

They left the lush grove behind them and exited back into the cold, hurrying and laughing jovially as they stumbled, breathless into the circle of trees the men were sitting in, a meal laid out on the table before them.
"It is good to see you both getting on so well," Resshin laughed as Kagome and Nanmei moved to sit. "Ah, Nanmei must like you very much, to gift you with those," He added as Kagome sat the soaps in a small stack near the table.

"She's very kind," Kagome demurred, smiling at the woman sitting across from her, who winked impishly.

"I insisted she have something more than the plain soaps you males seem to think works for everyone. The fairer sex should pamper their skin, especially one who has been on the road for weeks now," She replied haughtily before bursting into a small fit of giggles.

Kagome glanced a quick peek at Sesshoumaru, who stared stoically ahead, refusing to acknowledge the onna's words.

"I think perhaps it is time to eat," Resshin reminded them genially. Kagome sighed in contentment as she tried to eat the rice mix slowly, failing miserably in her hunger. Sesshoumaru of course, touched nothing.

Once they were finished, Sesshoumaru insisted on heading out, determined to reach Kato's camp as quickly as possible. Kagome thanked both Resshin and Nanmei profusely, squeezing the woman's hands gently before she climbed onto Ah Un.

"I'll write to you, I promise. And we'll see each other soon."

"I would enjoy that greatly," Nanmei replied, smiling still. Kagome moved to climb on Ah Un and waved down as they lifted into the sky, her spirits bolstered by the thought of making a new friend, especially a female one.

"Resshin was very impressed with how you bonded with his future mate," Sesshoumaru informed her several minutes later.

"I feel like I know her. Probably silly, but she's so nice!" Kagome sighed. "Those soaps, the smells don't bother you do they? I didn't want to ask in front of her, she was so nice giving them to me and all," She finished.

"They are fine. They are not as strong as most human soaps."

"Oh, good. They do smell good," She laughed. "So, Shinzuru couldn't tell me much about Kato. Just that he was loyal and a good warrior."

"He is a very good strategist, and cautious."

"Not a word I'd expect to hear from you in good terms," She admitted.

"Caution is a good quality in a warrior. Otherwise they're dead," He deadpanned. Kagome stuck her tongue out, struck with a sense of deja vu as she did it, determined to not let him ruin her good mood.

"Kato is not here," Sesshoumaru said as they landed in the camp. Kagome looked around, casting out her power to see if perhaps the smell of the unwashed bandits covered the youkai's scent. She couldn't blame him if it had, the stench was awful even for her, a human.

"Oi, whatchoo doing 'ere?" A voice asked, moving up to them. Kagome stilled, her power flaring in response to her distress.
"Sesshoumaru, we need to go," She whispered, beginning to climb back onto Ah Un's saddle, desperation and panic making her clumsy. A rock came flying from out of nowhere and struck her in the head, knocking her back. She fell on the ground, holding her forehead, feeling blood seeping out.

"What is the meaning of this?" Sesshoumaru demanded, moving more closely to her. "This camp was under Kato's command."

"Oh, that guy. Yeah, he tried telling us what to do. Offed him a few days ago when he said Naraku was finished. Couldn't come up with our pay, kept making excuses about waiting for the extra funds from his lord."

"I am his lord," Sesshoumaru intoned, voice chilly.

"Sesshoumaru, please, we have to go, please," She whimpered, staring past him at the bandit that was standing, expression insolent.

"Hey, I know you," He jeered, looking at the miko who moved to stand. "You were with that other bitch. Huh, didn't think you'd survive this long," He mocked. "Seems you got some youkai to take you in. Must be a better ride for him than us," He laughed, the sound rolling down Kagome's spine like a slithering snake.

"Are these the ones who held you captive?" Sesshoumaru asked, not even looking at her. When she didn't answer, he stepped away from her. Keening softly in her throat, unsure whether to shuffle after him or continue clinging to Ah Un.

"You know the miko?" Sesshoumaru barked. If he had been facing her, she would have seen the crimson bleeding into his eyes, his face shifting, as if barely holding it's more human shape against the beast that fought to get out.

"We did, met her and her friend in passing," The leader lied, as if suddenly realizing the depth of the youkai's rage.

"I smell your lies," Sesshoumaru half growled as he moved forward. Kagome watched as Sesshoumaru's whip, glowing in the darkness, struck out, and the scream that followed rang in her ears and ricocheted in her head painfully. The leader's legs were cut from beneath him, and the smell of burning flesh permeated the air. Kagome looked, her eyes traveling to the stumps where knees had once been. The wounds had been cauterized as they were being made.

"You will watch your men's suffering before you die," Sesshoumaru intoned. The others that had gathered around them in a circle, began moving away, some even breaking into a run. Sesshoumaru unsheathed Bakusaiga, and Kagome saw him give chase, darting from one man to another. Instead of cutting them in half or even plunging the sword through them, she watched as he made the smallest of cuts upon their flesh.

And then the screams of terror mixed with pain filled the air. Unable to watch as the effects of the blade began to work upon human flesh, she pressed her face into Ah's neck, clutching to it tightly as she tried to block out the sounds that only seemed to grow in volume and agony. Each one seemed to stab at her, filtering into her mind, determined to find a place to hook into. The sounds of the dying stretched into an eternity, and Kagome felt tears burning down her cheeks.

As suddenly as they began, they stopped. Afraid to look at what was left, she continued to hold tightly to Ah's neck, inhaling the scents mingling in his mane. Only one voice was left, babbling incoherently. The leader's voice calling Sesshoumaru a hundred sorts of monster and cursing him. Accusing him of being soft for coming down on them in such a way for a 'slut'. 
"Miko," A voice said. When she didn't turn away, a hand came to her shoulder. She flinched violently, not wanting anything touching her except Ah's cool, scaly skin and the thick mass of his hair.

"Miko, the last is yours to do with as you will. As leader, he is responsible for the crimes against you. Exact your justice," Sesshoumaru commanded. Kagome turned, eyes bright with ill concealed hysteria that was only building. She stumbled woodenly over to the body laying on the ground, oblivious to the piles of ash littering the camp, focusing solely on him. He switched from cursing Sesshoumaru to cursing her as he watched her approach.

Falling to her knees, she finally looked at his face, remembering the feel of him against her, his hands brutalizing her. He was the one to tie the gag tightly, bruising her flesh. He had kicked her viciously for biting him, then thrown her to his men, uncaring what they did. The knife in her wrist sheath was out and he stopped his profanities, watching her handle the blade.

"I should castrate you," She murmured. "But I never want to see you naked again. You got to my body, but you didn't get me," She added. "Not me. None of you will ever have that. I never want to see you again," She finished, standing. The obscenities started immediately, hurled at her back like stones. Numbed by the sight of him, by the death of the men that haunted her nightmares, she ignored everything, not even flinching when she heard the sound of a sword cutting through armor and flesh, the wet noise as it twisted. Wet gurgles followed, and she kept walking to Ah Un, shock blanketing every other emotion.

"It is done," Sesshoumaru intoned as she pulled herself up limply, barely making it onto the saddle. Ignoring him, she tugged on Ah Un's reins and felt him push himself into the sky. Sesshoumaru followed, silent as they moved further and further from the camp.

"I wanted to hate them. You know that I've had nightmares about them," She whispered hours later. "I never wanted to see any of them again. But, I feel guilty now, knowing they died because of me. That they suffered like that."

"You are a strange woman."

"You keep saying that," She sighed, feeling the tears start once more.

"They committed a crime against you and your friend. In doing so, they endangered this land. There are few, if any others, that could guard the jewel as you do, and none as strong to protect it. Thus, their crimes were multiplied. They did not deserve easy or honorable deaths."

"It seems so easy for you, like the world is black and white. I can't- I just can't be happy someone died because of me."

"Then accept that they died for many other sins which they doubtless committed. Think you that you were the only one to suffer such treatment from them?" He demanded, growing angry with her self pity and derision.

"Well, I guess not-" She began.

"Then 'guess' as you so easily put it, about how they treated other women? Guess how many there were. How many there could have been," He snapped impatiently. "How many women have been saved the torture they inflicted on you, and comfort yourself in the knowledge that they will not suffer the experience."

Kagome, wide eyed through his vehement proclamation, looked down at the saddle, suddenly
ashamed. Even if she felt horrible for what had happened, no matter how evil the men had been, there were others, could have been more, and the past victims were avenged, and the future ones saved. But still... The men's cries of agony refused to quiet, and she wondered if the pain they endured was just, or if Sesshoumaru had thought she wanted them to die so harshly.

"I don't like seeing people suffer," She whispered. "Anyone." When he didn't answer for several minutes, she was about to repeat herself when he cut her off unexpectedly.

"Despite what you may think, I do not enjoy inflicting suffering on others."

The calmly uttered declaration startled her, and she looked to the daiyoukai, a question dying on her lips. He looked tired. Weary, as if the events of the night had been as hard on him as her.

"I am your alpha. As such it is my place to punish those who harm you in a manner befitting their crimes. I do not think I could have exacted such justice without killing them and using tenseiga to bring them back again and again. But I do not enjoy inflicting such pain on others, no matter how deserving. Finding pleasure in such shows a defect of the spirit, and is dishonorable," He finished.

Kagome admitted that a small part of her had considered him monstrous for his seeming ease in exacting punishment. No one should be able to torture and kill so easily. But his confession, however surprising and out of character, comforted her.

"Thank you, for explaining. You didn't have to."

"As pack we will have to coexist. There will be times when my actions will disturb you, as they did tonight. I do not wish for conflict to arise because you think I undertake such needlessly or with joy."

"I understand," She replied quietly, looking to the stars. Now she felt even more ashamed that she had allowed herself to forget what she had felt in his core, abandoning the memory to embrace doubt so easily. "And thank you," She finished, adding another one, knowing that even if she didn't agree with the method, he had done it to give her justice and closure.

"Hnn," He replied blandly as they flew through the night, both too emotionally wired to sleep. Neither spoke, and neither suggested landing to make camp. Instead, he directed them for the citadel and the shiro, and Kagome forced herself to think of seeing the children again.

Sesshoumaru gestured for Kagome to follow him once they entered the shiro. It was still early, barely after dawn. The halls of the shiro were dark, and she plodded after him, tired and emotionally wrung out. Unaware of her surroundings, she was surprised when he stopped and slid a door open.

"Sleep," He commanded, pointing into the room. When Kagome stumbled in, she gave a shaky sigh of relief, blinking back tears of gratitude. As they seemed determined to do, all of the children were piled in the center of the room, sharing futons that had been pulled together and blankets that twisted around sleeping bodies.

Seeing Shippou curled up next to Rin, she moved to them and lay down, shuffling herself under the edge of the blanket gently so as not to wake them, and curled around them, burying her nose in Shippou's hair and allowing herself to relax.

Saying a quick prayer of thanks for the gift of the children in her life, she promptly fell into a deep, dreamless sleep. Never did she notice that Sesshoumaru took a place against the wall, sitting still and silent. Had she looked, she would have seen him relax as well, eyes drifting shut as he tried to absorb some of the peace the children exuded for himself.
Sesshoumaru started awake, surprised that he had fallen asleep, when there were cries of delight the next morning. First one, then more as the children began to wake and spotted the miko passed out on the edge of the futons. Then they spotted him, and once Rin had woken, eyes shining happily, she bounced over and practically slammed into him in her careless joy, embracing him tightly.

"Rin is very glad Sesshoumaru-sama and Kagome are back home," She chirped, pulling back and moving to hug the groggy miko, who was being piled onto by the children, all of whom seemed determined to hug her at the same time.

"Good morning everyone," She yawned, burrowing deeper into the covers, giggling at the plaintive moans as the children tried to pull her out. "Okay, okay, I'm up," She laughed, stretching lazily. The children moved back, allowing her to stand and rub her eyes. Her hair was mussed and eyes still foggy from sleep, but she smiled and allowed the children, still in their bedclothes, to begin leading her from the room.

"Sesshoumaru-sama," Rin called, waving wildly to him, "Come have breakfast with us!" She pleaded, eyes wide. Knowing what was in store for him later in the day, he allowed himself the simple pleasure of following. The children's innocent chatter and easy joy would balance out the arguments sure to come.

"Lord Sesshoumaru, Lady Kagome," Tenka greeted as the children stampeded into the school room. Kagome noted that the tables, which she had always assumed were used only for school, were piled high with food. Her stomach rumbled loudly and the children laughed, pointing and whispering.

"Are you home for good mama?" Shippou asked.

"Well, I'm definitely not going to be traveling like crazy anymore. But I will have to travel on occasion," She told him, smiling even as his face fell. "Because Sango and Miroku are going to get married, and Kouga and Ayame, and we have to be there for that because we're their friends. Besides, do you want to stay in the shiro forever?" She asked, eyes glinting with amusement. Her mirth did not rub off on the kitsune however.

"Why do we have to go see Sango get married, she's mean," He declared.

"Well sweetie, Sango's just confused right now, but now that Naraku is gone and she's got Miroku and Kohaku back safe, everything will be okay. She just needs time," Kagome promised, trying to believe her own words. "Anyway, I met the most interesting set of twins while Sesshoumaru and I were on our way here. Kitsune twins!" She added with an impish smirk, adding that they were coming to train Shippou.

That got the children's attention, and she worried for a moment, knowing the twins had come to train Shippou, and all of the youkai children wanted to learn their magic. Instead, she shrugged mentally and laughter rang out over the tables as she imagined the kitsune twins teaching the children every trick they knew.

Once Kagome was finally allowed to eat, promising them stories of her travels later, Tenka glanced at her wryly. "I do believe, Lady Kagome, that the shiro will no doubt be filled with chaos.

"And all of us targets for it. But where there are children, there will always be chaos," She giggled, glancing at the children who whispered around mouths full of food, already making plans for mischief.

"There is the matter of trying to find their parents, if they yet live," Sesshoumaru added. "Some said their parents were off fighting, there is a chance they are alive and grieve for children they think
dead."

"You're right, but how are we supposed to find them? I mean, at this point they could be off searching for their children themselves."

"It will not be difficult. I will send my own messengers, and ask Bokusenou to gather his own information," Sesshoumaru replied. "We will send out a list of names, so as not to give false hope, and see what happens."

"That's a really good idea," She murmured before going back to her breakfast. "By the way, when are you telling your court?" She asked after finishing her meal.

"They already know," Tenka snorted. "But only a few of them believe it. Most think it's a rumor."

"Once the others have paid off the bandits, they will travel here to make reports. I will present you once they have arrived."

"Why wait? I mean, don't think I'm not thankful, you guys keep making it sound like I should expect attack at any minute, and at least the others seem to like me."

"Having his highest ranking warriors there and swearing their allegiance to you publicly will stop anyone from behaving foolishly, or at least give them pause," Tenka explained. "Might I suggest the evening, so they may have the night to think it over in their own homes instead of feeding off of each other's 'righteous indignation'? I'm sure if they sleep on it, at least some of them will understand the wisdom of the decision," He added. Sesshoumaru nodded thoughtfully.

"A sound idea."

"Oh, does that mean Nanmei will be coming?" Kagome asked.

"Doubtful. Unlike you, she has no power to keep herself safe. Resshin will be here long enough to report and be present for your introduction, then he will leave. He finds the citadel uncomfortable."

"Too bad, she's really nice," Kagome sighed. Sesshoumaru saw her wistful expression and the words flew out before he realized he had said them.

"Resshin lives with the remainder of his people not far off from here, it will not be difficult for you to visit."

Her eyes brightened considerably and her smile seemed to summon a glow as she gave him an excited thank you and then turned to speak with Shippou.

"I see many changes taking place here in the coming months," Tenka observed. "Most of which she will bring about."

Sesshoumaru considered the youkai's words, giving no outward indication of his feelings on them. Once he had enjoyed a quiet home, keeping it as close to a sanctuary as possible. His court, which met twice a week and for certain occasions he was unable to back out of, had been the only disturbance to that peace. Now however, he had taken in children and a miko. Reflecting, the miko's words finally settled and for the first time since Rin had stopped breathing in hell, he felt a flicker of panic.

AN: Resshin, I love him. And Nanmei. So, so much. And infer what you will, because some questions are better left unanswered. As for Resshin's forest, it was based off of Aokigahara forest.
Which is like the suicide forest of doom in Japan. So yeah. I was reading about it when I was writing this chapter, and I got the idea for Resshin's breed of youkai, which are tree youkai of a sort. And uh, don't look up the forest if suicide and really disturbing stories bother you. Because it is effin creepy.
Kagome watched the stampede of children playing a game of tag in the gardens, soaking up the sunshine. Winter was showing signs of finally passing, and the unseasonably warm day had allowed her to slip into her linen miko garb, which felt like silk after the heavy, scratchy wool.

"Hey there!" A voice called out. Kagome looked over to the doors leading back into the shiro and smiled warmly. The twins were walking out, and for several moments she tried to figure out what was so different about them.

’No armor,’ She thought. Their tails were even waving sinuously as they trekked over to her.

"They all yours?" Mizu asked, taking a seat next to her. When she nodded Kasai whistled slowly, eyes watching the gaggle.

"Well, at least you'll never have to worry about grandkids like our parents do," He commented wryly. Just as he did, the children seemed to turn as a collective group, staying still for a split second before excited whispers began.

"Brace yourselves," Kagome warned them, just before the herd trampled over to them.

"Children, calm down," Kagome said sternly as the children's voices reached a new level of volume. Once again she wondered how the youkai children dealt with it and shrugged before bringing her hands together in front of her, clapping them once. The crack split the noise and suddenly it was quiet, everyone staring.

"Now, as I was about to say, this is Mizu," She said, gesturing to the kitsune with the braid, "And this is Kasai," She finished, gesturing to the other. "Now you two, I'm very sorry, but I mentioned Shippou's training to him, and the others heard, and it seems you'll be teaching whatever tricks you can to all of them."

"Won't be hard," Kasai laughed. "Half the tricks we've got don't involve any magic at all!"

"Now children, these two are like tall versions of you," She started, ignoring Mizu's snort of indignation. "But you've got to do as they tell you, and remember, no pulling your pranks on me, because I'm Kagome and I'm nice. Everyone else is fair game though," She added.

"Even Sesshoumaru-sama?" Rin asked, wide eyed.

"Especially Sesshoumaru-sama!" Kasai interjected. "We've only tricked him once, back when we were all still pups. He'll never suspect it from you. Besides, he likes being tricked," Kasai added conspiratorially. Kagome managed, barely, to hold in a laugh at the idea.
"Now go play kiddos, we'll start teaching you all tomorrow. We've gotta talk to your mom about some stuff," Mizu commanded gently. Still awed by their confession of tricking Sesshoumaru, even if it had only been once, they obeyed. Kagome was about to correct him on his use of the word 'mom', but stopped herself when she realized absolutely no one had seemed bothered by it, or even noticed for that matter.

"What's up?" Kagome asked as Kasai sat beside her. For a moment she felt strange, one twin on each side, pushing it aside when she noticed the seriousness of both their expressions.

"Shinzuru arrived yesterday, and Resshin got here just as we did. Sesshoumaru wants to present you to the court tonight," Mizu sighed.

"Tonight?" She squawked, jumping up from them and staring hard to make sure they weren't pulling a prank. "Tonight? He would have said something!" She accused, pointing a finger at them angrily. "You're just trying to trick me. Ha-ha, not falling for it," She sighed, suddenly relieved when she reached that conclusion.

"Yup, it's a trick," Kasai said brightly, smiling.

"Oh, thank the gods, I don't think I could have done it tonight."

"Kasai was lying, it wasn't a trick," Mizu corrected. Kasai let out a chuckle, crossing his arms over his chest and looked for all the world like a cat that had gotten into the cream.

"That was really mean," She pouted, whirling and thumping onto the bench between them.

"You left yourself open for it, not my fault," Kasai commented blithely. Kagome, fuming, summoned a small bit off power and pushed at him. Hard. The kitsune went face first into the melting snow and scrambled back up, somehow flushing despite the fact that his normally clean shaven face was adorned with a snowbeard.

"You-" He began.

"You left yourself open for it," She retorted impishly.

"You did, should have known better than to tease a miko," Mizu sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose. "And you can do it tonight Kagome. Even if we waited, would you be ready any other time? Tomorrow? A week from now?" He chided gently. Kagome, admitting the truth of his words, nodded gently.

"I just, well, I haven't met many people from his court. Just some of his advisers," She started.

"We're his advisers, same for Shinzuru and Resshin, even if he's not here all that often. But when we're out in the field, well, damn. The others are advisers, technically. When we're gone, they feel like they can actually talk and pretend to know things," Kasai said after wiping the snow from his face. He sat down again, and Kagome was happy to notice it was not any further than his original seat.

"So should I go get ready?" She asked.

"Won't be for a few hours yet. Unless you're going to dress up?"

"No, miko robes. I won't pretend to be some high born. I'm not ashamed of what I am," She declared. Both kitsune let out a chuckle, and had there not been the slight difference in their voices, it would have been disconcerting, like living surround sound.
"I probably need a bath though," She sighed. "I've been playing with the children most of the day, and youkai noses tend to be sharp. Don't want them thinking I'm some heathen."

"Unless of course, you want to have a good bit of fun with them," Mizu suggested slyly.

"I can see it now. First I'd play some sort of contact sport with the children that forces me to sweat and get muddy, then I stroll in, hair all over the place and glower at everyone. If they try to talk to me, I reply in grunts. Sound good?" She asked archly. Both twins stared in shock and she rolled her eyes. "Kidding."

"Oh, for a moment there, well, not that there isn't some novelty in that plan," Mizu laughed. "But it is going a bit far. Sesshoumaru tells me you're from a far off land. Any customs there that might confuse there court folk?"

"The whole womens lib movement for one," She snorted. When they merely stared questioningly, she waved it off, deciding that could be saved for another day. "Too bad I don't have one of my old school uniforms. The skirt sits above my knees. That would have been enough to scandalize them," She laughed.

"I remember that 'uniform' and I am very grateful you no longer possess it," A new voice broke in calmly. "Else there would be questions about why you were really joining this Sesshoumaru's pack, and I would never have it said I was dallying with a miko."

Kagome, still feeling playful, sent a tendril of her power and tapped against his chest, more determined to annoy him for the comment than anything else. "Because I totally want people thinking I'm carrying on with a youkai that could turn lava frigid."

When complete silence met her comment, she turned to look at the daiyoukai and saw that while he wasn't angry per say, his expression was carefully neutral. Shinzuru, who stood next to him however, looked ready to burst at the seams. Mizu or Kasai, she couldn't be sure, let out a snort, and as if it were contagious, all three burst into laughter.

"Perhaps we'd best turn from the topic at hand," Shinzuru sputtered several minutes later. "And discuss tonight. Resshin's on his way now, said he needed to see Bokusenou first."

"Does everyone know him?" Kagome wondered aloud.

"Nah, but Resshin's kind are old, old forest folk, and they've got ties with most of the tree youkai. Some say it was Resshin's kind that created tree youkai, or some such nonsense. I can't see anyone being older than that tree though," Kasai added.

Kagome listened to Shinzuru and Mizu both throw out suggestions, sometimes supplemented by a joke idea from Kasai. Resshin joined them moments later, almost appearing from nowhere, greeting them quietly before joining the discussion.

"Why does this have to be such a big deal. He's not presenting Shippou, and even Rin was clueless when I mentioned it. Why me?" She demanded at last, dizzy from the elaborate plans being thrown out.

"You are a miko. He's got to let them know you're not going to go hunting us at will," Mizu informed her.

"Not only that, he must make it clear to them that they are not to go hunting her," Resshin added. "She is a miko, and a strong one, guarding the shikon jewel. Just because our esteemed leader is above it's call doesn't mean everyone within the citadel is. They have to know what they risk should
"I can't just purify them if they try to attack?"

"By all means, do so. Especially if it's one of those windbags he's forced to keep around," Shinzuru commented wryly with a side long glance at the daiyoukai standing next to him. "Unless the lord has any objections?"

"This Sesshoumaru would not find it amiss if she does her best to protect the jewel," He said with a small smile playing on his lips. Kagome could see the wheels turning in his head as he imagined some poor soul he disliked gone.

"You could just skip this. I don't have to parade in front of them, they think I'm up for hunting, I purify them, they're out of your hair. Everybody wins."

"I do believe I may fall in love with you if you keep talking like that," Mizu stated as Kasai choked on his laughter, gasping for breath as he wiped tears from his eyes. Shinzuru and Resshin were both grinning, eyes distant as if picturing it all in their minds. Even Sesshoumaru seemed wistful for a moment before bringing himself firmly back to the present.

"Perhaps we should avoid such drastic measures for now," He started.

"How about we do it this way? There are four of you, right? Take a formation around me. Have Sesshoumaru announce me, we walk in through the doors. He gives his whole speech, I bow and try to look as important as he'll make me sound. Sound good?" She asked, crossing her fingers as she watched their reactions.

"It does keep us all from having to make long winded speeches, well, except you," Resshin commented. "A show of solidarity is often more effective than a speech as well."

"I noticed it keeps you from having to speak, nervous cat?" Mizu asked.

"Cat?" She asked blankly.

"Well, Shinzuru said you bristle up like a cat, and we've seen you twitchy as a cat, and you get along with Sesshoumaru like a cat with a dog. Seemed like a good nickname," Kasai chuckled.

"A cat?" She asked again, shrilly. Just what were they implying.

"See, she's doing it," Shinzuru said, pointing to Kagome's now standing form. "Bristlin' with the best of 'em," He joked.

"Not funny," She spat.

"She hisses too," Resshin pointed out.

"Oh you all are so-" She sputtered, grasping for a fitting word that wasn't obscene.

"Yes?" Sesshoumaru asked.

"Ugh!" She uttered the word as if it were a curse before stalking past him angrily. Ignoring the chuckles she moved back into the shiro, determined to get them behind her and into a warm bath. Knowing how long it could take to have one brought to her room, she found a servant and asked if they could send word for one.

"Stupid men," She muttered all the way back to her room, wanting to slam the door shut, even more
Sesshoumaru sighed, staring down at the couriers gathered in the room. Most of them were vultures, no matter their breed. Despite being loathe to admit it, he agreed with the human miko. Everything about the ceremony felt so unnecessary. He should have been able to bring her into the pack, let rumor do the telling for him and move on with his life. Instead, he had to present her and hold a feast with her at his side. Not his idea of an enjoyable evening. Miraculously holding back a long suffering sigh, he cleared his throat. His court, knowing that was ever the only signal he gave for quiet before violence ensued, quickly quieted down.

"This Sesshoumaru has called you all together tonight to present a new member of my pack. Her presence was paramount in the defeat of Naraku, and she is the guardian of the jewel by birthright and by deed. This Sesshoumaru has seen fit to give her protection. I present the miko Kagome." He spoke the entire thing calmly, forcing himself to go through the theatrics, which is exactly what they felt like, and tone the proper inflections in his little speech.

Fortunately, the courtiers were so distracted by the door opening that no one commented on the shortness of his speech. Instead, their gazes were forced to the group walking in. immediately whispers started, all of them blending to the point of becoming a low hum in the room. Kagome, walking in the center of a square of youkai. Kasai and Resshin stood in the front, Mizu and Shinzuru flanked her, all of them in full armor, their weapons at their side. In Shinzuru's case, he carried his naginata, not blade down as tradition dictated for peaceful meetings, but up, telling everyone present he was ready to defend the miko.

They moved in front of the crowd as one, and Kagome, despite the nervousness he knew she felt, walked head high and staring straight forward, her chin raised proudly. They stopped in front of the dais he stood upon and she inclined her head. As everyone watched, suddenly silencing the whispers, Kagome tilted her head, exposing the side of her neck to him. He padded silently forward, noting the glimmer of amusement in her eyes and the faint smell of clover and honeysuckle. Wondering if it was from the soap and why someone would use such simple scents, he admitted it was more pleasing than some scents dabbed on by his court. The veritable bouquet of floral smells was enough to make his head ache.

Determined to get the event over with, he touched his hand to her neck in a symbolic gesture of dominance, then moved back, his eyes on the crowd once more.

"Any move against her is a move against this Sesshoumaru," He proclaimed in a quiet voice, the threat implied very clear in his expression. It went without saying that should someone be so foolish, death would be swift in coming, and painful in the undertaking.

Kagome looked up at him, smiling impishly when she heard the outraged whispers beginning anew. When he flicked his gaze back to the crowd, she stuck her tongue out, only to hold in a giggle when she heard one of the twins let out a strangled sort of chuckle that was closer to a snort.

"Let us enjoy this evening," Sesshoumaru called out before moving down the dais and to Kagome's side. The barrier of armed men escorting her deterred anyone from speaking to them as they made their way to the banquet hall.

"Do I really have to eat dinner with them?" She whispered.

"Yes."

"I'd have more fun with the kids," She pouted. "At least I wouldn't feel like I'm supposed to be the
main course."

"Oh, I wouldn't call you the main course. Dessert maybe," Mizu joked. Sesshoumaru noticed Kagome stiffen and was ready to reprimand the kitsune for the innuendo when his twin cut in gracefully.

"Nah, too skinny. She wouldn't do as much of anything." Kagome relaxed, pretended to be offended before the doors to the banquet hall opened. They glided in gracefully and took their places, the courtiers filing in after them. Whispers were still abound as everyone took their places.

Servants filed in carry huge platters of food, and Kagome was grateful she'd eaten a small meal beforehand, else her stomach would be growling at the smells that began to fill the hall.

"I'm very impressed the miko managed to get the jewel back. Do you think you can keep it this time?" The feline youkai she had butted heads with before purred, his eyes narrow. Wanting to groan in frustration, because Sesshoumaru had informed her the vultures would wait before calling her out, she instead forced a demure smile.

"It seems that a spirit of the jewel had sealed my powers as a child. Sesshoumaru was able to destroy him and break the seal. I have no doubt between my powers and his own that the jewel will be safe from now on." There, not a whole lie, granted, not a full truth either.

"A seal? Why would it do that?" Another youkai asked. Giving in, knowing if they were thinking about the seal and Magatushi and Naraku, they wouldn't be thinking about killing her in her sleep. Maybe.

"The dark spirit wanted dominance of the jewel, and feared my ability to purify it."

"Why?" Still another asked. She imagined ripping out her hair in frustration and causing a scene. She'd be free of the dinner, but Sesshoumaru would make her pay for it later.

"If the darkness within the jewel is dominant, they can more easily ensnare youkai and human alike, and have the carrier do it's bidding."

"I don't think a youkai would be swayed by a jewel," The feline said.

"This Sesshoumaru saw many ensnared by mere shards of the jewel," Sesshoumaru rumbled. "It's power is seductive to a race who value strength."

"And yet you value strength more than any other here. I do not wish to offend, but you lack the purification abilities of the miko."

"I have no wish for strength that is not earned," Sesshoumaru replied blandly. Kagome saw the flicker of his rage as much as she felt it, and shivered. When no one else seemed to notice the sudden chill, she forced herself back to her meal.

"It's a good daiyoukai that doesn't take shortcuts," Shinzuru mumbled. "An honorable youkai."

"Honor is a precious commodity," Kagome murmured. "I have seen many claim honor, and few display it. When someone says war, it seems that things like honor and scruples and discipline are discarded as unaffordable hindrances."

Despite her sudden ability to converse as any proper highborn lady would, Sesshoumaru was uncomfortably reminded of his almost mistake in suppressing the miko and taijiya's memories. In the face of her observation, he found himself feeling relieved that he had not taken that course, despite
"Honor is what you hold onto in those times," Resshin added quietly.

"This talk is too serious for such an occasion," Kasai stated suddenly. "Perhaps I ought to tell our Lord what you told the children today about tricking people."

"You'd spoil the surprise," Kagome muttered from behind her cup of tea, glaring at the grinning kitsune.

"What surprise?" Shinzuru asked.

"Oh, nothing, nothing at all," Mizutaunted, a saucy grin lighting up his features.

"You are not to train the children to attempt any of the foolhardly tricks you pulled when you were pups," Sesshoumaru declared, staring the two kitsune down. Both shrugged indolently with cat-like smiles that expressed their own delight.

"Miko, what did you tell the children?" Shinzuru asked. "Do I need to find some duty or other that takes me far from the shiro?"

"Oh, not at all. I merely told the children that certain people are off limits." Half truth again, and Kagome would have felt guilty if it weren't for the sudden nervous tick the rude feline youkai developed, or the narrowing of the daiyoukai's eyes.

"Who was deemed off limits?" He asked quietly.

"That would ruin the surprise," She sing songed, smiling brightly.

"Tell me."

"Not a chance."

"My father once told me that the alpha is the alpha in his pack," Shinzuru began. "But that women will always be women, and sometimes it's best just to step away and watch your back. Of course, he was talking about his mother in law at the time, but I think it applies to all females," He finished sagely. Kagome let out a giggle and an 'I told you so' look in Sesshoumaru's direction before accepting a cut of rare beef from Kasai.

The rest of the dinner went without a hitch. Very few actually spoke to Kagome, although she could hear almost everyone talking about her, which would have been disconcerting if the four males guarding her weren't so determined to keep her entertained. Again she thanked the kami for her good luck with the addendum that she felt she had earned it after the past few years.

Kagome stared at the empty room in shock. Her things were gone. The trunks that held her clothing, the table that had served as a small desk. Even the futon was missing. It was completely bare, stripped of everything that had made it a bedroom. She stalked down the hall, searching out any servant that might be hanging around. Unfortunately, most of them were busy serving the courtiers, cleaning up the remnants of the feast, or going about their normal, unseen duties. At least she figured that was the case, because she couldn't find a single one.

"I suppose you were not warned earlier," A voice intoned. Kagome turned, eyes wide. Seeing him standing in the hall silently, as if waiting, she couldn't help but wonder if he knew something.
"Are the twins playing a joke on me?" She asked. The alternative didn't bear thinking about.

"You have officially submitted to this Sesshoumaru. As pack, your rooms are now in the family wing," He rumbled, as if still disgruntled by the idea.

"But I'm fine here," She protested. "Besides, it's close to the children."

"They have been moved as well. It was suggested that you would want them close to you."

"Oh, well, it still seems like a lot of fuss over nothing," She mumbled, embarrassed by the turn of events. She had liked her room. It had been small, but it had been unassuming in it's smallness.

"It is no small thing to be recognized as pack," He retorted, as if offended. Beginning to walk away, he paused long enough for Kagome to realize she should be following him.

"I'm not, trying to belittle it. Everyone is just making such a big deal out of it, and I didn't really expect them to," She admitted in a small voice. "And more changes. I just want something solid."

The last came out a wistful sigh, and Sesshoumaru inclined his head.

"We are still dealing with the war, although it is the after effects. In time, things will settle and you will be able to find your footing again."

Surprised by the kind sentiment, considering the source, she contented herself with a nod. The halls seemed to twist and turn and she was led up two flights of stairs. She saw they were on the top floor, and two guards were posted at the entrance to the stairs. Sesshoumaru moved on quiet feet to one door and slid it open. Kagome peeked and saw all of the children passed out asleep in their normal convoluted pile. The room itself was huge and would easily accommodate them, she was pleased to note.

He slid the door closed and led her to another door much further down the long corridor. He slid the door back and gestured for her to step in. Paper lanterns suffused the room in a dimmed glow, and she gasped in awed delight.

"It's too much, I could never-" She began.

"These are your rooms," He rumbled before closing the door. Turning from the door to her new room, she stepped forward hesitantly. The first was an area to receive guests, that much she could tell. There were several cushions scattered around a low table large enough to sit several adults, and if squeezed in tightly enough, all of the children. Saving that space for the morning, she walked through the doors to another room, only to find it empty. The last room made her gasp in pleasure.

Her trunks, initially pulled from some deep, dark corner of storage, had been more than a little beat up, and while made soundly, had needed some repair. They were no longer in evidence, instead she saw large, light colored boxes a little bigger than the trunks, and definitely more well made. Stepping lightly over to them, as if any disturbance would cause the illusion to fade, she dropped to her knees and allowed her fingers to run over one.

The wood was smooth and warm beneath her fingers, as if alive. The designs etched into the wood were patterns of woodland youkai, snakes and foxes and tanuki. Spirits danced in trees and she could see eyes peeking from within the forest that was carved. Opening the trunk she found her warmer weather clothing, although someone had placed herb sachets within the folds. Closing it, she moved to the next.

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It too was carved beautifully, although with an ocean scene, different spirits and sea youkai moving within it. It was so well carved for a moment she felt as if the sea and the creatures within it moved.
Once she opened it, it too held her clothing, also with herb sachets.

The last trunk was a complete surprise, as she didn't think she had anymore to store. It had been carved with a mountain scene, the clouds delicately traced in the finest detail, and she slid her fingertips over the ridges almost reverently. Opening it, she almost let out a squeal of delight. Held within were more soaps from Nanamei, and a rolled scroll. Almost greedily she took the scroll out, taking care to shut the trunk quietly before moving to the table set in the corner of the room. The paper lantern provided enough light to read by, and she quickly unrolled it.

'Kagome,

My love has told me of the plan Sesshoumaru seeks to implement, and I congratulate you on your introduction into his pack. It is rare to meet a woman such as you, and I hope to become great friends. Resshin doesn't wish you to know, but the trunks are a gift from him. He is a quiet sort, and gratitude seems to make him uncomfortable, so he would never say anything himself. The new soaps are a gift from me and the thankful women at my shrine for your efforts against Naraku. I hope I am not being to forward in hoping to see you again. Soon Resshin and I will be undertaking the mating ceremony, and I'd very much like you to be present. Resshin told me of your assortment of children, and I would very much enjoy meeting them.

Be well,

Nanmei’

Kagome clutched the scroll to her chest, blinking back tears. The words felt sincere, and the idea of having a female friend, no matter how far away, eased an ache she hadn't realized existed. It also agitated a wound she still didn't want to think about. Sango's anger at her decisions still stabbed her every time she thought about the past. Sango had been an integral part of her journey, and the idea of not seeing her again burned.

But Nanmei's letter gave her a small measure of hope. The woman was as different from Sango as two people could be, but if a stranger saw fit to offer her friendship so willingly, then maybe the taijiya's grudge could be put to rest.

Content to explore the soaps in the morning, she put the scroll back in the chest, smiling gently as she closed it and allowed a new appreciation for the trunks. Resshin was shy about praise and gratitude, that was okay. She'd still find some way to thank him and Nanmei both. Digging through the warmer clothing, she pulled out a simple linen shift and changed, delighting in the warmth the candles seemed to generate. Eyes beginning to drift shut, a yawn escaped and she crawled beneath the soft blankets and settled into an infinitely comfier futon than her previous one. Before she could form another coherent thought, she was asleep.

Kagome was doing her best to enjoy the silence despite wanting to fidget nervously and check the door every five seconds. Anxiety was building and she was fighting to contain herself.

"You're awful at this," Mizu whispered to her.

"How did you ever beat Naraku is you can't even sit still?" Kasai demanded.

"I'm just worried," Kagome whispered furiously.

"Miko," A voice intoned quietly, coldly. Kagome flinched and did her best to summon an innocent smile before she turned around.
"Ye-es Sesshoumaru?" She asked, praying her voice wouldn't give her away.

"I thought we had discussed this 'trick' conversation you had with the children. You said certain people were off limits," He snapped. Kagome took in his narrowed eyes and down turned lips and wondered just what the children had done, because neither they nor the two kitsune teachers were willing to indulge her curiosity.

"I might have fudged that a bit. I said I was off limits," She replied, keeping her eyes wide. "But it never occurred to me they'd try to trick you," She added, praying she wasn't laying it on too thick.

"Miko, you are a terrible liar," He shot out, straightening himself and gathering his wits. She could see him throttling his anger and wondered again just what the children had done.

"What did they do?" She asked curiously. What could have gotten the daiyoukai's fundoshi in such a twist?

"It seems that they absconded with all of the real weapons in the dojo," He started.

"Well that's not so bad, we could just bring them back and-"

"This Sesshoumaru is not finished," He interrupted. "Imagine my surprise when I take a blade down and begin my kata, only to have the sword turn into a flower at the first swing." Nervous tension began to swell when she realized the implications of what he was saying. "It was an annoyance, nothing more. I moved to take another blade, and once again, it turned into a flower at the first swing. As did every blade thereafter. The dojo looks as if a parade has run through it."

"Oh, well, flowers aren't so bad," She stuttered, looking to the two kitsune who sat grinning, and Kagome had uncharitable thoughts about chasing them around, zapping them with her powers.

"Perhaps it would be best if the weapons were returned post-haste," He rumbled. "And another discussion held, this time naming this Sesshoumaru as one that is to be left alone."

"Oh come on," Kagome whined. "It was all in good fun. The kids trust you enough to play a trick on you, doesn't that mean something? And Rin gave you flowers!"

"Not in the dojo," He began.

"Rin is sorry," A voice whispered sadly from the doorway. Sesshoumaru and Kagome turned, and there was a sudden uncomfortable silence as the daiyoukai was faced with almost two dozen teary eyed children. Each one looked as if his comment had been a personal blow.

"Oh guys, I'm sure it's fine," Kagome began, moving to them, throwing a glare over her shoulder. "Sesshoumaru was just surprised. I'm sure he enjoyed the flowers."

"We're sorry, we didn't think he'd get so mad," Shippou keened softly, big turquoise eyes filling with tears. "Rin was sure he'd like the flowers. Everyone helped, it wasn't meant to be a trick, not really. We just wanted him to have something nice."

"Oh, Sesshoumaru, see?" Kagome demanded, looking to the daiyoukai as he stood stiffly, contemplating the group of children.

"Thank you four the gift children, but next time please refrain from touching the weapons. The dojo is no place for you until you begin your training."

"Aannd nice use of crocodile tears," Kasai broke in, smiling over Sesshoumaru's shoulder.
The children didn't even bother trying to muffle their cheers.

"Has anyone responded to the letters yet?" Kagome asked as she and Sesshoumaru watched the children playing in the warmth of the sun. Spring was blowing in full force, and the cold rains had barely let up for almost a week, locking everyone inside. Tempers were fraying as cabin fever drove the little ones crazy, their only outlet for fun being the continued lesson from the twins. The 'lessons' were driving almost every adult in the shiro to distraction.

"It has not been long. Bokusenou has been unable to help, finding specific people is difficult, even for him," Sesshoumaru intoned. "The messengers have only been out for two weeks. It will take time."

"I know. Sometimes I worry though. They've gotten so attached to one another. What if they forget their real families, or don't want to leave?"

He said nothing, his eyes watching the strange game the miko had introduced them to. One child was blindfolded and trying to tag another.

"Have you been practicing lately?" He asked suddenly.

"I can't, not really. Last time I tried Shinzuru thought I was being attacked since my powers flared and came running. I don't want to worry them every time I try to train. And I know they trust my words, but being near my powers still makes them nervous," She sighed.

"Would you like to go to the field tonight?"

"Council annoying you that much?" She asked, raising a brow.

"There is much to be done to heal the land. Many have been volunteering for the positions as head of the great houses. My advisers give their own suggestions, no doubt paid for very handsomely."

"Isn't there anyone you would suggest?" She asked.

"There are at least two I would see take the titles. A third, I am still not sure."

"There's always Kouga," She snickered, then stopped when she saw the serious look on his face.

"He is already a candidate. Despite his lack of refinement, he shows excellent skills in leadership. And his home is already in the east. Also, he does not strike me as the kind to be easily led."

"Sounds like a compliment," She told him, dousing her levity. Apparently Sesshoumaru had thought long and hard about Kouga. Briefly she remembered his reminder to Miroku to make sure Kouga made it back to the castle. Had he been considering it even then?

"Hnn. There are many that would disagree with my choice," He told her.

"Would they get even worse if I voiced my support?" She asked quietly. In reality, she really, really didn't want to deal with court politics. From her studies of the past and the random snippets she caught from the twins and Shinzuru, they were even more convoluted than she had thought. Her own standing was still shaky, and Shinzuru had informed her that despite her sparkling behavior at dinner, almost all of the high borns were wary of her.

"It might prove to work, actually. He was present for the defeat of Naraku and his clan fought bravely in the war, which is more than most of those fools in court can say," He sighed. Kagome
saw the tense set of his shoulders and smiled sympathetically. A year ago she never thought she'd feel sorry for the seemingly perfect daiyoukai. Even now it felt a little silly, but the youkai was working hard to heal the land of it's scars, and that moved her.

"I would like to train tonight. I don't want to get rusty," She told him several minutes later before standing to call for the children. Evening was falling, and baths were in order before dinner. That was a nightly ritual that belonged to her alone, as everyone else was either too terrified or lacked the mental fortitude to deal with the gaggle of children in the bathhouse.

"I'll meet you here after I put the children to bed," Kagome promised brightly, following the herd back into the shiro. The daiyoukai nodded, only allowing a sigh to slip free after they had all moved inside and the doors shut behind them.

The council was beginning to irritate him more than usual, and a part of him selfishly wished for them to attack the miko. The image of her purifying the politicking fools had brought a smile to his face more than once, although he took great pains to ensure it never happened while he was staring any of them in the face.

The healer had been correct. Chaos.

Kagome rode on the fluffy cloud of Sesshoumaru's youki feeling like a rebellious teenager. Mizu and Kasai had hounded her, demanding to know where she was going so late. Both had been abruptly stopped by Sesshoumaru in the gardens, only to smile knowingly when they reached a conclusion that had mortified Kagome and annoyed Sesshoumaru.

"It's that way is it?" Kasai had suggested slyly. Kagome's face had burned and she hadn't been able to resist poking him with her power, growling in a wonderful imitation of the daiyoukai beside her.

"I've got to train, and he's the only one strong enough to take on my power," She boasted. That jibe still ringing in the air, they had taken off, grateful to leave the smirks behind.

"They're good guys, but they're stupid," Kagome muttered. "Stupid males."

"You imply that all males are stupid," Sesshoumaru intoned.

"No, not all. Just a goodly portion." Frustration was clear in her voice and he looked over to her, confused as to why she was still so tense.

"I can't believe they thought I'd, I mean, never, argh! I'm never going to do that with anyone, much less you," She snarled, taking some of the cloud she'd been picking at and clawing it apart in her hands, watching it settle back down into the larger mass beneath her.

"I will allow such insult to pass because of your former experiences with males, miko. But try to think before you speak from now on."

"Oh come on, you feel the exact same way! You'd never touch a human in a million years, especially not me! I was Inu Yasha's wench, remember? Anyway, they're just stupid. Maybe they need to find their own girlfriends. I'm getting tired of being watched over. I can kick their butts any day of the week, not to mention anyone else that comes at me," she whined.

The cloud beneath her disappeared. So distracted by her own ranting, she hadn't noticed they had arrived at the practice field. She fell to the ground with a small gasp and glared at the daiyoukai as she stood up and dusted her behind.
"Care to test it?" He asked, brow arched in challenge.

"Test what?" She asked, still angry at being dropped so abruptly.

"Your little boast. That you could take on anyone that comes at you, I do believe was the gist of it."

"You know what? Fine, bring it on," She snapped, summoning her ki and beginning to direct it. When he merely lunged, she was startled for a moment before breaking into a run, trying to move and gather energy at the same time.

"That's cheating!" She shouted over her shoulder, well aware that he only kept a distance between them to prolong the chase. He could mow her down in a second flat, and she knew it.

"I do not believe other youkai would fight fairly with the jewel at stake, especially against a miko," He replied, the beginning of a smile touching his lips. He picked up speed and she stopped in her tracks, dropping to the ground as he managed to just pass by her, overshooting the mark. Gathering her ki, it swelled around her in a bubble.

"Very good. You are getting more creative," He told her, stalking a circle around the bubble.

"Necessity is the mother of all invention," She retorted, snaking a spike of her aura out to tap him on the chest. He blocked it easily, bending it and forcing it off course. Huffing, she pulled the energy back, determined to get at least one blow in.

"You're just sitting there," He commented after several minutes of watching her within the bubble of her energy.

"Well, if nothing else I can just wait a youkai out. They'll either get bored, annoyed, or you'll come save me," She quipped, ticking the list off on her fingers. When she glanced at him after the last comment, she giggled at his nonplussed expression.

"Nanmei invited us to her mating ceremony," Kagome informed him. "Even all the kids. She says she wants to meet them."

"Resshin informed me of such. I do not think it wise to take so many children," He began.

"I have a feeling it won't be too bad. I don't see very many youkai attending a human and youkai mating ceremony. And from what she said, I don't think she has a lot of friends either, or family. Maybe taking all the kids would add some levity," She added.

"There are few that approve of Resshin's choice outside of his own clan. As he is not highborn, few in court will feel compelled to attend."

"I think it's sad. They're both such nice people, and just because they're different, people won't be kind to them. Their special day should be happy and filled with laughter, don't you think?"

"You have only met Nanmei once, and Resshin-"

"They're good people," She rebutted, glaring at the daiyoukai from within her pink sphere.

"Alright, the children may attend, but Tenka and Jaken must come to watch them. Doubtless Resshin's clan and the miko that raised his mate will be interested in you," He almost sighed, but just barely managed to refrain from the show of emotion.

"Deal," She said, sending a wave of energy rolling into him, pushing him back. Delighted that she
caught him unawares, she dropped her shield and took off running, determined to get to the tree line and hide within Bokusenou's roots as she had before.

He gave her no time however. Something caught around her foot and pulled back harshly, sending her feet flying from beneath her. Pushing herself up from the grass, grumbling angrily, she turned to see Sesshoumaru's whip sliding from around her ankle.

"How do you do that?" She demanded.

"I move more quickly than you," He replied evenly.

"Not that," She huffed. "You didn't hurt me with it, not like-" She stopped herself, the image of the bandit leader's amputated legs coming back to her. For a moment the smell of burning flesh was as real to her as it had been that night, and gorge rose in her throat.

"It is merely my youki, and I choose what it does," He informed her quietly.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean," She started. His raised hand stopped her and he nodded in acknowledgment.

"I understand your question. There is nothing else to say," He intoned.

"Can I do something like that?" She asked, desperate to turn from the topic they refused to discuss.

"Perhaps one day. It requires something you lack."

"What's that?" She asked, confused.

"Finesse," He replied, and for a moment she wondered if he was taunting her or actually teasing. Deciding on the former, because the latter just seemed too ridiculous, she shrugged at his turned back. Then with a grin, she took off toward the tree line once more, actually making it to Bokusenou's roots.

Sliding within the hollow soundly, she barely missed the claws that swiped down into the ground.

"I see the children are out playing well after their bedtime," A wry voice observed. Kagome giggled, staring out at Sesshoumaru, delighting in his frustration. He knew she was in the hollow, but he could neither see nor smell nor touch her.

"You will have to come out sometime," He muttered, folding his legs beneath himself gracefully and gazing up into the trees face.

"News travels fast pups, congratulations of your victories," Bokusenou told them in his gravely, old voice. Kagome leaned against the wall of the hollow and sighed gratefully.

"Thanks," She told him.

"I have heard rumor that a daiyoukai has accepted a miko into his pack. Strange days," The tree observed.

"It is a sound plan," Sesshoumaru started, almost defensive.

"Indeed. Your friend Resshin informed me of it. Had the grace to inform me of his mating as well. It seems that as we leave winter, true spring finally arrives in our land, the first in a few years."

"It is, isn't it?" Kagome sighed. "It feels like the world is beginning to breath again."
"There you have it child, very rightly so."

Peeking from behind roots that framed the hollow, she saw Sesshoumaru contemplating the tree quietly. Pulling herself out, she was pushing herself up when something shot around her wrist and pulled it from under her, a repeat of his earlier tactic. Only this time, she ended up with her face in the dirt.

"You jerk!" She shouted. He flinched at her volume and she felt a moment of petty triumph as she wiped the dirt from her face.

"It is not this Sesshoumaru's fault that you leave yourself open," He retorted haughtily.

"Some things never change," Bokusenou murmured quietly as the miko began berating the daiyoukai for his behavior, even calling him 'boorish', which, if the tree were honest with himself, more than made his day.

'How did I get myself into this?'

Kotaeru, seeing her wandering aimlessly, had decided that as a miko, she shouldn't have time to shuffle around as she had been. Granted it was her first free day since her 'introduction' as Sesshoumaru's new pack mate, but apparently it was too much for the weapons master. He had shown her the practice targets behind the dojo and thrown a longbow and quiver her way without even looking at her. Barely catching them, she held her breath and counted to ten, determined to keep her cool. Kotaeru was the weapons master of the shiro, which was a very high honor, and the last thing she wanted to do was offend someone that Sesshoumaru obviously valued.

"Shoot the center target," He barked. Controlling her growing agitation, she pulled the line taught at let her arrow fly. When it found the bulls eye, she took a moment to look at him, only to find that apparently, looking to him for any sort of confirmation was a mistake.

"Empty the quiver," He commanded sharply, as if she was stupid for not doing so on her own. Grumbling under her breath, she continued pulling the arrows from the quiver of her shoulder and positioning them in one fluid motion, every move becoming a single fluid motion as she released arrow after arrow. Once she reached back to find the quiver empty, she stopped and looked to him.

"Your aim's not bad, neither is your form. Could use a bit of work. Ever done that mounted?" He demanded.

"A few times," She began.

"Well, a few isn't enough. We'll get you mounted, a horse first, maybe get you on a dragon after," He observed. "Do you have a good seat?"

"I don't understand," She started, only to be interrupted once more.

"Do you ride well, are you comfortable?"

"I'm fine on a dragon, I've never ridden a horse," She shot out, determined to finish at least one sentence. Kotaeru nodded thoughtfully, eyes considering her. The stare would have felt intrusive if it hadn't been so impersonal. As it was, she still wanted to break the bow over his head for his attitude.

"You start tomorrow, mounted practice. Won't have anyone saying you're helpless," He snorted. "Especially not while I'm here, that would be worse than shameful."
"I'm not helpless," She ground out, eyes flashing angrily. A patronizing smile danced on his lips and she turned to the target and pulled the bowstring back.

"Don't think you'll do much of any...thing-" He stopped, eyes wide as her energy focused into a pointed line. Releasing it as she would any bow, it crashed into the target, ripping it apart as it exploded upon contact with the straw and fabric.

"Well, you're going to be a fun one," Kaotaeru fairly crowed, smiling down at her. "If you can do that, can't wait to see what you do once you learn to shoot while on the move."

"Are you a sadist, or a masochist, I can't quite tell," Kagome muttered.

"Depends on the day. For you, I'll probably be a sadist, unless you turn out to be a complete fool, and Shinzuru has faith in you, so you've got to have some brains, even if you are human."

"Because how could we poor, defenseless, dumb humans survive the almighty youkai otherwise?" Her words dripping with sarcasm.

"Dunno, haven't left one alive long enough to find out," He replied, his voice flat. Kagome stopped and turned, wondering if perhaps lessons were a bad idea, and saw the mirth dancing in his eyes.

"You're as bad as Shinzuru!" She accused.

"I might just be," He chuckled. "I'm sure you've got your own things to see to, so you best get inside. But be here tomorrow, we'll go to the stables and find you a suitable mount. After some lessons on horseback riding we'll see if you can use a bow without breaking your neck."

"Sounds fun," She replied dryly.

"Better than just walking around blind, innit?"

"Thank you," She told him, summoning a smile. Just because she wasn't looking forward to the lessons didn't mean she had to act ungrateful. And he was right, wandering around doing nothing didn't suit her anymore.
Sesshoumaru was looking over several more 'candidates' for the third house when he caught the scent outside of his door. Relief and impatience both warred within him and he had to force himself to calmly permit their entrance. When the door slid back and the two youkai entered, he gestured for them to take a seat as he moved the scrolls to the side.

"Perhaps you are wondering why you have been summoned here," Sesshoumaru began.

"You could say that. The monk told me I needed to come straight here, but I needed to go to my tribe first and make sure everyone was okay," Kouga muttered, as if the daiyoukai's command had been a great inconvenience.

Toran, her blue eyes ever calculating, merely watched and waited patiently.

"This Sesshoumaru is at an impasse. Three of the great houses fell to Naraku. I have come to the conclusion that both of you are suited to filling the roles of two of those houses."

He had expected reluctance, especially from the wolf, but he did not expect the male to suddenly jump up and head for the door.

"You do not wish to rule?" Toran asked, breaking her silence. Her cold voice reached the wolf and he turned smartly on his heel to glare at her.

"First off, it's got to be a joke. Second off, do I look like the kind of guy that could handle ruling a territory? I don't need that kind of bullshit," Kouga snarled. "I have to take care of my pack first."

"It is because you do not want to rule that you are most suited. You will not be bought, you will not be led, and you know first hand the cost of war. Your pack has suffered, and you have shown willingness to sacrifice your own wants and needs for their well being. Those qualities are a necessity when ruling a territory," Sesshoumaru intoned. "I would not ask this lightly. In fact I am fighting against my council because they're candidates would be puppets, if not less."

"You have no love lost with my tribe. Why would you give me such a position, especially if you have to fight so for it?" She demanded.

"Because you are strong, and you have a tribe at your back already. You too know the cost of war and revenge, and will not choose such routes with haste. The land is broken, but healing. There must be people that know how to care and plan and fight, should it become necessary, in the empty seats."
"No ulterior motive?" She asked, eyes narrowed in suspicion.

"I ask no favors. Unfortunately the choice falls to me. Some have foolishly suggested I take all four houses as my own. I have no desire to do so. Our land requires balance."

"Do you have anyone in mind for the fourth seat?" She asked.

"He still needs someone to fill mine, because there's no way I'm-"

"The miko is willing to support your claim," Sesshoumaru interrupted, hoping the mention of the priestess would calm him. As it was, he sat down abruptly, as if completely flabbergasted that Kagome would support him in such an endeavor. "She has faith that you are capable," He continued, manipulating the lingering traces of Kouga's feelings into working for him. Even as he did so he felt dishonest, but there were no choices left. He couldn't even choose a candidate for the fourth seat, and with each day that passed the skirmishes in each territory were growing worse.

"What does it entail?" Kouga asked dumbly, as if still shocked by Sesshoumaru's confession.

"Many have abused their rights and their power before this. If you want the truth, there are no rules. But if you abuse your powers, it will not be long before you are removed by your own people or a challenger. I patrol my lands every season to see it's state for myself, and answer any serious threats found by those doing more regular patrols as soon as I get the reports. I keep the bandit problem under control, and I try to make sure my lands prosper, although they tend to do well enough on their own."

"That's it?" Kouga asked in disbelief.

"No, but that's the simple version," Toran answered, still eying the daiyoukai warily. "Why don't you want all four territories for yourself Sesshoumaru? It's not like you to just pass by an opportunity like this."

"As I have stated, this land requires balance to prosper. I would see it restored."

There were several moments of tense silence where Sesshoumaru watched the two youkai, so diametrically opposite, mull over the offer. Kouga's blue eyes were cast to the floor, flocking back and forth as his thoughts raced. Even if Sesshoumaru couldn't smell his emotions, he could easily pick them out on the wolf's face. Toran however, smelled of nothing but ice, and her blue eyes were carefully neutral as she considered the idea.

"I think I might be up to it. The others won't mind. Beats the nomadic life," She finally shrugged carelessly. For once he was unable to tell anything about someone's thoughts, and not entirely pleased by the fact, he looked to Kouga.

"Can I talk to Kagome about this first? I just need to sort some stuff out. Ayame too."

"It is midday. I believe the miko is taking riding lessons," Sesshoumaru observed.

"Riding lessons? But she's great on that dragon of yours," Kouga sputtered.

"My weapons master has seen fit to have her learn mounted archery, starting with horses," He explained, wondering why he was taking the time to do so. "Is your future mate with you?"

"Yeah, wouldn't let me come without her. I have no idea where they took her," He added.

"The servant outside will guide you and the female to the training yard." It was petty of him, he
knew, to not mention Kotaeru's utter hatred of being interrupted. But the weapons master's request had been a surprise he still wasn't sure how to process. The miko was apparently bored, and out of curiosity he had tested her strength with a bow. Satisfied, he wanted to improve on it. There was also the matter of the miko's ability, which he had yet to be informed of. Kotaeru, being who he was and what he was, had merely hinted at it with a vague sense of excitement.

"You have a miko learning mounted archery in your home?" Toran asked, brows lifted in surprise. He eyed her carefully, feeling as if he was playing a strategy game. He had little doubt she knew exactly who Kagome was and why she was in the shiro.

"She is the miko the guards the shikon jewel, and also part of this Sesshoumaru's pack."

"Must be handy to have around." Her words sounded careless, but more and more he was getting the feeling that her interest in the miko ran deeper than mere careless curiosity.

"Her abilities are a boon," He replied blandly.

"Any chance I could see them in action?" She asked.

"This Sesshoumaru has little reason to believe so. The miko has little desire to dabble in court life, instead she focuses on her training and children."

"A miko with children? Well, the human monks are notorious for not adhering to their vows, but the miko? How are her powers still-"

"She adopted orphans of the war."

"Humans?"

"And youkai and hanyou," He replied, taking extra care with how he phrased his words. There was something in the blue eyes that set him on edge. Writing it off to his inability to read them, and her as a whole, he brought the papers he had been looking at and began to explain the bandit problems in the northern territory.

Kagome held tight to the reins, letting herself rock with the gait of the horse as the stallion beneath her, still amazed at how easy it was to direct him. Deep, rich brown hair glistened in the sun, and his mane looked tempting enough to run her fingers through. She had been informed that his name was Boufu, and he had taken to her immediately, despite the stableman's initial misgivings.

"Squeezing your knees will make him go faster," Kotaeru commanded. Because, as Kagome was learning, any new piece of information was indirectly a command to use it, she got ready. Squeezing her knees gently, the horse below her sped up. Her hair, which she had tied back with a strip of cloth, bounced a few times, and feeling herself rising from the saddle, she made the mistake of squeezing her knees to keep her seat.

After a few seconds of fear, she came to the conclusion it was the most glorious mistake she'd ever made. She held tight to Boufuu's reigns, feeling her hair pulling loose from the tie binding it. Within seconds it gave up the ghost and her hair was flying around her face wildly as Boufuu tore down the field, kicking up dirt clods as he went.

"You are amazing," She called to the horse, barely able to hear herself over the sound of his gallop. He took a sharp turn at the large wall that separate the shiro from the rest of the world. Feeling free for the first time in months, gave a carefree laugh as he approached Kotaeru. Slowing him down by pulling on his reins lightly, he obeyed without complaint, slowing to a canter as he brought her to
"That was some fine riding," Kotaeru commented. "Not that I wanted you tackle a gallop on your first day, not with him especially. Seems he's taken a liking to you," He finished.

"Kouga, Ayame!" Kagome cried, dismounting smoothly. The transition from a giant saddle to a normal sized one wasn't an issue, especially after spending all morning mounting and dismounting different horses, trying to find one that suited her.

"Looks like you're having fun," Ayame chuckled, taking in Kagome's mussed appearance. Despite her tangled hair, her eyes were bright and her cheeks flushed with joy. Boufuu stamped his foot impatiently and Kagome rubbed the bridge of his nose affectionately with a laugh.

"Kotaeru, could you take him to the stable, I'd do it, but I haven't seen either of them in awhile," Kagome said, torn between going to the stable and rubbing the horse down herself or letting a stable hand do it.

"Go talk with your friends. Since your seats so good, we start training tomorrow, don't be late," He warned.

"Wouldn't dream of it," She laughed, the sound still holding the note of carefree awe she had felt moments ago.

"Seems the royal life's treating you pretty good," Kouga joked. Ayame punched his arm playfully, giving him a glare. Kagome waved the comment off as they walked to the shiro, Kagome giving the obviously new couple a couple of feet of distance.

"I don't have a lot to do with the royal life. I train a lot, at least while the kids are with Tenka for schooling. I visit Bokusenou, deal with those royal pain in the ass kitsune," She chuckled.

"Huh?" Kouga asked, confused.

"It's kind of a long story, but they're a set of kitsune twins that offered to teach Shippou, and all of the children wanted to learn their tricks. It's been keeping everyone in the shiro on their toes. All the highborns too, at least on court days. Right now there's just a lot going on, trying to clean up Naraku's mess," She sighed. "Not a lot I can do to help that."

"Sesshoumaru said you would support Kouga if he decided to take leadership of one of the territories," Ayame bluntly stated as Kagome opened the door into the shiro. Stalling for time, she toed off her boots and stepped inside.

"We should probably have some lunch while we talk about this," She sighed. A servant was nearby, walking quietly from one duty to another, and she asked if they could have someone send lunch to her room. The servant nodded happily, pleased with the new addition to the household. Her politeness to all of the staff and love for the children that ran the halls had made her a bit of a favorite in their eyes, though she'd never know it.

Kouga and Ayame followed her through the spacious mansion, eyes wide as they took in the sheer size of it. Almost all of the rooms where hidden behind closed doors, but there were subtle signs of wealth. Silk paintings of historical battles were featured in every hall, usually only one, but never more than two.

Kagome walked past it all, oblivious, as she led them up two flights of stairs and into the family wing. The guards watched them carefully, as if unsure of their presence. Still Kagome moved on, completely oblivious to all, until she reached her rooms and opened the door, inviting them into the
"How was your journey?" Kagome asked quietly.

"Damnit, we are not here to talk about the journey," Ayame snapped. Kagome flinched, sighed, and held up her hand to stop the demoness from continuing her rant.

"I don't want to be interrupted by the food being brought in, and it should only be a few more minutes. I promise I'm not trying to avoid this," She declared.

"The taijiya, she hates youkai. All youkai. Wouldn't even look at me when she left to go rebuild her village. Her talk, it doesn't bode well for you or Sesshoumaru," Kouga said, his eyes lined with worry. "She kept talking about how the jewel belonged in the care of people who wouldn't be tainted by it. Guess she meant her or her village, something. Just be careful around her," He finished.

"Sango is still angry, but Miroku will talk her down. It'll just take time," She replied with quiet confidence. "Have your wounds healed?"

"Yeah, no thanks to you. Next time you try to get free and do something stupid, don't hit me where I've just been sliced open and hit with a dragon's lightning," He chuckled, remembering the moment she'd punched his side to get away.

"I'm sorry about that, but I was worried about Miroku," She flushed, choosing to look at the table instead of her friend.

"It's alright, I would have done the same. Well, maybe."

The doors to her room slid open and servants came in carrying trays laden with food. Another had a tea set and offered to stay and pour. Kagome declined and told them she needed privacy with the wolf couple, then thanked them profusely for the repast. Once the doors clicked shut, she leaned against the table, as if searching for where to begin.

"Sesshoumaru was the one to suggest it. He believes you can do it, and so do I. You can lead people, you can inspire them to follow willingly instead of forcing them, which is more than can be said of some lords. And you know that sometimes not fighting is the best answer. I don't think the land, the people, anything, can handle another war right now. And there are a lot of people still scared to go back and rebuild their homes because there are still problems with the bandits."

"It's so much responsibility though," Kouga began.

"I'm not saying it isn't," She cut in. "But you know it's responsibility, not power. That's part of the reason you're a good choice for this. You'd care about your people, and you wouldn't be some petty tyrant that bleeds his everything dry. I don't see you doing this," She said, gesturing the the walls around her. "You don't have to. Being a territory leader doesn't mean you have to be like Sesshoumaru. In fact, should you feel the need to emulate him, I'll have Ah Un zap you again just so I can punch you," She finished with an impish grin. The joke allowed both Ayame and Kouga relax.

"I don't know how to be a territory lord though," He sighed at last, as if it were his own fault. Kagome rolled her eyes, wondering at the silliness of males.

"Sesshoumaru can help," She started, then laughed at the stunned looks on their faces. "He wants the land healed as badly as everyone else, and despite his lack of social skills, he's actually a good leader and an honorable ruler. If you ask him, he'll help you." The assurance held all the sincerity in the world, and both wolves, knowing what she had gone through, marveled at her easy way of speaking of the daiyoukai.
"Are you sure Sesshoumaru isn't controlling her mind somehow?" Ayame asked in a mock whisper, eyes still on Kagome. Kagome pretended to be indignant as she used her chopsticks to deftly throw a piece of fish in her direction. And after so much practice with her own children, it found it's mark, hitting the wolf squarely in the forehead and sticking for a moment before falling to the table with a small splat.

"We should eat, and you can think on what I've said. If you want, you can stay the night," She offered. Kouga nodded his gratitude as he absently ate, mind still stuck on both Kagome and Sesshoumaru's declarations.

Kagome looked over her shoulder, feeling like a sneak thief as she scurried through the shiro. The lanterns had been dimmed, and shadows flickered over the walls as she ghosted along, trying her best to be quiet. Both guards eyed her curiously and she murmured a small greeting. The stairs, kept in good repair, did not betray her with a squeak or a groan as she took them. Relieved when she encountered no servants, her path took her quietly from the shiro.

Once outside, she began her run, feeling free and giddy, as if making an escape. Determined to find her way, she tried to triangulate her position, only vaguely aware of where her goal lay. Once she oriented herself, at least she hoped, she set off in the direction of the stables.

It was moving late into the night, and after tripping over her own feet several times, she was able to find the stables and sneak in. Grateful to see the servants gone, she began searching through each stall until she found her intended prize.

"Hello," She whispered as she opened the stall door. "I was hoping you wouldn't mind going for a ride." Her tone was soft and breathy, tinged with excitement. Boufuu stamped his hoof against the dirt floor, the noise issuing from his mouth one of agreement.

Kagome led him out and affixed a simple bridle to his head, grateful Sesshoumaru's stablemen didn't believe in bits. Using a mounting block, she boosted herself up and leaned down as the tall horse took her from inside the stable toward the practice fields.

The gate was still open, not uncommon since the horses (what few there were) were never alone inside of it. She squeezed her knees, urging him into a canter. After he paced around the field twice, his movement s became restless, and she leaned down.

"Go as fast as you want," She told him, not really expecting him to understand. She gave her command a reinforcement with her knees and felt him start forward, beginning in a lunge and building up to a flat gallop. As he gained speed, she laughed again, feeling her hair once again tugged free of it's confines. Letting him take the head, trusting implicitly that he wouldn't do anything to harm her, she held on, delighting in adrenaline that coursed through her as the wind hit her face.

So enraptured was she, that she didn't notice the stable hand, drawn from sleep by the noise of a horse galloping up and down the training field. He smiled, went to go find the stable master, who slept in a small attic like room over the stables. Once they returned, they watched the strange human as she zigged and zagged all over the practice field, completely oblivious of her audience.

"I see the miko is taking to her training," Sesshoumaru commented wryly. A servant had come to his office and informed him the miko was sneaking out. He had demanded to know if she moved in the night, determined to find out how she had escaped the shiro before their journey to Naraku. Instead, he had followed her scent and found her being watched by the stable master and stable hand, both leaning on the fence, small smiles on their faces.
"Hard to tell where the woman ends and the horse begins, isn't it?" The boy observed. "That horse hasn't let anyone ride him, we were worried we'd have to sell him, and he's a magnificent piece of horseflesh. But right as rain, he allows her. Acts like a puppy for her to be sure," He laughed.

"It's rare to see anyone enjoy riding that much, if you don't mind me saying so sir," His stable master commented, turning to give him an acknowledging glance. "You prefer your dragon, and he suits you. We don't have many that need the horses. But her, she's bonded with that one fast. And riding gives her joy. Isn't a secret that she was in harm's way more than once, and that it had it's way with her. Seems she's earned some small pleasures in her life."

Boufuu, sides heaving sweating, began to slow, approaching the men at the fence. Kagome, looking only slightly apologetic, as it was hard to look anything but happy with such a huge grin on her face, bowed her head and murmured an apology.

"No need. Taru just heard the noise and came to make sure he hadn't gotten out. Been a demon, that one has," The stable master told her.

"Oh, you're not a demon," She murmured, running her hands through the rich auburn mane. The horse made a noise that was not quite agreement and she laughed, the noise mixing with a snickering sound from the horse that sounded suspiciously similar.

Sesshoumaru took a moment to wonder at the change present in the miko. Realizing that she looked happy, which was rare enough, it was the magnitude of that happiness. Her children brought her delight and she radiated love even when they were mentioned. But this happiness had a subtle difference. Shrugging it off, he watched as she slid down from the horses back.

"Riding bareback? Oh Kotaeru's going to want to know about that. He was fairly chomping the bit himself when he saw how good a rider you are. Has plans for you, I'd say."

"Whatever makes me a better fighter," She laughed, rubbing the bridge of her new friend's nose affectionately before allowing him to be led away.

"You snuck out," Sesshoumaru observed as they headed back to the shiro.

"I'm sorry. Everyone was asleep, oh, they didn't wane you up did they? I just couldn't sleep and Boufuu," She started.

"This Sesshoumaru was awake. Your wolf came to me this evening and said he would accept the position as head of the Eastern house. Strangely he has for my help."

"Why would that be strange?" Kagome demanded, stopping to give him a hard look. "Your lands were the only ones that didn't fall to Naraku," She stated hotly.

"It is strange because I think help is something the wolf rarely asks for. He doubts himself heavily. His lands did fall beneath the hanyou, and he fears losing much more should something happen again."

"But it won't. No one will get the jewel and become that powerful ever again," She promised. "You didn't tease him, did you?" She added, wondering if the daiyoukai had said something that would make Kouga back down. "I told him you would help."

"I agreed, and I said nothing to make him feel the lesser for asking. He is wise to know when he needs aid."

"Good," Kagome nodded, slipping her boots off as they came to the door. Sesshoumaru took in her
bedraggled appearance and decided not keep silent on the matter. The miko had earned her happiness. He watched her scamper off with a goodnight, moving up the hall, almost skipping as she went.

He then acknowledged the cold scent of winter that had been hanging back as he had seen her off.

"You can stop hiding," Sesshoumaru commanded.

"Your little miko is reckless. I haven't seen humans ride like that before," Toran observed dispassionately.

"She is more than capable," He replied blandly.

"As you say. A curious little human. Was she the one to travel with your half brother?"

"You know that she is."

"It is a strange state of affairs that puts a miko and a daiyoukai together," She added, a hint of mirth entering her tone. "But, I saw what I needed to."

"And what is that?" He demanded coolly.

"It's obvious there is nothing there, so there is nothing to fear."

"This Sesshoumaru wonders what it is you imply."

"Nothing, and that's precisely it. Goodnight, Sesshoumaru of the west." With that, she slunk into the shadows, moving with a predatory grace that he would have appreciated at another time. Now, she just sent his hackles up, and he wondered what she was planning.

After a moments thought, he determined to save that problem for when it arose. He had more pressing matters, such as the paperwork on his desk and finding a suitable candidate for the fourth house. He hoped to find one soon, so the refugees in his lands could go back to their homes and begin the spring planting before it became too late.

Lurking in the back if his head was the worry about the miko's presence at the council meeting where he would announce his choice. It had not yet dawned on her that she would actually have to show up to declare her support, and despite his intention to remind her, there had been something about her carefree happiness that he had been hesitant to intrude upon. Cursing himself for going soft, he resolved to remind her in the morning.

Kagome awoke feeling, for the first time in recent memory, eager to greet the day. Still reeling from her ride the night before, her own dreams had been filled with images of eating up the ground beneath her as she rode hard and fast through some unnamed field. The smell of crushed grass still lingered pleasantly, and the phantom warmth of a sunny day banished any chills as she moved from beneath the covers. Quickly washing her face in the basin, she moved to her trunks and opened one, pulling the linen robes out delighting in the herbal scent of the clothing.

Once changed, she hummed softly as she walked through the doors separating the three rooms, intent of having breakfast with her children when she was stopped short by the sight of Sesshoumaru sitting in the main receiving area, looking bored.

"What are you doing here?" She demanded, feeling as if he had trespassed on her private domain.
"Your presence is required in the council room today. I will announce my choices, and the wolf will need your support." His statement clearly stunned her, as if she hadn't considered the need to go before the council at all.

"Do I have to?" She finally asked dully.

"It would help your friend. But we do not meet until later in the day. The children are waiting. The wolf and his future mate were spotted by the kit and convinced to share their breakfast as well."

With that admission, the young woman visibly brightened and Sesshoumaru followed sedately behind the practically bouncing woman as they moved past the ever silent guards and down the stairs. Her eyes were bright as she almost ended at the doors to the classroom in a run, slightly breathless and smiling.

"Mama!" A chorus of cries greeted her. Stunned, she dropped to her knees and welcomed hugs from all of the children. It marked the first time any but Shippou had called her mother, and to hear the resounding echo through the classroom provoked tears.

"Are you alright, you didn't hurt your knee did you?" Tegatai asked, eyes filled with concern when he saw her eyes shimmering.

"No, I'm just very happy," She murmured, pulling him to her and giving him a tight squeeze. Everyone quickly departed, young minds quickly flitting to other things, such as their stomachs and food. Kagome followed, silent in the wake of their chattering, and found a seat across from Kouga and Ayame, who were staring at her incredulously.

"You've got quite a litter there," Kouga finally snorted. Ayame elbowed him and muttered something too low for Kagome to hear. "What?" He demanded, eye wide as his shoulders came up defensively. "She's got more children than our whole pack does!"


"Might as well," Kagome laughed. "Some of them are youkai, some hanyou. Either way, unless we can find surviving relatives, they're here to stay." Smiling brightly as she looked over the tables, she missed the knowing looks the two wolves gave one another.

"It might be a good idea to bring orphans found into the houses," Ayame murmured thoughtfully. "At least until we can find them homes with others of their breed. If we can't or they wish to stay, it could foster better relations, show we're serious about caring for the people."

"That's a great idea!" Kagome exclaimed, eyes already bright with ideas. "It could also be a big help with human youkai relations!"

"Er, I ah, I don't think most humans would take kindly to youkai fostering human children," Kouga muttered, looking to Sesshoumaru apologetically. "Besides, most kids find homes with their relatives or someone in their village will take 'em in."

"Not all. But with the need to rebuild most would be willing to take in extra children for the help for the crops," The daiyoukai observed. "It is the youkai and hanyou children that will have a more difficult time finding new homes."

Both wolves stared at the daiyoukai in shock. Kouga and Ayame both knew of Sesshoumaru's hatred for Inu Yasha, and knew that part of it stemmed from Inu Yasha's dual bloodline. That he would include hanyou children in his statement had left the effectively speechless.
"It would be good for them to have a home," Kagome murmured, eyes bright with admiration. Sesshoumaru inclined his head and went back to eating his breakfast.

"The council meets this afternoon. You should hurry, Kotaeru will have heard of your ride by now, and meeting or no, if you don't show up at the field he'll find you," Sesshoumaru reminded her. Kagome blushed and began digging into her food eagerly. The soon to be eastern lord and his future mate watched the miko as she finished the bowl of rice and vegetables in minutes before murmuring a quick goodbye to them.

The children, immediately noticing her departure, all shouted their own goodbyes and she promised to play with them that evening. Once she was gone, Sesshoumaru stood, ready to make his own escape.

"She's doing a lot better than she was," Kouga observed, eyes steady on the daiyoukai. "Her scent's changed." Sesshoumaru heard the question in it, and was willing to let it go, except he would have to deal with Kouga in the future, and he didn't want to make those times difficult for himself.

"On our way back to the shiro, we encountered the bandit group that captured her."

"Was there justice?" Kouga asked quietly, eyes glittering in rage. Sesshoumaru could tell he wanted details, but refrained in the presence of the children.

"There was," Sesshoumaru replied blandly.

"Good. So between that and the kids huh? Well, at least she's smiling again," Kouga answered, forcing himself to relax muscles that had tensed against his will. Ayame too looked satisfied, as if the daiyoukai’s words had brought her pleasure.

Sesshoumaru thought of the young miko riding the horse like a demon through the field and found that he was pleased with his new packmate's sudden zest for life.

"She will heal, in time."

Kagome practically blew into the council chambers, hair in a messy braid down her back and cheeks flushed. Sesshoumaru could smell the oil used to soothe the saddles his mounts wore and the distinct tang of horse and sweat heavily upon her person, mixed with the scent of crushed grass. Beneath it, more subtle, were the scents of honeysuckle and clover that seemed to exude from the miko.

"It is good that the lady has decided to join us," One adviser snapped impatiently Kagome gave a small bow and took the last open seat, between Mizu and Shinzuru.

"I apologize for my rudeness. The weapons master is a good teacher, but a demanding one," She murmured.

"Kotaeru is teaching you?" The same self important youkai asked, eyebrows practically reaching his hairline in surprise. Kagome nodded, still trying to catch her breath from running to the chambers.

"The miko is learning mounted archery. Rumor has it she rides as if born on a horse," Shinzuru laughed. Kagome blushed at the compliment, aware of all eyes on her. "She even got that demon that almost trampled you, Hade," He slyly replied, glancing at one of the other high born advisers. The bird youkai looked startled for a moment, then concealed anger quickly behind his blue eyes.

"Perhaps his temperament makes him more suited to women," The youkai murmured, although not entirely without malice.
"Enough. That is not why we are here today," Sesshoumaru said, effectively silencing the room. All eyes swung to him in expectation. "I have selected youkai for the two houses," He announced.

The room erupted into pandemonium before he even gestured to the ookami or the panther. Shinzuru, Kagome, and the twins both watched, slightly amused as the high born advisers all blustered and raged about the daiyoukai not even considering their own suggestions. Kagome felt a twinge of sympathy for Kouga and Ayame, they looked distinctly uncomfortable as all sorts of epithets were piled on them. Toran looked so disinterested the shouting might have been occurring on another planet.

"Silence!" Sesshoumaru's voice boomed throughout the chamber. Kagome's eyes widened in surprise, she'd never once heard the youkai shout, and if it hadn't been such an extraordinary occurrence, she might have flinched like everyone else in the room.

"Miko," Sesshoumaru said, his voice once more a calm, modulated whisper. She stood, knowing they hated her, feeling their energies looking for something, someone, anyone to blame. And she was about to make herself the perfect target.

"I give my support to Kouga of the wolf tribes," She began, trying to recall every scrap of protocol she could and forcing every bit of ice into her tone she could muster. Her nervousness only made it easier to impersonate the icy daiyoukai. "He exhibits the qualities of a great leader. None of your candidates chose to aid Sesshoumaru in his quest to destroy Naraku. All of them were safe here, risking nothing. Kouga risked himself for his clan time and again. He has fought bravely for years, for his clan and for honor," She paused, looking for the right thing to say. "There is no better choice for the East," She finished, her voice ringing with conviction. Despite the sincerity of her words, she saw the youkai weren't listening.

"Sesshoumaru-sama, I know she is new pack, and that allowances are made, but are you really going to listen to the suggestion of a human female?" The blue eyed youkai asked, his hands gesturing to her rudely. More insults flew in the guise of warnings, and like the first time she'd sat in the chamber, her powers swelled.

The difference was, this time it was a controlled growth. Quickly and quietly her ki spiraled, so smoothly none noticed save those seated next to her and a slightly annoyed daiyoukai. She slammed her hands down onto the table, willing her words to sound divine, hoping the theatrics weren't going to be too much. The moment her hands touched the table, the power swelled out, knocking the highborns back and sending a rosy pink glow through the room.

"I am no mere human woman. Think before you make such inane accusations against my alpha. Kouga was chosen by him, and I support both my alpha's choice and the wolf's claim," She declared. Her words seemed to carry through the room, and through a haze of pink light she saw the shock and awe on several youkai faces. When she turned to Sesshoumaru, she saw he only looked slightly amused. She pulled the power back within herself, pushing it down deep and smiled politely.

"We will not be intimidated," A shaky voice began.

"I will not be insulted. You may be his advisers," She said, throwing her thumb in the daiyoukai's direction. "But I am his pack, and what's more, I refuse to submit to anyone's abuse. He might be angry if I purify you, but you'll still be gone." Her tone was pleasant, so much so in fact they seemed to be having a hard time understanding her words or the threat implied. "Now, he has made his choices. I voiced my support, and why I support the decision. I am sure he will look into your candidates for the last choice."

"They will be taken into consideration," He agreed, although Kagome could tell he'd already
"Now, how about we all try to act like calm, rational beings, and get on with this. I'm sure there's a hellish amount of paperwork for everyone involved, and the sooner this is over, the better," She added brightly, smiling a big, false smile that dripped sweetness.

"Maybe you should come to these more often," Shinzuru whispered as she leaned back from the table. Kagome stifled a giggle as she watched each youkai that had their own candidates already formulating plans to get the last house. Sesshoumaru's inability to choose a final one might work out for the meeting. So distracted by their own plotting, the advisers barely said anything as Sesshoumaru outlined his plans for the two houses.

Once the meeting was called to a close, the highborn advisers rushed out, and Kagome wondered if it was because they wanted away from her or because they were eager to set their own plans into motion.

"Why are they even advisers?" She asked after the last one had filed out.

"Because those silly 'nobles'," Kasai spat the word venomously, "Are supposed to have a voice in his ear, and if he doesn't, they get pissy. Plus it helps to keep an eye on what they're up to," He added.

"I won't have to deal with that, will I?" Kouga asked.

"Only if you choose to. In a few decades you might be pressured to, but hold off as long as you can. By then you should have your legs under you," Mizu offered. Kagome felt another flicker of pity at the discomfort in both Ayame and Kouga's auras.

"First the land and the people, then the silly court crap," She told them sympathetically. "Besides, part of the reason Sesshoumaru chose you is because you won't be led easily by scheming overgrown brats like that," She added with a smile. Kouga seemed slightly comforted by the idea and allowed himself to relax.

"You really should come to more council meetings. We've never had an argument like that, but you could stop the windbags in their tracks when they get too uppity," Shinzuru laughed. Kagome shrugged helplessly.

"I don't like the idea that they think Kouga was just my idea and Sesshoumaru went along with it. He's been thinking really hard about this, and he wants everything to work out. To insinuate that he's just satisfying a whim of mine is beyond insulting to everyone involved." Her words sent a hum of appreciation rumbling through Sesshoumaru. Initially he had assumed her show of power had been because of the insults given to her, to find out she was more focused on defending his choices allowed a tense part of himself to relax.

"Well, I've seen enough. I'll gather my clan and we'll head to the northern stronghold. I plan to clear up any issues with bandits along the way, shouldn't be terribly hard. I take it you'll be sending out word that the refugees can being making their way back," Toran stated as she moved to leave the room.

"It is as you say," Sesshoumaru answered. She left, the scent of snowlingering briefly before seeming to vanish.

"Did Kotaeru really keep you, or were you avoiding coming?" Kasai asked slyly.

"Oh, he really did keep me out there that long. It seems my midnight ride did reach him, and he's
gone completely mad trying to get me used to using a bow. It's harder than I thought it'd be," She sighed, slumping forward onto the table. "Riding Boufu is easy. Shooting a bow is easy. Doing both at the same time, not so much."

"It'll come with practice," Shinzuru assured. "Although we need to get you acquainted with something besides a bow. You need to learn how to use a weapon in close quarters combat," He insisted. Just as he was finishing his statement a dagger was in her hand, held loosely between her fingertips. Sesshoumaru allowed himself a small measure of pride when he saw the other youkai's face shift to surprise.

"And just when did you learn to use those?" Kouga demanded.

"Part of my defense training against humans," She shrugged carelessly. "I still practice even though I'm in the shiro. I haven't said anything to Kotaeru about it though. I don't know if he'll add some other sort of crazy training to my schedule."

"Our little miko is full of surprises," Mizu observed wryly. "One wonders if she truly needs anyone's protection."

"Never hurts," Kasai mumbled, still shaken by the sight of the slim dagger now hanging carelessly from between her fingertips. His eyebrows drew together when it slipped easily back into the wrist sheath, a fluid motion he could only half see.

"So, does anyone have an idea for the last candidate?" Shinzuru asked. "Besides that lot?"

"We could always ask Bokusenou," Kagome suggested. Sesshoumaru started, one of the more telling reactions he'd had all day, and almost groaned in disbelief.

"I will see to that tonight," He ground out, angry he hadn't thought of the idea himself. Finding another candidate was paramount, and he thought he'd been using all of his resources. Apparently he'd been wrong, and the miko's suggestion only grated at already exasperated nerves.

"Sesshoumaru?" Kagome asked.

"Yes, miko?"

"Can I talk to you for a second?" He nodded tightly and stood swiftly, striding the door. Kagome followed, eyes shaded with concern. Ignoring the mixed glances they both received, they left the room and moved down the hallway, putting some space between themselves and the youkai.

"You're angry," She murmured once they reached the end of the corridor.

"You assume much," He replied in as neutral a tone as he could manage.

"No, not really. Your energy, I've had to learn how to read it, remember? Did I say something wrong? I didn't undermine your opinion by suggesting Bokusenou, did I?" He turned to her, seeing that the fear was real. He wanted to laugh for a moment. She was very close to the truth, but not in the manner she thought. The others would think nothing of him asking the tree youkai for help, all that knew him respected him. But he felt undermined, in a hellish way.

"This Sesshoumaru did not think to do it. Finding replacements is my duty." It was more of an admission than he had intended to give, and he was surprised at himself for it.

"You've been battling off god knows how many of those so-called suggestions and dealing with your own territory," She replied gently. "We haven't even been back that long and you've managed
to gather support for me, deal with finding any possible relatives for the children, and you found two replacements, all while taking care of your own people. It's understandable that it didn't occur to you. I'm sure of you didn't have to deal with everything else it would have," She assured.

"This is my first priority. Those other things-"

"Those things are your people and your pack," She rebutted. "You can't solve every problem, not even the gods are able to do that. Stop trying to carry the world. I know you're doing everything you can, and it's more than anyone could do, and definitely more than anyone should be forced into doing."

He did not want to admit that the words were a balm for his troubled thoughts. He did not need validation from a human woman, did not want it. But the sentiment offered so freely and sincerely, with no attempt to flatter, was such a profound change from those he'd been forced to deal with that he allowed it to soothe the stress.

The thought occurred to him that perhaps another reason for having a pack was for moments like this. But the miko was well versed in reading the little signs of his emotions from his energy alone, and perhaps that made her unique. Realizing that he had said nothing, he straightened and inclined his head.

"I did something strange the other day," Kagome admitted. "And it's part of what Kotaeru has had me practicing," She added shyly. He felt his eyebrow raise as curiosity pushed itself to the forefront. The miko was many things, but shy was something he was not used to.

"You seem afraid to say what it is," Sesshoumaru observed blandly, determined to recover from his emotional slip.

"I made an arrow."

"This Sesshoumaru was not aware you were able to craft weaponry," he replied, his curiosity peaking. Not only was her nervousness salting the air heavily, the idea of her creating her own weaponry seemed more than a little absurd.

"From my energy," She admitted at last.

"Come, you will show this Sesshoumaru," He commanded, more than intrigued. If he had turned, he would have seen the knowing smile dancing on her lips and the flash if victory brightening her blue eyes.

A/N: Since this story has been written and I have so many projects I'm working on (including a couple of challenges AND the Valentines Day Exchange as well as a couple of other presents) I have decided to start posting more. Like, one every day or two. Or more. Possibly more. Probably more. I just have so much on my plate that trying to keep this on a regular schedule has been hectic. So. Be prepared. Lots of content to come.

Also, reviews. I do love them.
Kagome allowed herself to relax once they touched down at the shrine. Sesshoumaru looked tense, and she cast a sympathetic gaze in his direction before turning to see Nanmei walking towards her cheerfully.

"Kagome, it is good to see you," She said warmly, grasping both of Kagome's hands in her own and squeezing gently. Kagome smiled in return, anticipation already building for the event ahead.

"It's good to see you too," She replied.

"And these are all yours?" Nanmei asked, eying the gaggle of children staring at the woman unabashedly.

"They are."

"They are very lucky," She chuckled.

"So am I," The miko responded. "Now, all of you, you promised to obey Tenka and Jaken," Kagome said sternly. "I'm sure you all want to stretch your legs and play," She urged, watching the children break ranks noisily and stampede back outside the shrine gates and around the trees surrounding it. Kagome turned to Ah Un and pulled two wooden boxes, one large and one small, from the saddle bags and held them carefully, afraid to disturb the contents.

"Sesshoumaru-sama, Resshin is within the forest," Nanmei informed the daiyoukai with a small bow. He inclined his head in turn and turned on his heel, moving swiftly.

"If I didn't know better I'd say he was fleeing this place," Nanmei chuckled.

"Rin mentioned that holy men tried to take her away from him once. Some of the kids might be a bit shy around the priestesses as well, Zurui told me a miko tried to separate them while they were heading for Sesshoumaru's lands during the war."

Nanmei made a tsking sound and shook her head sadly. "Some people are very misguided. But they all managed to stay together in the end, which is what counts." Suddenly her face lit up and she tried to bite back a smile only to fail. "Come on, we need to go get ready." Kagome was surprised by the sudden eager, almost child like light that lit the woman's face and allowed herself to be drug deeper into the shrine. A small outbuilding held the dorms, simple rooms with cloth coverings for doors.
"It's strange to think that after tonight I'll never be here again," Nanmei murmured. "I've spent my whole life here, and until a year ago I thought I would end up as one of the sister's here. It's strange, how much can change in a year," She finished, her voice so low Kagome almost didn't hear it. Kagome, very much aware of how someone could change in a matter of months, nodded, her throat tightening.

"I'm sure you will both be very happy," Kagome assured the woman. Nanmei looked up, brightening visibly as she blinked tears back.

"No time to get weepy. There's a hot spring near here, and we've only got a few hours to get ready!" She exclaimed, as if the time had flown. She quickly showed Kagome her own temporary dormer and Kagome changed in a lightweight yukata. Once finished, she met Nanmei in the hall and they began to chat animatedly about what the ceremony would be like.

"So it's just exchanging vows? I figured it would be a lot more involved than that," Kagome commented as they walked the path to the hotspring. Already she could smell sulfur and minerals misting the air.

"Well, the mating mark is done in private of course!" Nanmei replied, scandalized. Kagome blushed, her ignorance of the mark itself and the whole ceremony embarrassing her.

"You really don't know, do you?" Nanmei asked, gaze softening at the miko's mortification. When Kagome shook her head, she launched into a lengthy explanation.

"There ceremony is declaring intent in front of the people's clans and the gods, like a human ceremony. Youkai gods are different. Some say youkai came before man, and they're the link between nature and humanity. I admit I'm still not sure. Either way, their gods demand blood, whereas our own ask for rice, sake, you know," Nanmei said. The speech was paused long enough for them to shed their yukata and step into the hot water. Kagome groaned, the last two days of riding soaking out of her abused muscles.

"I'm getting spoiled on that futon in the shiro. Sleeping on the ground bites," She sighed, feeling the hot water working miracles on tense back muscles. "And I love them, but trying to find a comfortable way to sleep with that many kids using you for a pillow is almost impossible," She laughed.

"I can see your point," Nanmei chuckled. Both took several minutes to enjoy the water, eyes closed as they drifted.

"So what is the mating mark? Is it like a tattoo or a bite or something?" Kagome asked eventually.

"I'm not entirely sure. Resshin said that it would hurt, but that it would bind my life to his. Mating marks are very serious for youkai, more so than marriage has been to any human I've ever met," Nanmei explained. "I'm not entirely sure what to expect tonight. The miko are trying hard to help, but almost all of them came into the shrine as little girls," Nanmei sighed. Kagome opened her eyes and saw the discomfort in the woman's expression and pushed herself up against the edge of the spring, wondering how to broach that conversation, and if Nanmei was asking for advice.

"Where I'm from, sex is more casual than here," Kagome started. "I never, well, I never went that far, but I know how it works, if you have any questions," She offered. "My mom explained it to me when I told her how I felt about-well, she explained it to me."

"In the land of the blind, the one eyed man is king," Nanmei laughed. "I don't really know what to ask. I've seen the animals in the forest, I know the differences. But I feel strange, sometimes,"
Nanmei admitted.

Kagome was having a difficult time, and she prayed her discomfort wasn't showing. She didn't want to think about sex, ever. The very idea made her stomach roll dangerously and she fought nausea that dizzied her. But Nanmei had been so kind to her, and she wanted to give her some sort of reassurance.

"It'll be very special for you both. The fundamentals are the same with animals I guess," She awkwardly started. "But the strange feeling is normal. It's your body getting itself ready to make love to him. It'll hurt at first, although my mom said the pain is different for everyone, and some don't feel pain at all. But after that it gets a lot better. I'm sure he'll be patient. Umm, the rest, well, my mom said it's important to learn one another and teach each other. I guess that's all I really know," She laughed uncomfortably while running a nervous hand through her hair.

"Thank you Kagome. I feel a lot better now, knowing. And I can tell it's hard for you. Resshin hinted at-"

"No, not today. Today is your day and it's going to be a magical, happy, wondrous day!" Kagome commanded in a firm tone. "How often is it someone mates the youkai they love after all," She teased, determined to lighten the mood.

"Only once that I can think of," Nanmei laughed. I brought some soap by the way," She added, handing Kagome a small cake.

"Of course, ooh, my favorite!" She sighed, inhaling gratefully. "It smells like the forest after it rains," She explained, seeing the bemused expression on the other woman's face.

"I'll make sure to tell Norin that, I don't think any of her soaps have ever had poetry dedicated to them," She laughed. Kagome blushed hotly but began soaping her hair and washing two days of travel dust and sweat from it. By the time she and Nanmei were done, soap bubbles decorated the top of the spring water and the already murky water even more so. They towelled off, enjoying the combined warmth of the sun and the hot spring.

"Do you have any idea how to tie and obi?" Kagome asked, thinking on the box Sesshoumaru had handed to her.

"I do. Can you help me with my hair?" Nanmei asked absentmindedly.

"I can," She replied.

"Good, because I can barely braid it," Nanmei laughed. Kagome eyed the woman's hair, already a few ideas in mind for the long, sable locks that hung heavily on her back.

"You won't know what hit you," She promised. "But I'm going to need Shippou's help."

Sesshoumaru was kneeling on the soft, spelled grass of the clearing, waiting for the ceremony to begin when there was a sudden crash and the whole stampede of children, the litter, as Kouga had called it, came laughing and singing between the two groups of people. Shippou led the group, flower petals of soft colors seeming to appear from nowhere as those that followed behind tossed the magic petals into the air from baskets. He felt his eyes widen, because it had not been expected. Chancing a quick, appraising glance at Resshin, he saw the man smiling gently, joy in his eyes at the actions. Sesshoumaru quickly looked around when Resshin's eyes widened. For a moment it looked like the youkai would fall back in shock.
But when Sesshoumaru turned, he understood. Nanmei, normally a simple, rather plain faced woman, was dressed in a simple coral kimono decorated in mums and grass, leaves and peonies and iris blossoms. But woven into loose braids scattered throughout her hair were small blossoms, too small to be real. Sesshoumaru realized the fox had been casting more magic than for just the petals still decorating the clearing and allowed a smile to tilt up the corner of his lips.

Kagome followed after, in a much more subdued soft blue furisode decorated with sparingly with yuzen flowers on their branches. Her hair was in a simple bun, held by a single kanzashi that held long metal strips that chimed as she walked behind her friend. Realizing that she had done everything within her power to dress simply so that her friend could shine, he commended her actions, for all eyes were on the bride.

She took her place next to him, kneeling with a gentle chime of the kanzashi and watched the couple with bright eyes. Sesshoumaru offered a small prayer to the kami for his friend and then let his gaze rest on the couple as well.

They honored her gods first, and Sesshoumaru watched, filing away the names and movements to learn about later as they went through step after step. After thirty minutes of prayers and actions to the gods, he began to wonder how the human's kami kept any of their followers.

Then came the rites to honor Resshin’s gods, and Sesshoumaru resisted the urge to stretch as Resshin proclaimed his intent, accepting a blade offered by the elder from his clan. The small knife first cut across his palm, a deep gash that bled freely, and he then took Nanmei’s hand in his own and drew the blade across it gently. So fine was the knife edge that he barely pressed it into the skin and Sesshoumaru smelled her coppery blood welling up. They joined hands, letting their blood mix as it dripped to the ground. To the amazement of the humans present, and to no few youkai unrelated to the groom, a sprout sprung up from where their blood dropped.

He heard Kagome's gasp and turned, seeing the delight and awe in her eyes as the sprout grew into a sapling.

"It is done," The elder announced, a a cheer arose from Resshin's clan, quickly joined by almost everyone else. He refrained, but let a smile creep to his lips for his friends good fortune. More flowers petals sprung into the air, and he noticed that Kasai and Mizu were following the kit's example and adding their own magic to the festivities. Kagome's happy cheer rung out, and she jumped up, rushing to meet the newly mated couple with everyone else to give her congratulations.

"You wouldn't have thought it would be so merry, not with so few in attendance, but it's shaped up to be a fine ceremony," Shinzuru chuckled. "Kagome and the children have given much more to Nanmei than they realize, I suspect."

"Indeed. I do not understand Resshin's choice, but it is no less than he and his mate deserve," Sesshoumaru replied. Anything else he would have said was lost as instruments appeared from nowhere and Resshin's clan began summoning food as if by magic.

Nanmei and Kagome's delighted laughter mixed together as Shippou and the twin's began trying to outdo each other with their magic, summoning larger and more elaborate flowers, and even small fireworks that whistled into the air and burst over their heads. Childrens voices joined the adults in simple folk songs and Sesshoumaru took in the merry chaos around him.

"It is more than I could have hoped for. She seemed so solemn last night when I left her at the shrine," Resshin commented. "There are so few of my people left, and her own family are the shrine maiden's that raised her. Thank you for allowing Kagome to bring the children."
"You may thank me later, when they are running wild and ignoring every attempt to put them to sleep," Sesshoumaru commented wryly.

"You sound like their father," Resshin observed. Any thoughts Sesshoumaru had promptly fled his brain as the youkai's words took hold.

"I am their alpha," He finally replied, although his tone was much more uneasy than he would have liked.

"Alpha, father, they are not so different, not for children," Resshin laughed, seeing the discomfited expression gracing the normally stoic youkai's face. Reminded of something the miko had said along similar lines, he waved the comment off.

"You should claim your bride for a dance, it is your honor, correct?"

"It is, it is!" The normally quiet youkai replied cheerily. "And for our wedding present, all I ask of my lord and my friend is that he try to enjoy himself." With that, he was off, moving on swift, sure feet towards the bride that was dancing with Kagome and the multitude of children around her. Kagome drifted away, breathless and bright eyed. He knew she was headed toward him when the elder of Resshin's clan waylaid her and began a discussion he could only hear pieces of over the music.

Her face grew animated, and then he saw as much as smelled the flicker of anxiety and sadness beginning to grow. Soon distress was added to her scent, and he was relieved when Shinzuru interrupted the conversation, demanding a dance with the miko. The elder only looked slightly disappointed and watched Kagome swept away by the moth youkai. The distress in her scent vanished, but the sadness remained.

With one prize lost, the elder immediately set his sights on him, and began walking purposefully in his direction. Seeing no option but to stay, since he could not be rude to the old man, he stilled and awaited the oncoming interrogation.

"So that's the miko my grandson swore our loyalty to," The elder observed. He green hair was streaked with silver, and his eyes were cloudy with age. Sesshoumaru nodded, watching the colors shift in the old man's eyes. The clouds over them seemed to part for a moment, banished to reveal startlingly blue eyes, similar to the miko's.

"Her heart still aches, though she hides it well, for her friend's sake. An extraordinary woman. You've done the right thing."

"This Sesshoumaru was never in doubt," He replied evenly.

"You should know better than to lie to my kind pup. Resshin will accept such out of respect and friendship, but I have no such limitations. Doubts are no bad thing, they show that you're thinking. But you can trust her. She's been wronged a great deal by a great many, and yet I can see no anger, no vengeance, not even a flicker of spite. Only loneliness. An extraordinary woman," He repeated. "It is an honor to be sworn to the miko of the jewel, and we will give any aid she asks."

"Such strong words," Sesshoumaru replied shortly, wondering why the old man was rambling at him so. He had expected questions of the battle with Naraku and even anger for asking Resshin to swear loyalty to a miko. Instead he was bombarded with observations that he neither needed nor desired.

"Hmph, you'll learn someday pup. Probably soon. Her light is too bright to allow for darkness. Her winter is almost over. Already a warm wind blows in her core." With that the old man left.
Sesshoumaru standing alone. Too dignified to gape at the easily uttered revelation, he narrowed his eyes instead, determined not to show his surprise.

A warm wind in the miko's core. He was given to believe that few ever knew their own center's, much less another. Resolving to ask Resshin how far his powers extended, he filed away the thoughts and forced his mind back to the present, where Mizu was dancing with Kagome. It occurred to him that the woman was beginning to allow others to touch her, and he wondered if it was because she trusted the four that had sworn loyalty to her or if the hateful memories of her past were fading.

Kagome pulled herself from the circle of dancers and stumbled breathlessly toward Sesshoumaru. Most seemed to be giving him a wide berth and she need a moment to catch her breath and and calm the dizziness threatening to topple her. She had almost reached him when a woman she hadn't noticed before popped up in a garishly bright purple kimono with yellow and green starbursts all over it, her face hidden behind her sleeve.

The sleeve dropped to reveal an unnaturally large head and bright, blinking cartoon eyes.

"The birds and the bees might be quite active,think you they will be?" The woman lisped. So startled by the simple, rather bawdy haiku coming from such an odd looking woman, Kagome felt laughter bubbling out from her before she could stop it. The woman's laughter joined her own, and she wandered off, leaving her giggling and confused.

Finally making it to Sesshoumaru's side, she ventured a question.

"Who is that woman?" She giggled, still thinking of the rather awful haiku.

"Perhaps she is Kerakera onna, the spirit of laughter," He replied, watching the spirit wander through the small clusters of people, bringing leaving laughter in her wake.

"Who?" Kagome asked, watching the walking phenomenon cause riotous laughter with every word she uttered.

"She is one of the few benevolent spirits I have heard of. It is her purpose to bring joy to those she deigns to visit. If I were inclined to believe in such things, I would say it is a good omen for the match made today."

"You don't believe in signs?" Kagome asked.

"I put little faith behind such things."

Before he had a chance to say anything else, the mischievous woman was in front of them both, her now normally shaped, sly eyes glinting at the daiyoukai.

"Faith has more to do with truth than you might think, great lord. The miko is to thank for this visit. How could one such as I ignore the wish of Midoriko's heir?"

"Wish? I didn't make a wish," Kagome stuttered, panicked at the thought. Her hand immediately went to her throat, where the jewel lay suspended on a necklace.

"Not that sort of wish child. A wish for their happiness and joy. Your thoughts hold great power, the wishes of your heart call out to those who can hear."

"You can read my mind?" Kagome asked shrilly, blushing.
A sudden pop sounded and a copy of Kagome with overlarge bright blue eyes faced them. The difference was in her garb.

"What, you, change back right now!" She shrieked, blushing at the doppelganger that had decided to imitate a sailor senshi costume. Blushing madly Kagome pointed and growled, and had Sesshoumaru not been so amused at her embarrassment, he would have been impressed by the sound issuing from her throat.

"Change. Now!" Kagome demanded hotly.

"Oh all right, silly girl. You wore much the same every day to your school," The spirit chuckled. With another pop, she was back to her normal self, although normal was a loose term. Her head was still much too large for her body, and her eyes and nose were still too large for even her head.

"Not funny," Kagome commented, afraid her face burned so hot someone could cook on it.

"The great lord thought so," The spirit sing songed before wandering away. Kagome didn't even watch her go, looking at the ground with her hands covering her face.

"Tell me you did not look at that," She whispered.

"I saw little of the spirit's imitation. Your own mortification was much more entertaining," He admitted, ignoring the urge to throttle his amusement. Rarely, if ever, was the miko embarrassed, and he decided it was something he would remember.

"Although," He mused aloud. "What was it she was wearing? Highly indecent, and so much red."

"I'm going to strangle you," She threatened.

"Accept her gift miko, and look around you. The wish she spoke of has been granted," He told her, inclining his head toward the crowd. Kagome peeked from behind her fingers and her hands dropped as a smile began to grow.

"Everyone is happy, aren't they?" Kagome asked. "It all came together really well."

Suddenly a crash echoed through the clearing, and Kagome and Sesshoumaru's attentions snapped to where three kitsune, two adults and one child, sat staring at one another with wide eyes. A woman giggled before a a pop echoed, and in a puff of smoke she was gone.

"What did she do?" A voice moaned. Kagome looked at the kitsune, and if it hadn't been for the braid, she wouldn't have believed it.

"Is Mizu a girl?" She asked, shattering the silence over the clearing. As if breaking a spell, everyone burst into laughter, taking in the sight of three females that had been males only minutes before.

"It'll wear off in half a mark," A voice whispered in Kagome's ear. Looking to Sesshoumaru and seeing the amusement in his eyes as well as a smile twitching to life, she decided to forgo mentioning it and let the laughter flow from her.

After making sure each child was finally asleep, Kagome tip toed out of the dormitory and into the night, grateful once again that Nanmei had decided that they wouldn't wear shoes. Her bare feet padded silently down the path and to the clearing where the celebration had been held. The moon hung full and bright, and stars glittered like scattered diamonds.
The petals, being magicked into existence, no long decorated the lush grove, but the plush grass remained, and careful of the kimono she had been loaned by a servant (whether it had been with Sesshoumaru's consent or not, she still didn't know) she sat herself down, exhaling deeply.

"You should not wander out alone at night."

"Considering anyone with any power or sense could feel you a mile away, I knew I wasn't alone," She retorted.

"The celebration was a success. Many credit it to you and the children."

"The laughing woman helped. Poor guys, I'm not sure they'll ever live that down," She laughed, remembering the three females that had been rather distressed with their situation. In half an hour the spell had lifted and they had returned to their normal shapes, but the jokes lingered. Kagome was glad Shippou hadn't needed to use the restroom. That was a conversation she was not ready to have for a long time, if ever with the boy.

"You should rest, we head back early tomorrow."

"I can't sleep," She admitted. "I keep thinking about the tree." Her hand moved to point to the sapling that had grown steadily throughout the evening. From a sprout it had grown to five feet, and it's leaves had unfurled to reveal itself as an oak.

Sesshoumaru waited patiently for her to sort her thoughts, curious why the tree would hold her attention so. Though he had never witnessed the ceremony unique to Resshin's clan, the youkai had told him of it before. Though it had held little interest before, he tried to view it as the miko would, seeing it as an act of magic. Yet after several moments of quiet contemplation, it was a magic that paled in comparison to the youkai's other abilities.

"I don't know why, but seeing it just grow from their blood mixing together and hitting the earth, it was striking. Are all youkai matings like that?" She asked.

"No, it is a ritual and a gift unique to Resshin's people. Most mating ceremonies differ from species to species. The wolf's will be vastly different from this," He informed her.

"Oh," She murmured, eyes still transfixed on the sapling. "It's nice though, growing something like that as a symbol of their relationship."

She sat silently for several minutes as he watched her. Scents emanated from her, flickering uncertainly. Growing almost desperate to flee the salty tang of her tears, but unwilling to leave her alone, he chose to break the silence.

"Resshin's elder said a warm wind was beginning to blow in your core," He quoted. Kagome shrugged, the words seeming to coast by her. After several moments, he tried once again. "If you are unable to sleep, meditate. Find your way back to that place," He commanded gruffly, growing uncomfortable with the myriad of scents that conflicted with her curiously blank eyes.

"It's not nice there," She mumbled.

"Perhaps it is changing."

"And maybe the old guy was just being nosy," She muttered.

"That is an incredibly rude statement," He stated. "Although this Sesshoumaru is hard put to disagree." He was met with stony silence, and was just beginning to consider pushing at her with his
"I feel defective," She admitted. "I'm happy for them, I really am. It's just, everything feels so awkward at the same time. I had to explain the basics of sex to her. While I was doing it, I was scared I'd have some sort of verbal diarrhea and tell her something frightening. But she seemed so happy, even though I'm pretty sure I butchered it, to have any knowledge. And I just wanted to ignore the whole thing. The minute she mentioned sex, it was like the idea of their mating changed in my head. Even though I know he's a good person, never mind. This is stupid," She muttered angrily, standing and brushing off the furisode.

He followed silently, never acknowledging her words, but understanding her meaning. He could think of nothing to say in the face of her own frustration, and knew that saying anything would only serve to make the situation worse. Since he had made a habit of avoiding emotional outbursts, his own and others, he was at a loss. The realization that he could do nothing was as uncomfortable as her statement. And yet his position as her alpha demanded he do something.

When she closed the door the dorms behind her, he stood still and stared at the weather beaten wood for several minutes without seeing it before turning on his heel and returning to the clearing to stare at the sapling.

A/N: In doing research for this fic, I came across the KeraKera Onna, a spirit of a witty, intelligent woman who loved to make people laugh. She is one of the few benevolent spirits in Japanese mythology, and I've also very firmly decided that if given half a chance, that is what I'm going to be doing after death. Just sayin.
"Sesshoumaru, can I have a word with you?" Shinzuru asked, making eye contact with the daiyoukai and refusing to break it.

"Speak," He rumbled.

"Something's wrong with the girl." The ‘girl’ in question did not have to be named, because Shinzuru referred to only one person that way, and because the ‘girl’ had been withdrawing more and more since their return from the mating ceremony two weeks ago.

"She will work through it," He stated simply before going back to his paperwork. An exasperated noise rose from the moth youkai’s throat and for a moment Sesshoumaru wondered if he was going to begin shouting.

"Something is wrong. She trains, she plays with the little ones, but she's not there. Did something happen?" He demanded, refusing to back down even when Sesshoumaru leveled cold, hard eyes in his direction.

"It is none of your concern," He bit out.

"My ass it's not," The old youkai shot back, his single good eye narrowing hatefully. "You asked me to swear an oath and I damn well meant was I swore. But if it's none of my concern," He spat, "As her alpha, you should deal with it."

"I cannot solve her problem."

"Do you even know what it is? Have you even asked her?" The questions came out as bitter accusations, and Sesshoumaru struggled to hold to his temper. The woman's emotional retreat had been noted by many, and the constant questioning by everyone from the children to his weapons master had long since worn down his resolve. That his father's best and oldest friend, one of his mentors was interrogating him pushed him past the fine line into finally answering.

"I cannot undo her rape," He ground out. "I cannot explain to her that what Resshin and Nanmei were doing on their wedding night was nothing like what she experienced. There is nothing that can be done to change her perceptions. Those doors are closed to her, and though I cannot empathize, I understand why it is so." Threads were snapping in his mind, a knife scraping at the fraying, tenuous hold he had on his temper.

"You mean, she thinks Resshin, but he would never--He loves Nanmei," Shinzuru choked out, face paling at Sesshoumaru's insinuations.
"The miko knows that in one part of her mind, but her rape and sex are inextricably linked emotionally for her. She knows it to be a fallacy and yet she can not change it. There is nothing that can be done."

Shinzuru stumbled back, eye wide and glazed as if he'd been physically struck.

"You're right, there's nothing anyone can do. Kami, what hell that must be," He half whispered in shock. "I can't begin to imagine, and you, kami man, how do you deal with it? You're her alpha."

Sesshoumaru sat back, able to calm his temper now that a fraction of his anger had been vented.

"I have kept myself busy with my lands," He finally said, once he was sure his voice would hold no trace of frustration. His inability to help one of his packmates ate at him, another task he couldn't accomplish. Despite the fact that he tried not to feel for her situation, she was pack, and his duty too deeply ingrained to ignore the situation.

"She won't let us touch her anymore. She barely let us before. We could all tell it was hard, dancing with us at the wedding, but we thought she was relaxing. Yesterday she almost stabbed Kasai for grabbing her wrist. Something needs to be done," Shinzuru insisted.

"What would you have me do?" Sesshoumaru demanded quietly, wearily. "Find someone with the patience to woo her? Not likely. No human would take a miko to wife, much less one sheltered by a youkai. And no youkai in his right mind would try for fear she'd maim or kill him."

"Is it really that hopeless?" Shinzuru finally asked, his shoulders slumping. Sesshoumaru had never seen the proud youkai looking so defeated, and the frustration he felt for the whole situation doubled. Then his own righteous anger came crashing down on it. All this fuss for a human woman! It was beyond ludicrous. Everyone seemed ready to sacrifice their own lives for the woman to smile, and only time would give her that. And yet all of them seemed to think he could provide a solution.

Damn it. As her alpha, he should be able to.

"Perhaps a visit to Bokusenou might provide me with insight. I was going tonight to see if he had any suggestions for the last candidate," Sesshoumaru offered. Shinzuru jerked, then smiled at the daiyoukai, his crimson eye glimmering with hope.

"I hope the visit proves to bring insight to both problems. I'm sorry about my conduct." The apology was stilted, and Sesshoumaru felt the urge to laugh at the added absurdity. Shinzuru never apologized for his manner of speech and decorum.

"You are loyal to the miko, and I have known you since I was a pup. There is nothing to apologize for."

"You still are a pup," Shinzuru chuckled, finally relaxing. "You've just gotten bigger. But your father would be proud," He added, tone becoming serious once more. "And I trust that you will do what you can to help the girl."

"This Sesshoumaru wonders why all seem to be under the impression that I hold the answers," Sesshoumaru almost sighed.

"I don't think you have the answers, but you've yet to encounter a problem you couldn't solve," The youkai said with conviction. Sesshoumaru nodded, albeit warily, and the warrior left him alone with his thoughts.
Bokusenou sensed the daiyoukai approaching long before he every saw him. Anger and confusion tangled to create frustration that was palpable before he even landed in the clearing.

"Good evening," Bokusenou offered first, breaking the oppressive silence. "Have you come for a candidate?"

"I have. And...other things," He answered enigmatically. Bokusenou would have shifted and settled to get himself comfortable had he been any other youkai, but being a tree, he settled for watching Sesshoumaru seat himself stiffly on the ground.

"You have found one?" He asked once positioned.

"I have. She has been sent to you, and will arrive soon, perhaps two weeks time. You will be the final judge of course."

"Tell me about her." The pale youkai commanded. Bokusenou raised a brow at the daiyoukai's sudden brusqueness. Silently contemplating the tinges of impatience and confusion the inu's aura, he sighed and would have shaken his head if he could.

"I will let you form your own opinion. I will merely tell you that her name is Harukaze." After letting the daiyoukai stew for several minutes over his refusal, he spoke again. "The candidate is not the only reason you are here, is it pup?"

"Do not speak to me as if I am a child," Sesshoumaru commanded coolly.

"I have rarely spoken to you in a manner other than this. What is it that troubles you?" He waited for several more minutes, beginning to wonder if the daiyoukai would speak again at all. More than once the inu looked ready to stand and leave.

"I am unable to help the miko."

"You have already given her aid. What is so difficult?"

"The memories of her past, she's withdrawing. Even the children feel it, especially the children. It is as if a silence in falling upon the shiro."

"I thought you enjoyed the silence," Bokusenou commented.

"This silence is heavy, disturbing."

"Pup, if I offered advice, would you actually listen to it? You have spoken to me before and I have given my thoughts, and you have, more often than not, ignored them."

"The children suffer," Was all he said, his tone curiously blank.

"I have been considering this strange situation you and miko find yourselves in. Combining powers, going to one another's cores. It is a strange thing, to be sure, and one that has puzzled this old mind for months now. I suspect it will do so for many decades to come, if not longer. Perhaps your ability to travel to her core will be the answer."

"How is that supposed to help me?" The daiyoukai snapped, losing his patience.

"She needs one to remind her that affection is different from coercion."

"The children shower her with affection."
"And they are children, and no threat to her. You are an adult male. Her body has been used as a weapon against her by grown men, youkai and human alike. And she trusts you."

"This Sesshoumaru is not an affectionate person."

"Couldn't agree with you more," Bokusenou chuckled dryly. "You feel as if you're failing in your duty as her alpha because she suffers. That suffering will not vanish overnight. Her trials have set her apart, much as your own have. Perhaps it is because she feels she cannot connect that she shies away from building those bridges."

"And what am I to do? It is not in my nature to coddle anyone, especially not a ningen."

"I don't suggest you coddle her. It's not in her nature to accept something so shallow. She's too determined to be strong to accept pity. But compassion is not pity, and being the first to try and build a bridge is not necessarily an affectionate gesture. She needs someone to care about her, knowing what she is, and the only person that truly knows her is you," He reasoned, his gaze resting thoughtfully on the man before him.

"I do not know how to do such a thing," Sesshoumaru admitted uncomfortably.

"Take her to her core. I know she still fears it. But if Keimou is to be believed, it is changing."

"Keimou?" Sesshoumaru asked.

"Resshin's grandfather. We often speak."

"I will not ask how you accomplish such a thing. How is it the old man could know such?"

"The core is the true essence of the self, and his kind see it, though they may not visit. He told me the darkness still lingers within the miko, but that a change had begun. Healing will not come easily to her, but it will come, and you can aid that effort."

He could tell Sesshoumaru was growing increasingly agitated with his suggestions, and hoped he hadn't pushed the idea too hard. Keimou had been full of things to say, and yet all of them seemed frivolous when compared to his thoughts of the miko and the daiyoukai.

"I do not know if I can do this. It is against my nature."

"Your nature is limited only to what you wish it to be. I believe you are a true alpha, and an honorable youkai. If you follow that calling, you will find the will to help her." Several minutes passed and he started again.

"Tenseiga is a blade that feeds off of the compassion of it's wielder. If you did not have the heart to do this thing, it would not answer to you."

Golden eyes that rarely looked anything but bored expressed the turmoil the daiyoukai stifled, and Bokusenou felt a sad smile playing at the corners of his mouth. After minutes of heavy silence, Sesshoumaru stood and inclined his head respectfully toward the old tree.

"This Sesshoumaru will consider your advice," He said slowly, beginning to walk away.

Sesshoumaru paced through his rooms for the first time in decades. Three days had passed since his discussion with Bokusenou, and there had been no clarity or enlightening revelations about his situation. Kagome was still withdrawing, little by little, and the children had taken to hounding him,
asking if they had done something to earn the woman's distance.

He stopped his restless wandering in front of his swords, both of which stood side by side on their upright stands. Bakusaiga was not his interest though, and he took Tenseiga in hand before moving to the small table. Sitting it down gently, he stared down at it reproachfully.

"I am not a compassionate being," He told it, and immediately felt foolish for speaking aloud to the blade. Heaving a sigh, something he found he was doing more often lately, he braced his elbows on the table and let his hands cradle his face. His eyes closed, and he allowed himself to wish for his father.

"I do not understand what I am supposed to do," He admitted, wondering that the great inu lord would say if he could see him now. With a wry smile he realized that his father was probably watching him avidly, laughing gleefully.

"I wish I know what he would have done," He sighed at last. For the first time since taking his place as lord of the western lands, he wished for his father's advice. He was surprised when the sword suddenly pulsed, as if in response to his admission. "I am a lunatic," He muttered, glaring down at the inexplicably active blade.

"A pulse tells me nothing," He snapped. Still the blade hummed insistently. He reached forward and pulled it from it's sheath, only to set it down once more. The metal, now exposed, seemed to be singing, the humming was so strong that a high pitched whistling noise moved off of the blade.

"Do I follow Bokusenou's advice?" He asked, feeling even more foolish as he did so. The sword only kept up it's insistent humming, and he took it in hand and was surprised when he felt the sword pushing him. On rare occasions the sword had pulsed, a gentle nudge to signal it's desires, but this felt more insistent, a demand instead of a suggestion.

"I see none that need brought back to the land of the living sword. Cease your song!" He snapped impatiently. The sword quieted a fraction before urging him to move. Standing, feeling a thousand times a fool, he allowed it to guide him. It grew warm in his hand as he exited his room, and he slid it into the sash around his waist before the warmth, quickly growing hotter, burned him. It's song only seemed to increase in pitch once more as he approached the miko's quarters. Glancing to the end of the hall, he was surprised to note the two guards posted there didn't seem to notice the noise or him. Determined to speak to them of it later, he quietly entered the woman's rooms and was surprised to see her sitting at the low table, lanterns scattered to give light while she carefully wrote something.

Upon his entrance however, she stopped everything she was doing, the blue of her eyes gray in the flickering light. They quickly shifted to the sword at his side, confusion furrowing her brow before her eyes met his own again.

"What's going on? I've never heard Tenseiga do that before. Is something wrong?" She asked, eyes beginning to betray her sudden panic. As soon as she spoke, the humming stopped, and the room quieted.

"Miko, there is something we must discuss," He rumbled gruffly, suddenly unsure of what to do now that he faced her.

"Are the children alright? They didn't pull another prank did they? It was a court day, the promised to keep it confined to the highborns," She tried explaining.

"It is not the children, not directly" He stated stiffly, moving to sit across from her. She watched him warily, and he wondered what how she had regressed so quickly.
"Then what is it?" She asked.

"It is you. Your retreat. You are hurting the children, and worry everyone within the shiro," He answered, searching for the correct words. Out of all the possible things to happen, this had not been a pictured scenario.

"I'm not retreating," She snapped, pulling away from him physically even as she did so. "I've just been training a lot."

"An excuse. Even Kotaeru says you are different."

"Why do you care? I'm doing just fine," She snapped.

"I am your alpha," He began.

"If you think that using your rank to push me around you're absolutely out of your mind," She shouted suddenly. He was surprised by her dramatic mood swing, and it only confirmed to him that something was wrong, that he had waited too long.

"I am not pulling rank, miko. I am your alpha, it is my duty to care," He snapped back, his voice only marginally more quiet.

"I don't need to be someone's duty! I can do just fine without you poking into my personal life like some old woman!"

"Apparently you over estimate your abilities," He snarled, completely losing patience with her at last.

"Oh, you-I'll show you who overestimates," She snarled, gathering her energy as she lunged forward, her hand coming out to slap him. He caught it easily, but the power crackling in her palm raced down to her wrist and burned him.

"I am not here to fight with you," He ground out, trying to remember the tree youkai's words. "I am trying to help."

"I don't need your help!" She shot out, her voice hitching.

"Damn it woman, stop this foolishness," He commanded, throwing her wrist away from himself and looking down to his burned palm.

"Then leave me alone," She demanded.

"No."

"No?" She asked, incredulity apparent.

"No, I will not leave you alone to suffer your memories."

"I'm not-" She started.

"You are. Shame clings to you like a cloud and you are letting yourself fade. You once said you trusted me. I ask that you remember that," He replied evenly, trying to push down the burning sensation in his palm. It still felt as if he were gripping fire itself, pain stabbing relentlessly into the muscles.

"I trust you, okay. What does that have to do with anything?"
"Let me into your core," he demanded, trying to keep his tone gentle. Her eyes widened and for a
moment he wondered if he had only succeeded in frightening her.

"Why? So you can slay some more ghosts? Would it make you feel like you're doing your duty?"
She spat, all irate fire again.

"Let me in," he repeated, his voice quiet and commanding. She stared at him for several minutes
before he felt her power swell from within her. Taking the chance before she changed her mind and
called it back into herself, he gathered his own youki and wove it easily around hers, then let his
consciousness follow the path of power.

When his eyes opened again, he was standing in the middle of a barren field. The sky was cloudy
overhead, and there was no sun to be seen, nor any moon. For miles there was nothing but the soil
stretching out before him.

"Is this what you wanted?" she asked dully. "Do you want to go find the memories and have your
way with them?"

"No," he replied, once again trying to convey some sense of gentleness. Feeling as if he were
failing, he turned to her and took a step forward, bringing himself within a foot of her person.

"They why? Why are we here?" she sighed, as if the very act of coming had tired her, drained her.

"It is no longer such a harsh landscape," he observed, his eyes never leaving hers.

"This isn't harsh?" she demanded, throwing her arms out to gesture to the field. "It's just dirt! Yay,
the mountains of madness are gone, and I'm left with a plain of dirt! Go me! Progress!" She shouted
sarcastically to the sky.

Sesshoumaru knelt down, ignoring that his hair mixed with the soil, and gathered some in his palm.
Standing again, he brought it to her face, watching her watching him.

"It is rich soil, good for growing," he intoned. Her eyes dropped to the hand that hovered inches
below her face and she eyed it speculatively.

"There's nothing to grow," she sighed at last. "Just more badness."

"Only if you allow it."

She sputtered for a moment, her gaze incredulous. Then the anger rose and smothered any other
emotion he could see.

"You think I like this? You think I like feeling like this?" she demanded shrilly, poking her finger
into his chest. "I'm probably going completely crazy!"

"Only if you choose to be." His words didn't even make a dent, and her she launched into a rant,
stabbing her finger into his chest with each 'point' she made.

"I'm alone. I'm stuck in a time period I don't belong in. My family is five hundred years into the
future and I'll probably never see them again! My best friend hates me! The man I loved is dead!" At
some point she had begun pummeling his chest with her tiny fists, and he looked down at her,
listening as the rage in her tone was flavored with bitter hopelessness. "I'm tired of you trying to fix
me out of some sense of duty."

Her words cut at him, and he realized he had rarely treated her as anything other than a duty, and that
was wrong of him. He had accepted her as pack, however reluctantly. One was not supposed to treat a pack member as a duty. The crux of the problem though, was that he didn't know how to treat an adult female within his pack. Rin was simple, all of the children were. Males were similarly easy. His only experience with a female pack member was his mother, and he'd be damned if he'd act like the stubborn female was his matron.

Grabbing her wrists almost absentmindedly, stopping the angry, rapid beating she was still delivering as she cried brokenly, he considered what to do. What was the right thing to do, to say?

"You are not a duty to this Sesshoumaru," He intoned, looking into her eyes, noting that in her sadness they had become a steel gray. "I apologize that you have been treated as such."

"Why won't you just leave me alone?" She sobbed, trying to free her wrists from his grip. Instead of allowing her to retreat, he pulled her to him and dropped her wrists, only to awkwardly place his arms around her shoulders.

"What are you doing?" She whispered, sounding as shocked as he felt.

"I'm trying to comfort you," He said gruffly, acutely aware of the burning sensation in the tips of his ears. Entirely too embarrassed for his own taste, he thanked the kami that she couldn't see the blush that turned pale skin a vivid pink.

"This is weird," She said, several minutes later. He silently agreed, wondering why he was doing this in the first place. It had seemed like a good idea, she always embraced the children, especially when they were sad. As an idea it had been simple and sound. Execution however, left him feeling out of his element.

Then she began relaxing into him, bit by bit. He repositioned his arms slightly, and with growing amazement, realized that the embrace no longer felt quite so awkward. A small shudder passed through her and his arms tightened almost naturally, unbidden, in response. Minutes passed, and his mind drifted as he tried to figure out what to say.

"I have never dealt with a female pack mate besides my mother and Rin," He eventually said. "It was more simple when there was war," He lamented. "Interaction with you seems more difficult in the peace. I would not have us at odds, and I do not wish for you to feel as if you are a duty to me."

"I don't get what you're saying," Kagome said, finally pulling away. The loss of contact sent a flicker of annoyance through Sesshoumaru. He did not wish to try and fumble for wards while the miko could easily see his expression.

"Perhaps we might try friendship?" He offered, wondering again why he was doing this, and how he was enduring it. Bokusenou's words rang in his head. Being the first to try and span the gap between them was not weak, was not wrong. Logically he recognized that. Now if only the utter strangeness of it would disappear.

"Friendship?" She asked, then stopped, looking as if she was considering something. He tried not to feel insulted that she would have to take such time to decide whether it was acceptable to her or not. "Your friends with the others, aren't you? Mizu and Resshin, and Shinzuru and Kasai. They're your friends."

"They are," He confirmed.

"But you always treat them so distantly," She murmured.

"When they are acting on official business, we maintain the distance required of lord and vassal. You
have only seen them in such conditions."

"You mean there's times you relax with them?" Her question sent a brief flicker of irrational anger rising in his chest, and he quelled it quickly.

"There are."

"How are we supposed to be friends?" She finally asked, staring him down. "You don't even like me, and half the time I want to strangle you."

"You and the hanyou were often at odds," He pointed out. She looked ready to say something, then stopped herself.

"Okay. We can try," She stated, continuing to stare at him as if he'd grown another head. For several awkward moments they watched one another before she finally dropped her gaze to the dirt beneath their feet. His gaze followed her own and he considered the dirt, trying to think of something. Perhaps a symbol of their deal, a show of effort on his part - although he thought back to the hug and wondered why that couldn't be enough - that proved he was quite serious.

"Give me your hand," He commanded. Her blue eyes swung back to his and she lifted her hand reluctantly, as if afraid he would break it. He took it in his own, palm up, and held it gently but firmly. She cried out in shock when he dragged a claw across the slope of skin. Accusation began to mingle with the shock and she began to say something, and he stopped her.

"Let it gather," He commanded, moving his hand from her own. She watched, her hand cupped to let the blood pool as it seeped out, as he drug his claw against his palm once more, much more deeply and the blood began to gather immediately. It occurred to him that their blood had no real scent, and knowing it was because of their location did nothing to change his discomfort. Taking her hand with his uninjured one, he tipped it down, mimicking the position with his own.

Crimson drops hit the ground together, leaving small splatters in the dirt as they both watched. He felt her tense up, moved his face closer to her ear. "Let me help," He whispered. "Trust me."

A small startled gasp flew from her lips and he moved back, feeling a strange sense of satisfaction when he followed her gaze and found that something had sprouted from where their blood fell.

"There's something growing," She said in wonderment, her wide eyes turning to his own. Disbelief mingled with excitement in the blue orbs and he inclined his head.

"It is a beginning." It seemed like the right thing to say. Kagome nodded, tears forming in her eyes. She moved to him hesitantly, as if unsure of her welcome. When he didn't move away, she brought her arms around him and let her head rest against his chest.

"I have a condition," She said at last.

"What is that?" He asked warily.

"You have to let me hug you whenever I want. Female friends are allowed that."

His mind shifted through scenarios where the miko would use such an allowance against him, and there were many. However, the miko, no matter how conniving or vindictive she could be at times, would never try to hug him in front of his advisers. Maybe.

"I agree, but I have a condition of my own," He intoned.
"What's that?" She asked, her amusement apparent in her tone.

"That I be given the same right." She looked up at him, gauging his sincerity. When his face remained stoic, she let out a bark of laughter.

"You're serious?" She finally asked after her laughter had run its course. Figuring he would never give a right to anything without being given the same right, no matter how strange it was or how little he wanted it, she shrugged, accepting.

"I am."

"Well, okay," She agreed, moving away from him and holding out her hand. When he didn't move to take it, she grabbed his palm, and he was startled to realize that their hands were bleeding together. There was no pain, and not even the scent of their blood tinged the air. Shrugging off the visual, he followed her through the paths of their power, leaving the tree behind.

When he opened his eyes once more, Kagome was pushing herself off of the table and rubbing her arm. Apparently she'd been resting her head on it and it had fallen asleep. Watching her shake it vigorously, he allowed a small smile to grace his features.

"So um, wow. Suddenly everything just feels really awkward," Kagome muttered, peeking at him from beneath her lashes as she tried to get her arm to wake up. The pins and needles spiking through her flesh began to recede and she laid it back down on the table, still unsure of how to act around the daiyoukai now that he had offered to change their dynamic.

"It is strange," He admitted. "But the strangeness will fade, with time."

"You know, if I'm allowed to hug you whenever I want-" She started.

"You will not embrace me in front of the highborns."

"You said whenever I want," She reminded him, her tone puckish.

"If you act in such a familiar manner, they will misconstrue our relationship, and will probably rise to kill you."

"I could purify them," She teased. "Get them out of your hair for good."

The idea still held appeal for him. He awaited the candidate, and each day that passed only made the persistent councilors all the more annoying. All had found ways to corner him whenever he was alone to try and convince him to choose their personal choice. Each had begun resorting to 'gifts' and promises that Sesshoumaru knew few would be willing to keep.

"Once the selection for candidates is over, perhaps I will have you join the council," He murmured.

"What? No. No, no, a hundred million times, no," Kagome sputtered. "They already hate me and are secretly planning my untimely end. I don't need to give them more ammo."

"Ammo?" He asked, confused by the word.

"Nothing," She sighed, letting her head be pillowed by her arms on the table.

"You are tired," He observed.

"Exhausted." He was up and moving, remembering Bokusenou's words. A small part of him was still angry that he had found something that was awkward for himself, and now faced with the
challenge of overcoming it, he was determined to destroy what he now perceived as a hurdle.

She cried out as he picked her up, cradling her in his arms.

"Put me down," She commanded.

"I thought I was allowed the same right," He replied archly, looking down at her, eyes narrowed. "Would you renege on our agreement?"

"Hugs, we agreed on hugs!" She whispered furiously.

"This is not so different from a hug," He replied carelessly, beginning the walk to her room. He heard her heart start pounding furiously in her chest, could smell the fear and sudden nervous sweat as he grew closer to the inner chamber. Once inside, he made for the bed and lay her down as gently as he knew how.

"Sleep," He commanded, stifling his fury at the confusion in her eyes. Did she truly think him so low?

"Sesshoumaru?" She asked. Unballing fists that had been clenching against his will, he forced himself to relax. His fury would only serve to frighten her.

"Yes, miko?"

"Kagome. Friends call each other by name."

"Kagome," He repeated, wondering if it was the first time he'd ever said the name. Realizing that it was, he absorbed the feel of it coming from his lips. Not an altogether unpleasant sensation. "Yes, Kagome?"

"The tree. I mean, you didn't have to. You didn't have to do any of this. I mean, it's really unlike you," She admitted. He knelt down next to her futon, considering his next words carefully.

"You are pack, and pack is not duty, it is more than family even. I dishonored your trust, and my own vow with my actions. I apologize for doing such. I was reminded that you allowed yourself to trust me, knowing who and what I am, despite events that would have rendered a lesser person incapable. Such trust should not be repaid with distance."

It was perhaps, the hardest thing he had ever admitted to out loud, and even as he said the words he realized more and more the depth of his error. Her trust had not be given lightly, probably never would be again, and that she chose to trust him began to take on a new quality. If he was completely honest with himself, that she did so was, dare he think it, humbling even as it stroked his pride.

"Well, thank you. It- it was very kind of you."

"Goodnight, mi-Kagome."

"Umm, maybe we could go back soon, and you could help me?" Kagome asked in a small voice as he was turning away. The fear in her scent tore at him, and he quashed the instincts that wanted to send him tearing into the night to hunt, to eradicate the bitter tang of that fear. Her cursed those baser instincts and calmed his breathing, knowing her fear was not of him, but of his answer.

"We can," He finally said.

"Goodnight," She whispered, burrowing under her covers.
"Hnn," He answered before leaving her chambers.

When Kagome skipped into the schoolroom, which had also become the breakfast and dinner room, Sesshoumaru was already there, listening to Rin tell some story. She heard snatches and presumed the girl was telling him how the twins had helped them trick one of the older advisers, a certain feline youkai that seemed to be the butt of most of the pranks.

"Good morning," She breathed, the children looking at her expectantly. Giving into the playful urge, she moved over to Sesshoumaru and bent, putting herself at the right level to wrap her arms around his neck. He stiffened, and didn't relax until she moved to sit next to him.

Silence encompassed the room, which was normally alive with whispers at the very least. But then Rin, delight shining in her eyes, moved to hug the daiyoukai. And like a dam that had burst, children were practically climbing over one another to get a hug from the miko, cheered by the sudden change in her demeanor. A few of the smaller children shyly moved to hug Sesshoumaru, and she laughed at his obvious discomfort that the youngest ones were completely oblivious to.

"I had not thought that giving my word would result in this," He finally admitted as the children ignored their breakfast and vied for space to cuddle.

"Okay munchkins, back to breakfast. We'll play a game today after your lessons, alright?" Kagome asked, winking at all of them. They nodded slowly and reluctantly removed themselves, glancing over their shoulders as they went back to their meals.

She smiled impishly and began filling a bowl with cut fruits."Is it so bad?" She asked.

"Merely strange," He commented before going back to his bowl of rice. Rin, still stunned by the sudden affection being displayed, completely left off on her story, turning to whisper to Shippou, both completely ignoring their food as they discussed something too quietly for Kagome to hear.

"Any idea when the new candidate arrives?" She asked after quickly polishing off the fruit.

"Soon, if Bokusenou is to be believed. Those at the gates know to watch out for her."

"Another woman. Awesome, everything will be balanced out then," Kagome told him. When he only inclined his head, she stifled a giggle. Not that she had expected everything to change overnight, but he seemed as awkward as she felt, and it was strange to see him like that.

"It will rain today," He finally commented.

"Oh no, Kotaeru wants me to train on Boufuu," Kagome gasped, realizing that she had been looking forward to the ride.

"He will still want you to train. Kotaeru is very thorough."

"I get to ride in the rain and try to shoot at targets?" She deadpanned. "But it's still not that warm out, I'll freeze," She whined.

"He is very thorough," Sesshoumaru reiterated. Kagome groaned and stood, determined to get the training over with.

"It's not fair," She muttered. "You don’t even have to train anymore."

"My skills are more than proficient."
"Most, not all. We're still trying to get out attacks to merge on purpose."

"Go train miko, before he comes to fetch you. It will be worse if he does."

Grumbling, she almost stomped from the classroom, the children staring at her retreating form, confused.

"Is momma going to be alright?" Shippou asked tremulously. Sesshoumaru looked down at the kit and wanted to sigh, wanted to give in to the urge to rub his temples. Miraculously, he refrained. Instead, he calmly answered the boy's question.

"She will be fine, you have this Sesshoumaru's word."

"Oh. Why did she hug you?" Shippou asked.

"This Sesshoumaru believes your mother is purposefully trying to drive me mad," He muttered, the words escaping before he could stop them. The words were out in the open, however much he wished he could take them back and shove them in his mouth.

"Oh," Was all the kitsune said. Several moments in silence passed before a smile lit up his face. "Inu Yasha said that a lot too." The words were flavored with hope, and Sesshoumaru wondered if he actually understood what he had offered the miko.

Sorry, I know. I said a couple of days. Argh. Every time I try to post on a schedule, something happens (aka too many pies, not enough fingers). Forgive me. Working on editing the next chapter now.
Yesterday's Action

Running Up That Hill

By: The Hatter Theory

Chapter 18: Yesterday's Action

 Originally Published on January 25, 2012


Kagome was soaked to the skin, Boufuu was more than annoyed with her and Kotaeru was glowering at her, she could feel it. The saddle was just as wet beneath her by now, and she struggled to stay astride even as she was struggling to hit the targets in the rain.

"This is pointless," She shouted over the sound of the downpour.

"It is not," Kotaeru called back, frowning from beneath his rain hat. He hadn't even allowed her that much. The only thing keeping her hair from covering her eyes was a strip of linen holding it in a braid, and even now wisps were escaping, clinging to the sides of her face and neck, blowing wildly when another gale pushed against her.

"Just let me go in," She demanded.

"Not until you can hit half a dozen targets in a row. In the bulls eye," He added. Kagome practically snarled as she squeezed her knees and sent Boufuu off into a gallop. Mud splattered beneath his hooves and she knew it landed on her hakama, covering the red in brown dots.

"Stupid training. Stupid rain!" She muttered as she drew the bowline back, trying to rock with the motion of Boufuu's gallop. Her arrow flew, and she hit just inside the black center of her target. Quickly drawing another arrow, she was aiming when the stallion nickered angrily and reared back. Startled, Kagome let go of the bow and arrow and grabbed for the reins, only to have them just elude her fingers as she began sliding from the saddle.

Closing her eyes and preparing herself for a hard fall, she prayed to every god she knew that she wouldn't break anything when she landed. With a soft thump, she opened her eyes, looking up at an irate daiyoukai, his soaked hair plastered to his head.

"What are you doing here?" She asked, stupefied. Apparently it had been the wrong thing to say, because he dropped her, allowing her to land in the mud none too gently.

"Hey!" She shouted, looking up at him angrily.

"This Sesshoumaru believes 'thank you' is generally a proper response to being saved."

"You just dropped me," She sputtered as she stood in the slick mud, determined to keep some semblance of dignity as she tried not to slip and fall.

"You are ungrateful," He retorted.

"Okay, you want to be that way?" She shot back, gathering her own ki and pushing forward,
watching it slam into the daiyoukai. There had been no anger behind it, nothing that could truly harm
him. But the light was bright, and apparently her reaction had been unexpected, because she was
pleased to note that he fell backwards, his butt making contact with the mud. He looked satisfyingly
bewildered for a moment before standing, his pristine white clothing ruined, eyes almost glowing in
the rain.

Realizing that perhaps she had pushed the daiyoukai too far, she began to back up, determined to get
some distance between them. Seeing the rage suffusing his expression, she gave up on a slow retreat
and turned to run.

His whip snaked around her ankle and she fell face first into the mud, a gasp getting lost in the sound
of the rain. The whip untangled itself from her ankle as easily as it had gone around it, she stood
and turned to him, the rain making quick work of washing her face. Resolving to give as good as she
got, she tried to snake her power out in an approximation of his whip. What she lacked in finesse she
more than made up for in strength, and it coiled around his knees and pulled his legs from under him.
Before he could catch himself, he was laying in the mud, staring at the sky blankly.

"Perhaps we should call it a day," Kotaeru suggested, laughter bubbling up as he stared at the mud
covered miko and daiyoukai, who was pulling himself up. Even in the deluge he could smell the
daiyoukai and miko's anger, and the clash of power singed the air, smelling like lightning as it
danced.

"Leave us," Sesshoumaru commanded imperiously, his eyes never leaving the miko.

"Now, she was just playing sir," Kotaeru began, concern for the miko's well being coming to the
forefront.

"Leave us," Sesshoumaru repeated, his tone brooking no argument. Worried, Kotaru began to walk
away, glancing over his shoulder as the two faced one another, soaking and looking utterly
ridiculous. A sharp whistle and Boufuu, eager to get inside his paddock, came running to him,
leaving his mistress behind.

Once he was gone, Kagome crossed her arms and tapped her foot impatiently.

"Well?" She demanded.

Sesshoumaru darted toward her, too fast to be anything but a blur. He was just suddenly there in
front of her, and before she could react he seemed to fly behind her and she felt her feet coming out
from underneath her. Pride in ruins, she barely caught herself before eating mud again.

"That's it!" She shouted, not even bothering to stand as she sent her power snaking out. Barely
rolling out of the way, she watched as he caught himself, but not before the front of his kimono and
hakama were stained as well. Suddenly the whole situation, seeing him dirty for the first time ever,
she began giggling, which turned to hysterical laughter.

"I fail to see what amuses you," He muttered as she pulled herself into a sitting position and
continued laughing at him. He pushed himself from the ground, and considering his clothing a lost
cause, sat himself a few feet from her.

"We're like kids, playing in the mud, and you, you're dirty!" She exclaimed. "Even your pelt thing is
dirty!" She crowed, clutching her sides.

Before he had a chance to respond, he heard the stampede as the children came over the hill, spilling
into the practice field.
"We want to play too!" Shippou said, jumping into a mud puddle and splashing it everywhere.

"No guys, we weren't," Kagome began, but it was too late. The children were jumping, sliding, and falling everywhere she looked, determined to get as dirty as their adopted mother and alpha were.

"Playing," She finished, looking to Sesshoumaru. He seemed at a loss and shrugged almost helplessly.

"You promised them a game after their lessons, although how they knew we were out here-"

"Kotaeru-sama told us!" Rin piped up. "He said you two were playing a game and wanted us to come too!" She chortled happily as she ran from Sesshoumaru to join the others.

"Remind me to strangle my weapons master," Sesshoumaru muttered as he watched the girl give a gleeful shriek while she slid, her feet falling from beneath her.

"I wonder what caused Boufuu to rear like that in the first place," Kagome wondered in an offhand manner.

"You were angry. Horses are susceptible to emotion, and he was already agitated from the rain," Sesshoumaru guessed.

"I'm sorry I didn't say thank you, I was just surprised you were here," She sighed as she moved to stand. Immediately she froze when a coil of power wrapped around her ankle. "You wouldn't-" She began, seeing the smirk dancing on the daiyoukai's lips. "I just apologized!"

He completely ignored her indignation, that insufferable smirk gracing his features as he tugged, sending her flailing as she fell to the ground. The children cheered their alpha on, and then Kagome when she pushed against him with her own ki, forcing him on his back.

"You know what, I have an idea," Kagome said from her place in the dirt. This is perfect for tug of war!"

"What is tug of war?" Sesshoumaru asked, pushing himself up.

"Give me your sash," She demanded. He removed his blue and yellow sash reluctantly from around his waist, and she gathered the children around her, evenly dividing them up and explaining the game. Sesshoumaru watched as she tied a knot in the sash and then cut a line in the mud with her foot.

Once completed, she thumped on the ground next to him and they watched the children begin the game.

"You know, I never expected you to be playful," She admitted at last.

"For my kind, play is a precursor to training. There is little truly playful about it."

"But that last one," She started.

"The children arrived, and they are not like me. Play is just that, play."

"Hnn," Kagome commented, wondering if it meant the same thing when he said it.

"Been having fun?" Shinzuru asked as Sesshoumaru made his way to his rooms half an hour later, soaked to the skin and still bearing mud stains on the white silk of his clothing. His sash had finally
given way and torn beneath the abuse it endured for the sake of the game, and Kagome had finally called an end to the afternoon.

"Is there something amiss?" Sesshoumaru asked.

"Nah, just been hearing some awfully strange things today. Tenka tells me you allowed the miko to hug you. The wee ones too. And that you were out playing with them in the rain."

"I did," He ground out, not wanting to have the conversation.

"Why?"

"A deal with the woman."

"Deal?"

"It is none of your business."

"Pup, you know better than that," Shinzuru pushed. Sesshoumaru gave, glad at least, that there was no one else in earshot.

"We will try to be friends."

"Friends? How did- You know, I probably don't want to know," Shinzuru chuckled.

"She says female friends are allowed to hug whenever they please," Sesshoumaru tried to explain, suddenly feeling too defensive by half.

"They do at that. So you solved the problem."

"Not yet. Problems of that nature are not solved overnight," Sesshoumaru admitted. "But it is a beginning. I was...remiss in my treatment of her. She is pack, and as such, should be a friend, not a duty to be seen to."

"It's good to hear you say that. The boys and I were getting worried," Shinzuru admitted. "Well, now that that's solved, we'll follow her lead. Now go get into a hot bath before you catch a cold."

"I do not fall ill," Sesshoumaru replied, but the old youkai was already walking away, heedless of his words.

Youkai do not succumb to the elements, at least not easily, that much was true. Hanyou were not susceptible either. However, the next morning dawned with several sick humans in the shiro. This was brought to Sesshoumaru's attention by Shippou, who had come running in, eyes filled with worry.

Which is why he was now looking at a sea of blankets that encompassed almost a dozen humans, all of which sniffled at random various moments.

"Momma's sick too, but she won't come from her room. She says she scared of getting everyone else sick," Shippou keened. Sesshoumaru gave a one shouldered shrug, a habit leftover from having only one arm that he was trying to break himself of, and sighed. Rin was among the mass of sick children, and he would blame the miko for it, were it not for two things. One, she was obviously sick and two, he had not thought to bring the children inside either.

"I will retrieve your mother. Go find Jaken and tell him to have soup and warm bread brought up, as
well as more blankets." The unsure, lost look in the boy's eyes faded as he set about his task, and Sesshoumaru nodded to the youkai and hanyou children that stood, looking forlornly at their sick family. As if some unspoken communication had passed, they all relaxed and began moving to the humans on the floor.

He left and moved up the hall, praying the miko was at least decent. Once past the first set of doors, he immediately heard her sniffling. Past the second, a loud resounding sneeze echoed. Past the third, he saw the miserable mess that was the miko, or he would have had she not created a den of blankets around herself. As it was, he could only see wisps of her black hair.

"Miko, your children worry."

"It's just a cold, not even as bad as last time," She said from within the blankets. Her voice sounded nasally despite being muffled by the blankets and he gave in to the urge to roll his eyes to the ceiling.

"All of the mortal children are sick as well. Can you stand?" He asked.

"Don't wanna," She whined, somehow burrowing even more deeply into the covers.

"Woman-"

"I thought we agreed you'd use my name," She shot out petulantly.

"Why do you refuse to come out?"

"I don't want to," She huffed from within the den. "It's freezing out there, and warm in here."

Finally giving up on her foolishness, he strode to the bed and pulled the covers away. She clung viciously, giving out a cry even as he lifted the blanket, with her still clinging to it, into the air. She hung for a moment, swinging back and forth like a pendulum before landing with a soft thump on the futon. Once she landed, he had a chance to see her face and wondered if she had not been hiding because she looked completely, utterly miserable. Bleary, bloodshot eyes were only slightly less red than her nose, and her whole face was flushed with a slight fever.

"Can you stand?" He asked again. She nodded, her form so limp it was a wonder she was still upright. Watching her move slowly, he saw her wobble as she got to her feet and sway as she took a deep breath.

"You seem to be more ill than the others," He observed. As soon as the words left his mouth, she was falling over. Reflexes pushed him forward and he caught her neatly, realizing even as he was scooping her up into his arms that if she had fallen, she would have landed on the futon. Once she landed, he had a chance to see her face and wondered if she had not been hiding because she looked completely, utterly miserable. Bleary, bloodshot eyes were only slightly less red than her nose, and her whole face was flushed with a slight fever.

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"You are perhaps the most troublesome member of my pack," He commented wryly.

"I'll take that as a compliment," She replied, and he realized the blankets hadn't been the only cause of her voice sounding so muffled and strange.

"Soup is being brought to the childrens room. Would you like to join them."

"We're almost there," She pointed out. He had barely realized he'd been walking. The doors were still open, and servants were filing in with covered pots of soup and trays of warm bread and blankets. He followed in after them and found an open spot for the miko and sat her carefully on the floor. He noticed when she left his arms she began shivering violently again and watched as Shippou and two other youkai rushed to pull blankets around her.
"Your guys are all the best," She sniffled, gratefully accepting a bowl of soup from yet another of her adopted children. "I have no idea what I'd do without you."

"Be left to Sesshoumaru's tender mercies," A voice barked out in laughter. Sesshoumaru turned, watching Shinzuru stroll in carelessly, the twins behind him.

"How did you all get up here? This is the family wing," Sesshoumaru growled, wondering how they had gotten past the guards. Friends or no, it was a breach of security he would not allow.

"Their idea. I got to be a lady for a few minutes. A bit awkward, to tell the truth," The older youkai admitted, blushing colorfully.

"Now you'll never make fun of that incident at the mating again, will you?" Mizu asked archly.

"Why are you all here?" Sesshoumaru snapped, still angry at the thought of anyone slipping by so easily.

"We heard Kagome and the others were sick. Tenka said lessons would be pointless today, so we came to tell everyone some stories, that sort of thing. I mean, if you had plans to keep that many children entertained and quiet all day, we can leave," Kasai offered, his smile more feline than anything else. Not for the first time Sesshoumaru wondered if foxes were born of cat and dog alike, then shrugged the idea away. There was nothing dog-like about kitsune.

"It is alright. I am just troubled you slipped past the guards so easily."

"Ah, it's alright. The boys'll tell 'em what to watch for from now on, me too for that matter," Shinzuru offered. "Kotaeru's a good choice to train anyone, but he probably didn't think about us that can use illusions."

"It is an oversight that will be corrected," He ground out.

"Come on Sesshoumaru, stop growling and have breakfast. It's easily solved, and if they hadn't done it, imagine the possibilities of someone else alerting us to it," Kagome rasped, her words finally taking a toll on her throat. Rin was tugging on his sleeve insistently, her fever diminishing any hesitation she normally would have had.

"Please?" The girl asked, her voice holding the same stuffy, nasal quality the miko's had. Sesshoumaru sat, slightly amazed at the situation he found himself in. Nodding in appreciation to the child who brought him his own soup and bread, he took the time to survey the room and appreciated what he saw.

No matter what they claimed, the three interlopers were stationed in various positions between the sick mortals and the door. Shinzuru did not visit the children as the twins did, but his presence spoke volumes.

"So, have you learned your lesson about playing in the rain girl?" Shinzuru asked fondly. Kagome smiled wanly as she sat her mostly full bowl down.

"I'll say yes if Kotaeru promises I don't have to do that again," She rasped.

"Finish your meal," Sesshoumaru commanded.

"Yes father," She said. Her delivery would have been better had she been able to muster the breath for sarcasm. As it was, her breathing was beginning to worry him. They were shorter than normal, and her bleary eyes began to take on a glassy sheen.
"I told you to never call me that," He muttered as Shinzuru chuckled.

"Girl, he's just looking out for you, as his is right. The rest of the wee ones are finishing up, I'm sure you can manage."

"I'm dizzy," She admitted in a voice so small and timid Sesshoumaru could barely hear it.

"Perhaps later then," He sighed. "Move to the futon, no doubt the others will want to gather around you.

As he helped Kagome to the giant bed in the room, made by pulling so many mattresses together, he saw the other sick children beginning to gravitate to her, following still wrapped in blankets and sniffing. Once she was settled, wrapped in three blankets and radiating misery, the others cuddled around her, Rin claiming the spot next to her stomach. He watched, some strangeness occurring in his chest as Kagome curled around the girl slightly.

What happened next surprised him. He had merely been taking a spot by the futon to keep watch should anyone worsen. But the youkai and hanyou children began piling around him, spreading blankets and strewing pillows everywhere.

"Thank you for taking care of mom," Shippou said as he settled into a cushioned spot next to his knee. None asked for his lap, which was just as well, because the twins and Shinzuru stared in disbelief as the children crowded around him, making him a centerpiece to their lounging.

"You came to tell stories?" Sesshoumaru prompted, shattering their moment of stunned disbelief and prodding them into all speaking at once. After stammered apologies, they decided on taking turns to tell stories. Shinzuru started, and Sesshoumaru settled in for what promised to be a long day.

But none of the hale children made too much noise, and most napped around him, the kit, lost in sleep, began clinging to the cloth of his hakama at some point, and he found it strange that he didn't have the immediate urge to remove him. Once all were put to bed, Kagome still so deeply asleep she didn't even move, he watched the three move into a solid line facing the door.

"You have my thanks," He told them.

"They're ours too," Kasai threw over his shoulder. "Besides, you'd be doing it if we weren't, especially with us being able to sneak up here, and someone's got to look after the little beasts. And the miko," He added an afterthought, earning a chuckle from the rest of the males.

The next morning Kagome's cough was worse even though the children seemed to be recovering quickly. Rin put a hand to her forehead in concern, and her cry of alarm had Sesshoumaru jerking awake from a light doze. Berating himself for falling asleep, he moved to the futon where the children were gathering around the miko, their concerned voices not even breaking through her sleep.

"Move," He rumbled. Immediately they parted and he lifted the woman into his arms, surprised that she was still shivering despite the blankets wrapped around her. A sheen of sweat covered her face and he moved quickly from the children's room to hers, toeing open the doors in his way and setting her down on the bed gently, as if afraid she would break.

"Get Tenka," He ordered Shinzuru, who had followed. Worry permeated the man's scent as he dashed away.

"Miko," Sesshoumaru rumbled, shaking her gently. When she only groaned through chattering teeth
he moved her around, pulling the blankets on her futon over her. When that didn't lessen the violent shivering of her form, he pulled the pelt from his shoulder and watched it find its way beneath the blankets. It curled around her, and he was relieved when the intensity of her spasms died down, although it didn't disappear altogether.

Tenka blew into the rooms, eyes frantic and hands clutching a wooden basket filled with several bundles of herbs. When he saw Sesshoumaru however, he stilled, then began walking carefully to the other side of the futon. Kneeling gracefully to the blankets, his palm when to Kagome's forehead and almost jerked back when they made contact.

"This isn't good for a human, she's too hot."

"She shivers," Sesshoumaru rebutted, looking down to the woman who still twitched.

"It's the fever. She shivers because she's so hot, everything else feels cold. We have to cool her down, or the fever will get worse."

"We?"

"We'll need one of the basins for bathing and lots of cold water. I can't do it by myself, and she's unwed. As her alpha-" Tenka left the statement hanging, willing the daiyoukai to understand. Sesshoumaru stared at him blankly for a moment before his gaze hardened and he nodded tightly.

"I'll see to it," Shinzuru muttered, and Sesshoumaru watched the youkai flee. Damning himself again, this time for being completely unaware of another's presence, he waited, feeling slightly helpless in the face of the illness gripping the miko.

"When we were traveling to Naraku's fortress, she became ill after being thrown in a lake, how will this help her?" He demanded as he stared at the kagan busying himself with the herbs and a teapot that seemed to appear from nowhere.

"She probably didn't have this high of a fever then. We have to bring it down. I dealt with humans some before coming here. If her fever isn't forced down soon, well, few made it back from such sickness."

Servants kept him from asking anymore questions, two carrying a large wooden basin easily big enough for their purpose. Others came in carrying large buckets of water and he thanked the gods that the servants at least, were not human. The noise of their feet clumping in and out and water sloshing into the tub was enough to keep him from thought. Several more buckets were left, still filled with water. Shinzuru and Mizu stood at her doors, worry evident in their scents and expressions.

"Keep the children busy, tell them stories, play games, whatever you must. But keep them away from here," Tenka commanded. Both looked to Sesshoumaru, who nodded his assent before they left, closing each set of doors behind them. Tenka was already pulling her from the blankets, and the raspy keening noises rising from the woman's throat ground at Sesshoumaru's temper.

"Help me," Tenka commanded, obvious to anything but his patient. He was pulling her upright and trying to remove her sleeping robe. Sesshoumaru grabbed her from behind and watched as Tenka disrobed her with cold, impersonal hands. He only barely managed to hold in the growl when he saw the scars on her arms. When he looked lower, he saw the keloidal, raised flesh, paler than the surrounding skin, on her stomach and thighs.

"Sesshoumaru, calm yourself," Tenka snapped. "Focus, we have to be quick and careful, or she
could go into shock."

He hadn't known he was growling as he took in the hateful reminders of her rape. That he hadn't known of their existence bothered him on a level he didn't understand and didn't have the luxury of contemplating. Tenka grabbed under her feet and Sesshoumaru kept his hold under her arms.

"She might scream, loudly," Tenka warned just before they dunked her. When they pushed her into the water, he felt her muscles tense and her back arch as the cold seeped through his sleeves and into his skin. That she only let out a weak moan worried him, as well as her feeble attempts to break free. Within minutes Tenka was telling him to lift her out and they set her down in the blankets. Tenka's touch was still impersonal as he toweled her off and wrapped the blankets around her.

"I wish we could have a fire in here," He muttered angrily as he finished wrapping the girl.

"I could have one of the fire pits brought, it will not be large, but it will add warmth."

"Not yet, it'll warm the water, and we need it cold," Tenka replied. The girl still shivered and he rubbed the sides of the blanket harshly, creating friction and shaking her in the process. Sesshoumaru growled once and received a glare for the noise.

"Unless you're willing to loan your body heat, this is all I can do. You look ready to kill, and I'm not risking my life to cuddle her," Tenka snapped. Sesshoumaru let the healer's lack of protocol go, in fact, did not even think to reprimand him as he pulled the shivering miko to him and cradled her in his lap.

Several minutes later her shivering stopped and he finally looked down at her.

"We have to get her in the water again," Tenka told him. His head snapped up and his eyes hardened to the youkai.

"How many times?"

"A few more, then we'll see if her fever comes down any," Tenka replied blandly, eyes curiously blank. Sesshoumaru nodded and they unwrapped her from the blankets. Once more he felt the ice cold water stabbing at his arms as he helped dunk the miko and he looked away as she thrashed weakly in the water. When they removed her, he didn't even wait for Tenka, moving her to the bed himself and wrapping her in blankets, then holding her to him, willing his warmth into her.

They repeated the process twice more before Tenka said it was time to wait, and began mixing herbs together and pushing them into the teapot. As he was, Kagome began mumbling under her breath and Sesshoumaru had to turn his ear to her mouth to understand.

"Sorry," She murmured past a throat raw from coughing.

"Why?" Sesshoumaru asked.

"All my fault." Her eyes weren't even open as she said this, but he had the unsettling feeling she thought she was talking to his half-brother.

"Delirium sometimes comes with a fever," Tenka sighed as he sat back and watched the tea steep. "Once this is done, we'll have to get her to drink it."

"Sorry," She mumbled again.
"You have nothing to be sorry for," He rumbled. "You did everything in your power to stop it." Even as he played along with her delusion he wondered why. But after his words she quieted, although still shivered every few seconds. When Tenka approached with a glass, Sesshoumaru took it and pushed it to the miko's mouth.

"At least we don't have to pry open her jaw," The youkai said, tone heavy. Sesshoumaru started when she sputtered and choked on the tea and shifted her position. Her head still lolled back and he ignored the flicker of agitation he felt as he moved her to lean against his chest for better support. She drank the tea, spilling little down her chin despite her half conscious state.

Tenka reached forward slowly and once more Sesshoumaru repressed a growl. The hand quickly touched to her forehead and cheeks then pulled back as slowly as it had approached.

"It's not breaking," He told the daiyoukai quietly. Sesshoumaru merely nodded.

They were on the fourth round of dunking her when a knock resounded from the outer doors.

"See to it," Sesshoumaru growled, pulling the limp body from the water and bundling her up in blankets as the healer fled. He returned minutes later, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

"There is a monk here to see her. He says he is a friend."

"If it is the monk she traveled with, the kit will know. Have on of the twins disguise him and check him," Sesshoumaru replied blandly, looking down at the shivering woman in his arms. Tenka left silently, leaving him alone with her.

"You are too fragile to be so powerful," He observed. It was a wonder she could contain such power in a shell felled by something as mundane as the weather. Eventually her shivers stopped and she snuggled deeper into his form, as if trying to find any way to steal more heat. He took mokomoko and wrapped it around her gently, then allowed her to cuddle back into his chest.

Tenka arrived minutes later, checking her forehead and allowing himself to hope at last.

"The fever is beginning to go down. I'll have a fire basin sent up. The monk, his name is Miroku. The kit vouched for him. When Kagome is decent, he wants to come wait next to her. The kit too."

"The children may visit, two at a time, for a few minutes, all at once will cause too much noise. She is not conscious, but it will make them feel better to see her. The monk may visit, but afterward he is to be sent to the guest quarters. Have Shinzuru question him after-" He stopped, realizing that he had lost track of time, and he no longer knew what meal was supposed to be next.

"It's evening," Tenka supplied, guessing at the daiyoukai's hesitation.

"He will be questioned in the morning."

The children filed in soon after, each pair holding hands tightly as they approached the daiyoukai, their eyes bright with worry. He allowed them to look on the woman still bundled in blankets in his arms. Each had the same questions about her health. Disconcertingly, each child seemed to have unshakable faith that he would somehow make her get better.

Strangely, Rin and the kit came last, though he had expected them to be the first pair through the doors.

"She doesn't look better," The kit observed.
"Her fever is going down. She will be well soon."

"Sesshoumaru-sama will make her better," Rin promised the boy confidently, her eyes still on the woman cradled in his arms. "He brought Rin back from the dark place. He'll save ma-Kagome," Rin stuttered, looking down.

"You wish to call her mother?" Sesshoumaru asked, looking at the suddenly shy girl. Surprised, because she had never been timid around him, because of him.

"I didn't mean, it's just-

"It is fine. I'm sure the miko will not mind." Bright brown eyes swung up to meet his and he was worried by the tears there. Suddenly she stopped and looked to Shippou.

"Do you mind sharing her with me?" Rin asked, as if he weren't already sharing Kagome with the others.

"Of course I don't. Remember what she told us?"

"How people's heart can grow?" The girl asked, smiling tremulously when the kit nodded. The sentiment was lost on the daiyoukai watching, but he allowed himself to relax as both children seemed to come to some agreement he didn't entirely understand, and judging from the strange comment, didn't want to.

"Kit, the monk, was his scent familiar?" Sesshoumaru demanded after both children had resumed staring at the sleeping form of their mother.

"Yes, it's him. He really wants to see mama."

"Tell Shinzuru to fetch him." Both children nodded and walked slowly from the room, glancing over their shoulders now and again. When they left, Sesshoumaru busied himself with trying to get her on her futon and beneath the covers. However, she seemed determined to cling tightly to his kimono.

"Don't go," She murmured, her hand escaping the blankets to cling at his kimono. Despite the weakness of her thrashings in the water, her grip was tight on the silk, wrinkling it in her small fist. "Please," She whimpered.

"I will not," He rumbled in return. He couldn't get her hand free without harming her, and her little pleas held so much desperation despite her condition that he found it difficult to deny them. So Miroku found them several minutes later as he saw himself into the rooms.

"Sesshoumaru-sama," He greeted, giving no indication to the surprise he felt. Sesshoumaru inclined his head in acknowledgment. Friend of the miko or no, he did not like a stranger around her, and to the daiyoukai, the monk was a stranger.

"How is she?" He asked as he settled himself on the other side of the futon. His voice was quiet, and his eyes eyed the daiyoukai evenly.

"The healer says her fever has broken."

"You're wet," Miroku observed after a time of tense silence.

"I aided in the healers method," Sesshoumaru finally replied.

"She trusts you."
"Delirium from the fever. She thinks I am the half breed."

"No, she trusts you. Your energy is too strong to mistake for anyone else's. I can see I was right."

"About what?" Sesshoumaru snapped, annoyed by the monk's calm proclamation about the unconscious miko's behavior.

"You're helping her, taking care of her. Sango." He paused for a moment, as if saying the name pained him. When he began again, his voice had taken on a steely quality. "Sango thinks you're using Kagome for her power, and the jewel's."

"The taijiya does not strike me as the kind to send someone in her place."

"I'm not here for Sango."

"I was going to question you tomorrow, but it seems there is more to your visit than you're saying," Sesshoumaru observed at last.

"I left the village. Sango and the others are convinced that Kagome is unfit to guard the jewel."

"That is their own concern," Sesshoumaru said coldly, his grip tightening around the miko. When she mewed softly in her sleep, her own aura rising from her, soothing him even as she slept, he loosened his arms and felt her wriggle a moment, pressing closer into his warmth.

"Perhaps it would be best to speak of this when Kagome is well enough to hear. If I could beg an indulgence, I do not want to repeat this."

Sesshoumaru's eyes were resting on the man, narrow, cold slits of gold. Though he appeared to be judging the man's face, he was sifting through the motley assortment of smells emanating from the man. Anger, frustration, worry. They told him only what the monk was feeling, and nothing about why.

"Is it a story I need to hear?" He asked.

"It is."

"You will be allowed to stay long enough to tell your story once the miko is well. Beyond that, I make no promises."

"You are most gracious," Miroku murmured. He stood and bowed deeply, and though Sesshoumaru normally did not adhere to human signs of submission, he inclined his head to the monk. Miroku had almost made it to the door when he turned.

"Perhaps in a deeper fever she might mistake you for someone. But she's not that bad right now, or else she'd be getting cold baths. Your aura is too unmistakable, and she's had time to get to know it."

"Speak plainly," Sesshoumaru commanded, more than tired with the man's observations.

"She trusts you, and you're taking care of her. Thank you, for taking care of my friend."

"She is pack," Sesshoumaru rumbled.

"I know," Miroku calmly replied, despite Sesshoumaru's growing temper. With that strange statement, he was past the door and sliding it closed behind him. Once again Sesshoumaru looked down at the woman in his arms and wondered for the first time if she actually did recognize his aura, or if the monk had only been guessing, and she imagined the dead hanyou.
It wasn't until dawn that her fingers finally loosened and he was able to arrange her on the futon. No longer in the midst of the healer's chaotic frenzy, he saw the burn on her arm, knew the other places those burns were, and could not restrain the growl rumbling from within.

Suddenly feeling weary, he moved silently from the room and was not surprised to find Tenka and Shinzuru sitting outside, guarding the door.

"How is she?" Shinzuru asked, looking as tired as Sesshoumaru felt.

"Her fever has gone down, she's resting peacefully."

"I'll take over, if that's alright," Tenka offered. At Sesshoumaru's nod he padded silently into the miko's rooms and closed the door behind him.

"Why is the monk here?" Shinzuru sighed.

"I do not know yet, but it does not bode well," Sesshoumaru responded evenly, despite wanting to snarl, to growl, to rage. The raised marks on the woman's flesh ground and scraped against his already fraying resolve and there was no one to hunt for them. How merciful would he have been had he seen those scars before finding Naraku? The question haunted him. The hanyou had not suffered enough.

"Get some sleep pup. It'll be awhile before she wakes, and the little ones will need you."

"Perhaps this is why my father had such a small pack compared to so many. There is not enough time to handle the affairs of my territory and watch after them."

"Well, that's what we're here for," Shinzuru offered with a wry chuckle. "Never had any children to get grandchildren from, seems this'll do."

Sesshoumaru let his thanks go unsaid, but the look he offered the older youkai was one of gratitude before he walked away, mind too full of the scars the miko bore and the news the monk brought.

Kagome awoke, her throat raw and mouth dryer than the sahara desert. Every muscle in her body ached and she wondered for a moment if she had been in a battle she didn't remember. It certainly felt as if she'd been knocked around. Or maybe she'd been thrown and trampled by Boufuu.

"You are awake," A voice observed quietly. Kagome finally opened her eyes, rubbing them to clear the image. When Tenka finally came into view, he was smiling down at her, his relief palpable.

"Wha-water?" She asked, immediately changing from questioning what happened to begging for water. A cup of tea was brought to her lips and she brought her hands up to take it, surprised at how her arms shook.

"Best let me do it for now. You've been in and out for a couple of days. Had everyone quite worried to be sure," He told her as he held her and helped her sip from the cup. When the tea was finished, he leaned her back into the sea of blankets and she snuggled in, stopping when she suddenly noticed something.

"Every time I get sick this thing shows up. I'm beginning to think he's trying to creep me out on purpose," Kagome chuckled as she moved the pelt from beneath her.

"Don't tell him that. He only left a few hours ago to get some sleep. Between his duties as lord, the children and you making sure you were alright, I'm surprised he didn't pull a futon across the door."
Of course, it would be redundant at this point," Tenka chuckled wryly.

"Huh?" Apparently she was still asleep, because nothing that the youkai had said made any sense to her.

"Seeing as I've been busy taking care of you, the children have been free to worry. Mizu and Kasai have been doing their best to keep them occupied-"

"Oh no, how many nobles want to kill them?" Kagome groaned.

"Very few. And Shinzuru has been standing guard outside of your door constantly. It seems the first day the twins and he were able to sneak past the guards under some illusion or another, and it's had Sesshoumaru on edge. Since you were ill and Sesshoumaru busy looking after you-"

"I thought you said you were looking after me," Kagome cut in, glaring at the youkai smiling serenely down at her.

"You were very ill child, and Sesshoumaru claimed you as pack. There were points I needed extra hands, and as alpha he was the only one able to help me," The youkai hedged. Kagome shrugged, stretching her sore muscles. She began to move from the blankets when she noticed something else very odd.

"I'm naked," She squeaked.

"Indeed. We had to give you several cold baths, and then warm you. Clothing would not have been conducive."

"You saw me?"

"I did."

"That means-" She groaned and pulled a cover over her face, sure that the heat in her face was not any lingering trace of the fever, but pure shame.

"He did not have to time to notice, if that helps."

"Not really," She muttered, the noise muffled from beneath the blankets.

"He did see your scars," Tenka admitted at last. Kagome peeked from beneath the blankets, something in the youkai's tone worrying her. When she saw the thoughtful expression on his face, she pushed herself up, careful to keep a blanket covering her chest. The scars ringing her arms however, were readily apparent.

"And?" She asked.

"He was very angry. I do not think he will ask, but they bother him."

"He knows how they happened." Kagome swallowed thickly. "May I have another cup of tea. It was very," She paused. "Bracing?" She offered in her best unsure but game smile. Tenka laughed and poured another cup, this time allowing her to drink it herself.

"It will help, although you will probably need help walking at first. There is another matter," Tenka began, but was stopped as the door slid open and a very haggard looking daiyoukai stepped in.

"I distinctly remember telling you to inform me the moment she woke," He groused, moving to the side of the futon and completely ignoring Kagome's fumbling with the wooden cup as she tried to
"Don't you ever knock?" She demanded hotly, glad her voice was only slightly raspy. The tea was helping soothe the ache in her throat, and she was awake enough now to be mortified and angry.

"How are you feeling?" He demanded as he folded his legs beneath him, sitting himself next to her.

"I'm fine, now can you give me some privacy?" She retorted. He stared at her blankly.

"I will give you both a moment," Tenka said, making a hasty exit. "The children will want to know," He excused, practically flying from the room.

"Any faster and he would have been a whirlwind like Kouga," Kagome muttered after the kagan's departure. When she turned her gaze to Sesshoumaru she was startled by the vague shadows beneath his eyes and the way he swayed even as he sat.

"Are you okay?" She asked, moving a hand toward him.

"This Sesshoumaru is fine." The effect of his claim was belied by a sudden yawn he was unable to hold in.

"Tenka said you'd only gotten to sleep a few hours ago. You should go back to bed," She commanded. "I'm fine, see," She told him, gesturing to herself.

"You're still shaking."

"It'll get better. I've been in bed for two days, three if you count the first one. I just need to get my feet under me again and move around some." He only continued staring at her blankly, and she realized that perhaps he was tired enough that he wasn't really hearing her.

"The monk is here." He said it in such a bald tone that she knew he had to be suffering from his lack of sleep. There was a wariness in the tone, and even a hint of anger. While she had heard the latter plenty of times, she had never heard the former flavoring his words.


"He wished to tell us both at the same time."

He was definitely swaying.

"You need to sleep."

It seemed the kami were playing a cruel joke, because at that exact moment the herd of children she called her own came walking through the door as quietly as they could manage. Being a herd however, meant that they still made quite a bit of noise.

"Momma!" Shippou cried. "Rin was right, he made you better!" He said before throwing himself into her arms. Kagome caught him easily, but was overwhelmed by the rest crowding around her, determined to get their own hugs.

"Thank you all so much. And yes, Sesshoumaru and Tenka made me better. But now Sesshoumaru's very sleepy, he's been working hard to take care of all of us, and now we need to take care of him."

"You should not be alone," He protested, although it was in his normal, stoic tone.

"I'll make you a deal. I'll submit to whatever fuss you and the others make without complaint if you cover herself.
go to the kids room and at lean against something, because it looks like you're going to fall over. I'll get dressed and have Tenka help me get there."

"You are in no place to set conditions."

"Too bad. Deal or no deal."

"And if I refuse?"

"You get to explain it to them," She said, smiling sweetly as she pointed to the gaggle of children who still sat watching, wide eyed and worried.

"I accept the terms, I will go with the children," He muttered. Kagome watched him walking with the children, and realized that Rin and Shippou had each taken a hand, hero worship shining in their eyes as they led him away. Tenka came in as they were filing out and smiled gently.

"Tis a wise woman that can get such a man to bow to her wishes," He commented. "Now, I'm not putting you in those miko robes, too much for your condition. Sesshoumaru had some of the more simple yukata pulled from storage for you."

"Some day I'm going to have to find a way to pay him back for all of this," She muttered dryly as Tenka moved to the storage boxes. Next to them several thin, wide wooden boxes were stacked and he opened the top.

"I do believe the servants took your eyes into account. That or this is very happy circumstance," The kagan laughed as he pulled a blue yukata out of the box. He laid it out over the carved trunks gifted to her, 'to air out' he assured her. They then began the process of getting her bathed, which was mortifying for Kagome and more amusing than anything for the healer.

"It'll be fine. Nothing I haven't seen anyway," He laughed. "Although between you and Sesshoumaru, I might just need to move here into the family wing," He joked.

"Kami, I hope this is the last time," Kagome lamented as he finished his ministrations. As cold as his touch was, she was grateful for it's formality. He was helping her tie the obi when she asked for a brush. It took her several minutes, and by the time she was finished, her arms shook with fatigue. He wove an arm around her shoulders and helped her stand.

"Wait," She murmured, reaching to the futon and pulling the pelt to her chest. When Tenka only nodded, he braced himself against her and they began to move forward.

"Do you need to be carried?" He asked after she had taken a few wobbling steps, her knees knocking together.

"I'll be fine. I will get there on my own two feet," She grumbled as she lifted her foot again. After what felt like a small eternity they made it to the corridor and she leaned heavily against the youkai, a part of herself angry that she was so weak, and another part just grateful the youkai was there to keep her from falling flat on her face.

"I'll take it from here," A voice intoned, and Kagome looked up to see Shinzuru moving towards her. Before she could utter a single word of protest, she was swept up in his arms and moving quickly down the hall to the children's room.

"Put me down," She hissed. "I'm not an invalid."

"Stop your caterwauling," He chuckled. "If you managed to fall I'd never hear the end of it from the
pup." Kagome merely bristled at the nickname and endured the ride in silence. He did allow her some small measure of grace when they reached the doors. Setting her down, he allowed her to use him as a support as the door was opened from the other side. Kasai's face lit up when he saw her, and he brought a finger to his lips and then pointed into the room. First she saw Mizu, who sat against a wall, eyes on the door. He waved brightly, then gestured to the wall across form him more deeply into the room. Her eyes followed his thumb and she was only just barely able to hold in the gasp that sprang up in her throat.

Sesshoumaru was seated leaning against a wall, which was normal for him. What was not normal however, was that he seemed to be out cold, and there were children piled around him. None were on him, which would have been too strange for her. She almost chalked this vision up to a fever dream when Shinzuru leaned to whisper in her ear.

"The little ones haven't been able to sleep well either. The pup's been doing his best keep them from worrying. Even let them cuddle up to him, as you can see. All of 'em need the rest," He explained. Kagome nodded, swallowing thickly around the sudden lump in her throat. She tried to move silently, stealthily, because the daiyoukai did need his sleep, and so did the children. Her efforts were in vain however, when sleepy gold eyes blinked open, followed by one or two pairs of strangely colored eyes that saw but didn't fully comprehend.

Once she was at the edge of the tangle of sleeping bodies, she paused, unsure of where to sleep. Shippou was curled up near Sesshoumaru's knee, looking like an exceptionally fluffy hedgehog. Just as she was ready to lay down, curling near some of the older children, his hand came up and gestured for her to come forward.

"What?" She asked in a confused whisper.

"Like when you were sick," A sleepy voice said, and Kagome looked down to see Zurui watching her through fogged eyes. "He wants to hold you."

Kagome very much doubted he wanted to, was stunned that he had at all, and had no idea for the sudden change in his behavior. Since making the deal to be friends it seemed the kami were determined it would undergo trial by fire, and she was beginning to wonder at the daiyoukai's patience. But the girl's words were the only thing that made sense. She tip toed through the mass of tangle bodies, stumbling into Sesshoumaru more than reaching him. As luck had it, he didn't comment, didn't even seem to to notice.

Instead, he arranged her silently, his arms cradling her. His head leaned back against the wall once more, and he was out. She could swear he had done it in his sleep, even if his eyes had been open.

And despite the fact that it felt as if she'd only been up for half an hour, and she'd only bathed, changed and walked less than twenty feet the whole time, she found herself exhausted and decided that it had to be a dream, and since that was the case, she wouldn't question the warmth the dream provided.

When she woke again, she felt cramped, as if she'd slept strangely. Trying to stretch, she felt something rumble at her side and opened her eyes, blinking against the bright white that greeted them. Mumbling something pithy under her breath about pelts, she began moving the fir from her face, determined to tell Sesshoumaru he could have it back when she realized that her dream had not been a dream at all.

"Oh, wow. Umm, morning?" Kagome finally asked, looking up into alert gold eyes.
"It is evening," Sesshoumaru informed her. Kagome looked around, mokomoko relaxing itself as dropping lazily from their forms. She spotted the children still sleeping peacefully, although it looked as if they had gravitated closer to the daiyoukai as they slept, because Shippou was definitely nestled into his leg, and Rin claimed the other side, head pillowed by her arms.

"Sesshoumaru," She started, blushing madly.

"Hnn?"

"I have something to see to," She stuttered, mortified because she wasn’t entirely sure she could even stand. Weakness aside, her legs felt like rubber and she knew her current position was the cause.

"The monk will wait," He rumbled, leaning his head back against the wall.

"I cannot believe-agh. Last time we had this conversation was after I nearly killed you and you grew your arm back," She muttered. He stared at her blankly for several minutes, and despite his seeming alertness she wondered if he had gotten enough sleep. But she saw him realize what she was saying, because his eyes widened a fraction of an inch and she could swear there was a hint of a blush dusting his fair skin.

He stood abruptly, nearly dropping her, then moved to the corner of the room where Tenka sat dozing, deftly avoiding the pile of children that were stirring awake at the sudden movement of their alpha.

"Healer, the miko requires your aid," He muttered before handing her off to a surprised looking kagan.

"Are you feeling alright?" Tenka asked, eyes concerned as his hand came to her forehead.

"I have something to see to," She muttered darkly.

"Oh, well, that explains it," He sighed, standing fluidly, for which she was grateful. Jostling her around and tossing her like a hot potato was not helping her situation.

"Make him suffer for it later," Tenka chuckled as she began muttering obscenities under her breath.

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I haven’t had time to properly thank everyone for their reviews lately, as I’ve been bogged down with studying and writing. But your reviews are cherished and appreciated, thank you.
Sesshoumaru was waiting for her with the children when she came back, this time wobbling, although less than before, braced by the healer. She steadfastly avoided looking directly at Sesshoumaru and instead went to her knees and let herself be surrounded by the hoard. All of the children crowded her, but he could see their care with the woman they had adopted as their mother. She was so busy with each of them she didn't notice the new presence in the room. It wasn't until Shippou called the monk's name that she looked over her shoulder.

"Miroku!" Kagome cried out, standing and wobbling precariously.

"Kagome," He greeted, although it was much more subdued. His grin belied his tone and he came forward to hug her, silent as she asked endless questions she didn't give him time to answer. Finally she pulled back and looked to the children, most of whom were giving the monk a wide berth.

"Everyone, this is one of best friends, Miroku. He traveled-"

"He was with the lady that took Shippou," Tegatai accused. At the child's declaration, every other seemed to crowd behind him and Zurui.

"It wasn't his fault, he didn't know Sango was doing something wrong," Shippou defended. "And he's not going to take me. Momma and Sesshoumaru won't let him."

"We won't neither," Tegatai shot out, still glaring at the monk. Miroku sighed and his shoulders slumped.

"Guys, I promise you can trust Miroku. No one's going anywhere, I promise," She added. The children nodded in acknowledgment, although they still refused to go any closer to the male.

"What are you doing here?" Kagome asked, turning back to the monk. "Is everything alright?"

"That is something that is best discussed elsewhere," Sesshoumaru rumbled from behind her. Without her realizing it, he had moved behind her. Like the children, he was still looking at the monk with hard, unforgiving eyes.

"It's dinner time anyway," Kagome said, not knowing if it was or not. "We can discuss it while we eat in my rooms," She suggested. Miroku nodded tightly and Sesshoumaru answered by picking her up.
"I can walk just fine!" She exclaimed, flushing brightly.

"Kagome has always had trouble accepting her limitations," Miroku commented as he followed the daiyoukai out.

"Be good and get to bed on time!" Kagome called over Sesshoumaru's shoulder as they exited the room. Then she proceeded to cross her arms over her chest and attempted to swing her legs. When the arms around her tightened she stopped and glared up at his face. Shizuru opened the doors to her rooms and she was rewarded for her efforts when Sesshoumaru dumped her on the pillows.

"I seem to remember this happening before," She muttered as she struggled to straighten her clothing. "And it ended with me sick as a dog."

"Kindly refrain from such comparisons," Sesshoumaru said as he seated himself next to her, not even looking at her when he said it. His gaze was centered directly on Miroku, who was staring at the table. Shizuru closed the doors and sat himself, his eyes also on the monk.

"I left the village, and Sango," He finally admitted, looking to Kagome when he said it. "I couldn't stay anymore."

"Why? I thought you and Sango, well, you said you guys were going to get married!" The miko exclaimed, aghast at his sudden admission.

"She's changed. At first I thought it was just, the attacks, the stress of rebuilding her village, the constant reminders everywhere. But it's not. Kohaku and I both, I mean, Kohaku's still there, but I couldn't stay." The words came out in a tumbled rush that was unlike anything Kagome had heard from the monk before. For once he seemed at a loss, and he had always been level headed, always ready with a plan.

"Best to start at the beginning lad," Shizuru said, his tone not exactly unkind, but not kind either. Miroku responded by taking several deep breaths, as if bracing himself for some swift retribution.

"We got back to the village, and Sango was still angry about Kagome refusing to come. I thought it was just hurt, but Kohaku and I both knew Kagome couldn't come back, not with the children involved. And Kohaku gave his complete trust to Sesshoumaru, and that isn't something he gives easily anymore. But even after we began working on building the village back up, Sango could only talk about Kagome and the jewel and Sesshoumaru," He explained, still looking at the table, and Kagome had a feeling that as his words grew more strained, he'd forgotten she was even there.

"The other slayers, she told them about it, and it only grew worse, not better. I had hoped it was her fear of abandonment. I know it's something that haunts her, and even though there was no real choice for Kagome to make, she still feels as if she's been abandoned. But she won't accept that. Everything bad she feels has turned into this blinding hatred." He paused for a moment, which Sesshoumaru took as a chance to cut in.

"Why is it necessary I be here monk?"

"Just give me a moment," Miroku said, straightening and looking at them, as if he suddenly realized they were there. His eyes cleared and he swallowed convulsively before starting again.

"It didn't take long for the slayers to start talking. Sango has set herself up as their leader. I don't know if they suggested it or if it was her own idea, kami, I hope it wasn't," He sighed tremulously, on the verge of tears. Kagome reached her hand out and was surprised when his hand sought hers and clung tightly.
"I'm so sorry, I should have come when the rumors first started. I asked Sango about the truth of them. I should have seen it, stopped it somehow."

"What's wrong Miroku, what's going on?" Kagome asked softly, her own eyes swimming with tears.

"Sango and the villagers, the slayers, they mean to come here and take the jewel back. They're convinced you're unfit to guard it. He murmured apologetically, the tears that had threatened leaking down his cheeks at his confession. "They're still in the planning stages. Kohaku is there keeping an eye out, he can send us any news, anything pertinent."

"How-" Kagome began.

"Kirara refuses to let Sango ride her anymore, won't come near her. Kohaku is her only rider now, and myself. I came here on her, then sent her back."

"It's simple," Shinnzuru said. "We wipe out the village, the threat will be dealt with."

Miroku flinched as if struck and Kagome reeled back, her eyes going wide.

"What?" She demanded. "How could you even suggest something like that?"

"I took an oath, or did you forget? It's a whole village of taijiya that threatens to rise against you and Sesshoumaru. I swore loyalty to you both. I'll raze the whole village to the ground to be rid of such a threat."


"Children that will grow and continue to be a threat. It is best dealt with now."

"Kohaku is a slayer, and he isn't a threat," Kagome retorted. She turned to Sesshoumaru, her gaze filled with fury. "What do you think? Is it a good idea to kill an entire village?" She demanded.

"I have killed more people than could fill the citadel," He acknowledged, his own quiet, toneless words shocking the two humans into silence. "Ningen, youkai, and hanyou. I have destroyed armies that posed less of a threat to me, and for lesser reasons than this."

"You can't be serious! Think of Kohaku, he trusts you!" Kagome accused, tears pouring down her cheeks.

"You have posed difficult problems since your arrival," He began.

"Then I will go be someone else's problem!" She shouted, starting to stand. In her fury she forgot her own state of health and stumbled against a wall, suddenly dizzy, and her hand tore through a delicate paper panel. Sesshoumaru was suddenly standing and pulling her back, keeping her from stumbling all the way through it and sitting her down.

"I have listened, and now you will listen. You have posed many strange difficulties since you first came here. And there have always been solutions, albeit creative ones, that did not compromise anyone's honor. It is your duty to guard the jewel, and mine to keep you safe. Shinnzuru's plan has its own merits, no, let me finish," He said when she opened her mouth to cut him off. "But I have given my word to keep you safe and sane. Doubtless I would be forsworn if we followed through with such an undertaking."

Kagome stared at him as if he'd grown another head, and her arms were around his neck, practically strangling him as she cried and mumbled thank yous into his hair. When she moved back, suddenly
aware of what she'd done, her already red face became even more so, if possible.

"You're going to be the death of us," Shinzuru mumbled, but was smirking as he said it.

"Thank you, Sesshoumaru-sama," Miroku murmured, his own tears drying as he politely rubbed them. "I do not think, I could not, even though Sango."

"Perhaps a way to stop this should be considered," He suggested, saving the monk from fumbling any further.

"Sango is the headman, or woman as it were, correct?" Shinzuru asked.

"Yes. Kohaku is her second, although she doesn't listen to him much these days."

"But the village would listen to her, right?"

"Yes."

"Well, seems to me we just need to change her mind."

"Don't you think I've tried?" Miroku demanded angrily, as if the youkai's words were accusations. "Every day I've had to debate, then argue, why Kagome is fit, why Sesshoumaru was the right choice, why all youkai shouldn't be wiped out. Do you have any idea how hard it is to deal with a female that's been treated that badly?" The human ended his tired yelling and pointing angrily at the moth demon.

"As a matter of fact, I do," Shinzuru snarled, face dark and any hint of humor gone. "Do not forget, your lady love was not the only one harmed by the war, and I can say that at least Cat doesn't go about thinking of genocide because of it."

"Guys, stop this right now!" Kagome shouted, or tried. Her voice was growing raspy and she desperately wished for some tea. She brought her palms down hard on the table, the sudden clapping noise startling the two men. "If they'll listen to Sango, we have to change her mind. And we will have to bring her here to do it," She calmly finished.

"Kidnapping the head woman will only bring them down on us faster," Sesshoumaru murmured. He stood gracefully and seemed to glide out of the room.

"Where's he going?" Kagome demanded. "He's not leaving is he?"

"He'll be back, should be at least. I don't see him leaving a discussion like this to just us."

"How are we supposed to get Sango here?" Miroku demanded, turning the conversation back to their current dilemma. "Sesshoumaru was right, if we kidnap her, they'll only think the worst."

He was interrupted by Sesshoumaru returning. Tenka followed, moving past him and into Kagome's inner chambers. Everyone watched as he came back carrying a teapot and the small fire basin, as well as several small cloth baggies.

"You remember?" He asked Sesshoumaru. The daiyoukai only nodded in response before the healer left.

"Remember what?" Kagome asked, watching Sesshoumaru light the charcoal brick inside the basin and set the teapot over it.

"Can she be tricked?" He asked instead, turning back to the table, completely ignoring everyone's
curious stares.

"Huh?" Miroku asked.

"Can the slayer be tricked?"

"How?" Kagome asked.

"Lure her from the village, leaving Kohaku in charge. Perhaps to meet the monk," He suggested. "A conciliatory meeting, one she will be busy with for several days."

"Oh, but we haven't-" Miroku began, then blushed hotly. "The villagers might buy it. Especially if Kohaku played along. But how do we get her here, specifically? She'll never come to the citadel of her own free will."

"Ah, well, kidnap's kidnap, but it clears up the problem of the village knowing about it," Shizuru chuckled.

"In her opinion," Kagome interjected. "It would only make it worse."

"Perhaps more than a few days. Send the firecat back with a note saying they have decided to travel a bit, try to work their problems out?" Shizuru tried. "If we give her more time to come to terms with what is, then she'll have to get over her delusions."

"She's mule headed," Sesshoumaru retorted, noticing Miroku bristling at the descriptor. "Most humans are."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Kagome demanded, smacking his arm with the back of her hand and promptly pulling it to her chest, wincing.

"My point exactly," He murmured.

"Resshin and Nanmei are on their way here. Once they got the message Cat wasn't doing so well they apparently headed out. Sent one of the hawks ahead with the news. Maybe if the woman sees them together, and Kagome with the children she'll back off."

"Or explode," Miroku muttered.

"It's either that or we kill everyone," Shizuru said plainly. "And frankly, I'll do what it takes to keep the girl safe, even if it makes her hate me. And stop glaring, I don't give a good godda-" He started when he noticed Miroku's glare.

"It won't come to that, and Shizuru, if something like that were done in my name, for any reason, I'd go stark raving mad. Think about that, would you?" Kagome demanded.

"You'd have to find out about it first," He retorted.

"This is getting us nowhere," Sesshoumaru cut in. "Removing the threat through violence is a last resort, and only under my orders," He snapped at Shizuru. When Kagome made a small sound he turned to her, his eyes showing the depths of his displeasure with the way the meeting had been going. "I vowed to protect you, and humans were the ones in mind when I made it. I will do everything within my power to avoid something that would cause you such distress, but the main goal is keeping you alive and the jewel in your care. You cannot demand that we not consider every possibility," He finished, his words turning into a snarl.
"You can't, you wouldn't," Kagome started, his words at odds with what she thought she knew of him. "Children, Sesshoumaru. There are children in that village, like Rin."

"You dare-" He started, then stopped. Instead of finishing he stood and stalked from the room, completely ignoring the three amazed looking people left behind.

"You shouldn't have done that," Shinzuru sighed.

"What, reminded him that there are innocent lives in the village?" Miroku retorted hotly.

"Yes!" Shinzuru snapped, turning to glare at the monk. "He's forging a bond with a new packmate, and he's been taking care of her for the last few days. More than anyone except maybe the healer, he knows how weak she is right now. And you come waltzing in with this and demand he not consider every action? Reminding him that there are children, like Rin," He snapped, his gaze swinging to Kagome. "Will only add more conflict when he's trying not to think about it. His first priority is to his pack, whatever the cost. It's cruel to ask him to think of children when he has to consider the possibility of destroying them!" He finished, his words a quiet angry hiss. "Think you he would enjoy something like that? Is he such a monster in your eyes?"

Kagome, tears running down her cheeks, remembered the night he had executed her rapists, and his words.

"As pack we will have to coexist. There will be times when my actions will disturb you, as they did tonight. I do not wish for conflict to arise because you think I undertake such needlessly or with joy."

As it had after he had told her that night, shame rose up in her and she buried her face in her hands and let out one choked sob, and then another. The smell of herbs broke through the smell of salt and she looked down at the wooden cup of tea placed in front of her.

"What?"

"He got this for you. Tenka showed him how to brew it while you were sick. It'll help your throat," The youkai answered gruffly. Looking down at the cup, her reflection peering dimly back up at her, she felt even more ashamed of her words.

"I can't believe I thought-" She whispered, then stopped.

"He's a territory lord, and he's kept his seat because he's honorable, and fair. And because he can make the hard decisions. It won't come to slaughter if it doesn't have to. Especially because it would cause you so much pain. You broke faith with your alpha Cat," He said softly into the silence.

"It's partially my fault. I lost my temper, I never-It's just been hard," Miroku replied at length.

"It is. And mine. I wasn't lying. I'll do what it takes to keep her safe, even if she hates me for it, but I do admit that my phrasing was-" He stopped, looking for a word.

"Exacerbating to the situation at hand?" Kagome suggested, still looking down at the tea.

"That would be it," He admitted.

"Do you know where he went?" Kagome asked.

"Sounded like he was headed to his rooms. I'd leave him alone for a bit," Shinzuru suggested.

"No, I can't just let him sit and stew over it," She sighed, finally moving the cup to her lips and
drinking it down, flinching as she scalded her tongue with the hot liquid.

"Need help getting there?"

"I think I can manage. If you could help Miroku back to his rooms? And no arguments," She pleaded.

"I think we'll manage," Miroku said, giving the youkai a strange look. "I've never met a moth demon that wasn't trying to kill me," He offered.

"It'd make Cat sad if I did, and since there's no need," He shrugged, watching Kagome get up and strain for balance. She was aware of both their gazes and did her best to wobble to the doors. When she made it without falling flat on her face and only slightly out of breath, she smiled brightly and exited. After moving away from the door however, he smile faded and she looked at the long corridor stretching ahead of her.

It felt like a small eternity before she made it to the doors to his room, and by the time she arrived she was out of breath and her legs were trembling. She was very aware that she was going to collapse if she had to stand much longer, and prayed she was spared the indignity. She knocked against the wooden frame of the sliding door and waited for a response.

Repeating the process twice more and still receiving no answer, she gave up on being polite. If he could just barge into her room, she could to his, right? Sliding open the door, she closed it shut behind her quietly, hoping to disguise the fact that she needed the support of something or else she would fall over.

"Get out," A quiet voice commanded from behind her. She turned to see him, his back to her, staring at the two swords on their stands. Ignoring the command, she took a deep breath and took one step, and then another. With each one she seemed to get dizzier and dizzier, and by sheer force of will she pushed back the darkness trying to slide down her eyes.

Once she made it to him, she as much fell as knelt, and her knees banged against the wooden floor. He hadn't moved to help her the whole time, hadn't even turned or spoken to acknowledge her presence.

"I'm sorry," She whispered at last, looking at the long white hair that spilled down his back heavily. His shoulders were tensed and he was sitting so straight it was as if his spine was made of steel. "I'm sorry I doubted you, and threw that in your face. I know you wouldn't-"

"Wouldn't kill a whole village? Even children?" He asked quietly, his tone apathetic.

"Wouldn't do such a thing needlessly, or with joy," She replied, parroting his words back at him. "As much as you took a vow to be my alpha, to protect me, I took a vow to trust you. I'm sorry I broke it," She finished. When he said nothing, she leaned forward, covering the few inches between them, and wrapped her arms around his middle. He tensed even further and she let out a shuddering sigh, trying to suppress a new wave of tears.

"I do not wish to be touched." It was as much a command as a declaration.

"You promised."

He jerked away at her words and finally turned to her. It was pure luck that she caught herself on her palms, keeping her face clear of the floor by inches.

"Why is it you accuse me of breaking my oaths and then throw them in my face a moment later?" He
demanded. "You cannot have it both ways, miko," He bit out, moving several feet from her.

"I forgot," She began.

"At every turn it seems you're ready to accuse me of one monstrosity or another."

"And you keep blowing so hot and cold I have no idea what to expect," She snapped right back, her defensiveness escaping as anger. Even as she said the words she wished she could take them back. He was right, and she hated that he was right, but even so, she knew she shouldn't be arguing with him.

"Perhaps if I make you understand," He snapped out coldly. "I am trying to be friends with a woman that has been horribly used in her time even as I am trying to protect her, and it seems I cannot do both."

"I'm sorry," She whispered at last. "I know I messed up. I'm going to try harder from now on," She promised. "I'm sorry I threw everything in your face like that, it was wrong." She finally looked up and saw him staring at her evenly, his face devoid of any emotion.

"I'm still scared," She finally admitted, breaking the long silence between them. "Every time I turn around, it's like some new problem is just there, and everything keeps changing so quickly."

"Change is the way of life. You must learn to accept it."

"I would if I were given time to," She sighed, ignoring the fact that her statement had made no sense. "I know it's hard dealing with me. But try to understand my perspective. It wasn't too long ago that we were at odds. I'm pretty sure you hated me, and I know I didn't like you. Now, it's like we've been thrown together in this family, and you're good with the kids and taking care of me when I'm sick, it's just a huge shift. Today I kept wondering if I was still dreaming some crazy alternate reality because of the fever. I still am."

Sesshoumaru allowed a sigh to escape and he relaxed, if just a little.

"My father never had a large pack. It was my mother, myself, and the hanyou's mother. The woman was never here, and there were no children unless they were the servant's, and I had no contact with them. Mizu and Kasai were the closest things I had. These children, Rin, your kit, they lost everything because of that bauble hanging around your neck, whether directly or not. I would not see more children die because of it."

"You mean-"

"We would find humans to raise them, or bring them here."

"But they wouldn't want to be in the home of the person that-" She started, then stopped.

"It would not be difficult to keep them from knowing who, or why."

"You'd be willing to do that?" Kagome asked, awed by the magnitude of his confession.

"There are no other options, except to let them wander, and that could as easily turn into a death sentence."

Kagome moved forward, once more closing the space between them. Instead of hugging him this time however, she bowed, her forehead almost touching the floor.
"I'm so sorry," She whispered again, her words vibrating as they hit the floor directly beneath her lips.

"Do not bow to me," Sesshoumaru demanded gruffly. Kagome pushed herself up, her hand reaching out to the table as another wave of dizziness hit her. It calmed, and she felt a measure of gratitude when he didn't comment on it.

"The monk and Shinzuru?" He asked, changing the topic.

"Both admitted they were goading the other. All of us admitted we couldn't have chosen our words more carefully, and thought more," She admitted. "Shinzuru was showing Miroku to his room."

"And you? This news must be-difficult."

"Actually, the argument about the children kind of knocked it clear out of my head. I'm not sure what to make of it," She sighed, acknowledging the truth.

"It is still early in the night. Perhaps Bokusenou-" He started, but Kagome shook her head, inciting another round of dizziness.

"I know you probably don't want to right now, but I just really need someone to hug me and tell me it's going to be okay," She finally admitted, tears starting as she allowed herself to dwell on the realization that her best friend had turned against her so completely. More shocked than anything else when he allowed her to lean against him, she let out the frustration and the fear, sobbing heavily on his shoulder.

"I cannot promise you that this will end well, but there is a chance it will not," He told her as she settled her chin on his shoulder. She nodded and barely noticed as his chin rested on hair lightly, her head cupped by the curve of his neck and jaw.

It was enough.

I'm still floating somewhere above the world. To the person (or persons) that nominated this, thank you so much.
Running Up That Hill

By: The Hatter Theory

Chapter 20: Ask For Answers

Originally Published on February 4, 2012

Disclaimer: Checklist of things I don't own the rights to: Inu Yasha. Placebo. Kate Bush. I do own the OC's, so no stealing please.

I got art! Ejunkie, you are phenomenal, you know that? If you haven't heard it lately, you are. Simply fantastic. Resshin is glorious.

Three days later Kagome was playing simon says with the children when Nanmei burst into the room looking frantic.

"You're okay!" She shouted, running to the miko who was sitting and smiling up at her.

"Mostly," She laughed. "The guys won't listen though, they all keep snarling every time I stand up on my own."

"Wouldn't snarl if you wouldn't keep falling on your ass when you try," Kasai muttered darkly from his post at the door.

"Language!" Kagome hissed. Nanmei chuckled richly and knelt next to Kagome, moving her hand to the miko's forehead and cheeks, then staring at her speculatively.

"No fever, and you're breathing easily."

"Only when she sits still. Still gets all short of breath when she tries to move too much," Kasai said before Kagome could answer.

"Why is he doing that?"

"Because if you try to get he to do something too strenuous and she gets hurt Sesshoumaru'll have my ass," He answered, smiling at the obscenity even as Kagome glared at him. "Don't let her fool you, she did it to Mizu and he's the one that got stuck with some duty out on the land," Kasai chuckled.

"You know it had to be one of you since you guys are kitsune," Kagome retorted.

"What?" Nanmei asked, growing more and more confused.

"Later," Kagome promised. "And I know Resshin hates being in the citadel, but it is so good to have a female around here," She muttered. "Someone born with a brain," She finished, looking over her shoulder at the kitsune that was smiling broadly.

"Momma, can we do something besides balancing on one foot?" Rin asked.

"Simon says put both feet on the ground!" Kagome called.
"Who is this Simon?" Nanmei asked.

"I'll explain," Kagome giggled.

When Nanmei and Kagome finally made good their escape, leaving the children under Kasai's care. In the face of Nanmei's full glare he had backed down and allowed the woman to help the miko from the room. Once they had both settled down, Nanmei busied herself with lighting a fire in the small basin and preparing the teapot.

"How has your honeymoon been?" Kagome asked.

"Honeywhat?" Nanmei asked, once more looking confused. Kagome blushed madly, wishing she hadn't said anything.

"It's that time period after a couple gets married, where I'm from it's the first few months after a wedding."

"Oh, it's been amazing. Resshin's people have been so good to me, everything has been amazing," She said with a blush. Kagome smiled at her new friend, content to see her so happy.

"Someone, one of the males I suspect, sent a note to Resshin that you were very ill. But you seem mostly better now," Nanmei began, hesitating before continuing. "You seem different, besides the illness, I mean," She offered at last. "More vibrant."

"It's been a long, strange few weeks," Kagome admitted, a frustrated sigh escaping.

"What's bothering you?"

"It's an old friend, someone I traveled with before Naraku stole the jewel shards. She's angry with me," Kagome admitted.

"What about? I'm sure it can't be that bad."

"She thinks I'm unfit to guard the jewel because I chose to be part of Sesshoumaru's pack."

"Oh. Well, she'll understand in time surely. It's not as if Sesshoumaru is out to use it's power," Nanmei tried. Kagome shrugged helplessly as she moved to put a packet of herbs in the teapot.

"Actually, that's exactly what she thinks. She's a taijiya, and since the last battle, she's been rebuilding her village. They're all slayers, and they all agree with her. Miroku, another friend and her partner, came here to warn us. It's been-well, not fun," Kagome added lamely, refusing to give in to the tears that threatened every time she thought about her former friend.

"I take it that was why Sesshoumaru requested Resshin's presence immediately?" Nanmei asked softly.

"Probably. We have a plan, it's just, I'm not sure it will work. I'm scared Sango will just hate us more. If that happens, Sesshoumaru said they'll level the village," She whispered, staring at the steam rising from the teapot's spout.

"When I first met Resshin, it was when he brought several people, all wounded, to the shrine I was living at. He was kind, very kind, and more gentle than anyone I'd ever met." Kagome listened, wondering where the woman was going. "But after a time, when we courting, he had to go to battle. I demanded to go with him, and he refused. I followed, foolishly. It wasn't far, and I wanted to help
him, do everything I could to see him safe. When I caught up, he was in the center of a slaughter. Just him, no one else. He had taken on a full regiment of men and killed them all."

"What did you do?" Kagome murmured, remembering her own time with Sesshoumaru when he had killed.

"I ran. I tried to get the image out of my head and I couldn't. I'm not sure it will ever go away. At first I didn't want to see him again, and he respected my wishes. But how was I to live in the forest, surrounding by everything that reminded me of him? I sought him out, and we talked it out. I have learned that there are parts of my mate that are not pleasant. I think they exist in every warrior. Even the twins, as harmless as they seem, are skilled warriors. But all of them are good," She finished with conviction.

"I know. Sesshoumaru said if it came to that, we'd find homes for the children, or bring them here," Kagome sighed.

"I hope it doesn't," Nanmei answered. "Sesshoumaru is a good man, for offering such."

"He is," Kagome agreed quietly.

"And if he has to execute your friend?" Nanmei asked. Kagome flinched at the term, knowing it was probably the most gentle the other woman could think of in the circumstances. It was a question that had crossed her mind several times, and she wasn't sure of the answer.

"I don't know," Kagome answered at last. "One night, he told me that sometimes he would have to do things that would bother me, and at the time I was only thinking of it in context, not for something like this. A part of me knows everything could go horribly wrong when Sango is brought here. But I keep hoping that maybe friendship and love will win the day, you know? Silly, I guess," She mumbled.

"Not silly at all," Nanmei protested vehemently, and Kagome met the other woman's eyes, startled by the intensity in the azure pools.

"You're right," Kagome said, feeling as if she was bowing to the other woman's will instead of voicing a true opinion. Nanmei was newly married after all, love would be everything to her.

"Now, what is this about Sango coming here?"

"Mizu's off with Miroku, in the process of kidnapping her and bringing her here. Hopefully she'll see that Sesshoumaru isn't using me, that everything is alright, and that the jewel is in safe hands. Once she gets over being angry about being kidnapped, of course," Kagome replied, her voice dry. By the time she was finished explaining, her fingers pinched the bridge of her nose, an attempt to ward off an oncoming headache.

"Oh, well, you will have your work cut out for you."

"I know."

The next afternoon Shinzuru came knocking for her. Proud that she was able to walk to him without help from anyone else, she left the children in the care of Tenka and Kasai. Shinzuru's serious eyes told her everything she needed to know.

"Is she awake?" She asked as they moved down the stairs. Shinzuru offered an arm for her to balance on, and she clung to it gratefully.
"She is. And angry."

"Who is with her?"

"Right now she's with Sesshoumaru and the monk, cursing up a storm. Sesshoumaru said I was to bring you down. I'm not sure it's a good idea," He admitted. "Are you sure you want to do this, Cat? Sesshoumaru said she was a close friend of yours."

"She is. She's just angry."

"Sounds a bit beyond angry. Resshin tried to get a handle on her, refused to come near her after that."

"Did he say anything about what he saw?" Kagome asked quietly between puffs of breath.

"Best I not say," The youkai confessed.

"Tell me," Kagome demanded.

"No, Cat," He insisted gently. "Now, I can carry you the rest of the way so you can stand when we get there, or I can let Sesshoumaru know you need someone to hold you while you talk to your friend."

"Those aren't real choices," She muttered.

"You're the one who made a deal with Sesshoumaru. I believe the terms were that if he rested, you would let us take care of you."

"And you guys love reminding me," She snapped.

"I'll let him know when we get there-" Shinzuru started, only to hear a hiss escape the miko. He responded by picking her up and taking the rest of the stairs carefully but quickly. Kagome muttered the whole time, ignoring his chuckles and kept complaining that they were out to make her an invalid, and that when she got back to training she'd be weaker than a lamb.

"Here we go," Shinzuru said at last, setting her gently on her feet. Kagome refused to say anything and the door slid open, the daiyoukai greeting them with a neutral expression. Kagome could feel the anger in his aura as it snapped and popped energetically. Briefly she wondered if anyone else could feel it, and why they weren't scared.

"Are you sure about this?" Shinzuru asked again. Kagome swallowed hard, hearing a sudden string of angry epithets erupting from behind the daiyoukai. Nodding once, not trusting her voice, she followed the daiyoukai into the room, her eyes immediately drawn to the taijiya that sat, tied up, in the center of the room.

"No one told me she was tied up, how can you guys expect her to listen if you're behaving exactly like she expects?" Kagome demanded angrily, moving forward to aid the slayer.

"Don't you even try to pretend you're innocent in all of this!" Sango snarled as Kagome moved closer to her. Kagome stopped and looked down at the red faced woman that was glaring hatefully up at her. Sango's chest heaved as she took deep, harsh breaths, straining against the ropes.

"This was the best choice we could make," Kagome said at last, getting on her knees across from her once friend.
"Tricking me? Kidnapping me? That was the best choice? You sound just like them!" Sango accused.

"They aren't so different from us. You kidnapped Shippou," Kagome answered.

"Oh yeah, because killing and raping and-" Sango was cut off when Kagome slapped her smartly across her cheek. Sango stared at her in shock, and the miko pushed forward, rage burning hotly in her chest.

"Never, ever accuse them of that. Don't you ever-" Kagome whispered furiously, then stopped and stood abruptly, not even looking at the woman at her feet anymore. "I was raped by a hanyou. I was raped by over a dozen human men," She said, her eyes unfocused as she stared determinedly at the wall. "And people of every combination of blood have tried to kill me. But since Sesshoumaru agreed to protect me, he has done nothing to harm me. Neither have any of the others. They're not just my guards or my alpha, they're my friends, part of my family." Finally she looked down at the slayer who was still glaring up at her hotly, eyes burning with fury.

"How were you going to get the jewel Sango? Would you have accomplished it without violence?" Kagome demanded harshly. "Or would you have hurt the people responsible for keeping me safe, good honorable youkai that have been nothing but kind to me? Or how about sacrificing several of your own men? What if the children got in the middle of it? Innocent children, youkai, human and in between. What makes you any different from the monsters you claim they are?" She demanded, hot tears beginning to burn down their cheeks.

"They are monsters, the jewel calls to them more strongly than to humans, it doesn't belong in the middle of a youkai fortress or with a supposed miko that's willing to live there!"

"Far be it from me to butt in," Shinzuru's voice said calmly. "But I haven't felt the urge to do anything with the jewel. And I know Sesshoumaru kept watch over her almost constantly for three days while she was ill, and the jewel stayed around her throat. Seems to me it's safe."

"She's not fit to guard it if she's willing to let beasts like you protect her instead of humans," Sango shot out.

"Enough," Sesshoumaru said at last, his aura flaring. Kagome shivered despite herself when she felt the fury he was suppressing. "What are you willing to sacrifice for your convictions slayer? Some of your men, yourself? Perhaps Kohaku even?" He demanded coldly. When Sango attempted to lunge at him, springing forward despite her tied hands, he pushed her back as if he were batting a fly. He waited for her to get on her side before he continued.

"I gave my word to protect the miko. I have agreed to give you a chance to watch her here, but only because the miko would suffer at your end, regardless of the fact that you have betrayed her trust. You make your own conclusions about what you see. Remember, you will be watched, and she will always be guarded. If harm comes to her or anyone under my protection, I will obliterate every trace of your foul existence."

"And if my opinion doesn't change just because you all show what a good job she's doing of being a youkai's pet?" Sango spat.

"I will destroy you."

"My village will come looking for me-" She started.

"No, they will not," Miroku cut in at last. Sango's eyes swung to meet his, suddenly bewildered, then
shifting to angry disbelief.

"And why is that?"

"I'm not sure you need to know that," Miroku answered honestly.

"Tell me, what have you done with them? Damn it monk, if Kohaku's been hurt, if even a hair on one villager's head has been touched."

"None have been harmed, and we are taking great pains to avoid any physical confrontations with them," Miroku supplied quickly, his eyes anguished.

"You're just like her, you're on their side," Sango accused. "You kept trying to defend them, but I thought with time you'd understand, and instead you betray me like this?" She demanded shrilly.

"I am doing what is right," Miroku whispered. "If you try to follow through with this plan, many will die. And if you succeed? Many more will die. All for that jewel, which has been safe here the whole time."

"All the youkai should die anyway!" Sango snapped.

"What is it with you?" Kagome demanded softly. "We traveled with Inu Yasha and Shippou and Kirara. Did Inu Yasha deserve to die? What about Shippou and Kirara? Do they deserve to die because they were born youkai? What about Jineji, or Kouga and his clan? Or Hachi? Soten, or what about Shiori? Tell me if any of them deserve to die." Her voice never reached anything higher than a whisper, and when Sango only glared at her hatefully and spat at her feet, she turned away.

Shinzuru however, took offense at the action and Kagome gasped when she turned back to see Sango dangling helplessly from the youkai's hand by her neck.

"No, not this Shinzuru. You're only allowing her to think she's right," Kagome said, putting her hand on the youkai's arm to calm him. The whole situation was spiraling way beyond her control and she began to feel true fear at the possibility of her friend dying.

"I don't care what she thinks. Her heart is too full of hatred to see any light, even yours, Cat. She'll try to hurt you, might even harm one of the little ones because she's too obsessed with clinging to her childish fears instead of facing them." Sango gurgled angrily, her expression changing to one of rage at the youkai's accusations.

"Oh yes, you're afraid, and like any child, you'll put a mask on them and rage and rant and fight and even kill to avoid the truth. Pathetic," He snapped, dropping her to the floor. She landed with a thump, slightly stunned from the impact. "I've been given the honor of guarding the Lady as well. I know what she's gone through to get here, and what she still lives with. And despite all that, she hasn't come out of it the bitter bitch like you. Slip up just once in front of me, and I won't hesitate to end you," He growled before turning smartly on his heel and stalking from the room.

"You're all going to intimidate me into backing off. Well, it won't work," Sango rasped.

"No," Sesshoumaru answered evenly. "I will not intimidate you. I am warning you. Kagome and the children are pack, and should they come to harm, your end is a guarantee. It is only because of her that I am giving you this chance to see and understand. Thank her, or your whole village would be laying in ruins because of you. Come, she will need time to sit and think on this opportunity," Sesshoumaru rumbled. Kagome followed, noting that Miroku opted to leave with them instead of staying behind.
She was proud that she didn't flinch at the obscenities being thrown at her back as she walked through the door, the accusations and insinuations stinging worse than any physical blow. Once the door was closed, she leaned against a wall and slid down it, crouching and cradling her face in her hands.

"We expected this," Miroku said, as if trying to convince himself. "We knew she'd be angry."

"I didn't know she was that angry, that she really thought all youkai were evil. How could she think that after all the help we've been given by youkai and hanyou?" Kagome whispered in horror. "I don't understand it. Kotaeru even helped train her. Sesshoumaru saved all of us, helped us. How can she just-" She stopped, unable to finish the words. The shouting was still carrying through the paper and wood walls, and when she looked to them, she noticed Shinzuru glaring at the door and Sesshoumaru moving to her silently.

"Resshin was right," Shinzuru growled.

"What did Resshin say?" Kagome demanded.

"I don't think-" Miroku began.

"He said it would be better to end her now," Sesshoumaru told her, his eyes meeting her own. "I will offer no false comfort. But she has a chance, if she will allow herself to take it. Now come, we will find the children and explain to them why that woman is in the shiro."

Kagome tried to stand and stumbled, her adrenaline seeming to seep away. Instead of feeling embarrassed at being caught by the daiyoukai, she allowed herself to lean into him and continued to cry.

"Not yet," She whispered. "Just give me some time, the morning, something. Not right now," She begged.

"As you will it," Sesshoumaru rumbled. "We will inform them tomorrow. You should rest," He added.

"For once I totally agree," She sighed, suddenly to weary to even be annoyed that he picked her up and began walking away from the room where a hoarse voice continued shouting angrily. Instead, she pressed her face into his chest, grateful for the warmth it offered.

"I'm sorry if I upset you both, but that woman-" Shinzuru said as they all headed for the stairs. "If even Resshin is telling us to drop her in the river-"

"He said that?" Kagome gasped.

"Er, well," Shinzuru said, blushing hotly as the miko looked over Sesshoumaru's shoulder.

"Resshin read what was in her heart. Remember miko, his clan was greatly diminished because of humans," Sesshoumaru supplied.

"I thought he mated a human," Miroku asked.

"He did, but it does not erase the memory of his clan being slaughtered as their forest was burned," Shinzuru replied testily.

"He and Sango have more in common than she thinks," Kagome mumbled. "Her village was slaughtered, everyone killed."
"Perhaps she should have left it that way and started a new life with her second chance then," Shinzuru muttered. "From the way I hear it, she was saved by you, Sesshoumaru managed to save her brother on more than one occasion, and then you two defeat Naraku. I don't understand what she's thinking."

"She is mortal," Sesshoumaru replied shortly, pausing at the base of the stairs to look at both men.

"Hey," Kagome said, thumping him on his shoulder testily. "I'm mortal."

"Calm down Cat," Shinzuru chuckled. "You want me to stand guard down here tonight, or one of the boys?"

"Resshin is assigned to the monk, you to the slayer. The twins will watch the children."

"Why do I need a guard?" Miroku asked, surprised more than angry by the designation.

"You too are mortal," Sesshoumaru replied.

"I'm not going to hurt anyone here. You had your friend look into my head, which was harder than you can begin to understand, and -"

"You love the woman. Sesshoumaru is doing everything he can to make sure you don't visit her and let her loose. Love can make a man do foolish things," Shinzuru replied. "Just go with it, the pup's already dealt with enough without anyone blustering at him." Shinzuru threw an arm over Miroku's shoulder as if they were old friends and led him down the hall toward the guest rooms. Kagome watched, heaving a small sigh when they turned the corner and Sesshoumaru began ascending the stairs.

"I'm glad he wasn't super angry about Resshin," Kagome said as Sesshoumaru seemed to glide over the stairs with her. It hardly felt like he was walking at all, and not for the first time she envied his ability to fly.

"He is not a stupid man, but Shinzuru is correct. He cares for the slayer, and might do something foolish. I will not take any more chances. Having her here is already a risk I do not like taking."

"Thank you," Kagome whispered.

"Your words were-" Sesshoumaru started, then stopped, letting it go.

"Were what?" Kagome asked, determined to find out what put such a strange expression on the daiyoukai's face. It was almost discomfited.

"You defended us," He stated simply. "Can you stand?" She nodded, realizing they were at her door. She nodded and he set her on her feet and followed behind her when she walked in.

"What are you doing?" Kagome asked, confused.

"Everyone is to be guarded each night the woman is here. I will guard you."

"You're not sleeping in my room," She argued.

"The second chamber is generally for a handmaiden, but it will serve for a guard," He rumbled, as if insulted by the insinuation.

"Oh. Okay. Umm, I'll change while you go do, whatever it is you do before bed," She offered with a weak smile. He nodded curtly and left. Stumbling to her room she moved to the chests and pulled out
a simple shift. The weather was getting warmer and since her fever had broken it was too hot to wear anything but the linen, especially since Sesshoumaru and Tenka seemed determined to keep a small fire going in the basin, generating heat in the windowless rooms. Just as she was finished pulling the shift over her head she heard Sesshoumaru closing the first door to the rooms. Another slid open and closed, and she saw his shadow through the paper panels.

Several minutes passed in silence, and she got up, wrapping a cover around herself, and shuffled to the door and opened it. He had doused all of the candles and was sitting, legs crossed and back erect, barely visible once she closed the door.

"You should be asleep," He murmured as she sat herself across from him.

"Too tense," She confided softly. "I didn't think it would be like that."

"She is full of fear."

"I'm full of fear, she's, I don't know, just so angry."

"Anger such as that is because of fear. Humans hate what they fear."

"Don't youkai?" She countered.

"Some. But our lifespans give us perspective."

"I don't know, some of you guys are pretty bullheaded," Kagome chuckled. He let out a derisive noise that could have been an indignant huff or a snort.

"Can we go back there?" Kagome asked. He looked at her curiously, uncomprehending. "To the core. I want to go back, but I'm scared."

"Of what?" He asked.

"That this killed the tree," She mumbled, burying her face behind a layer of blanket, ashamed. She had wanted to go back, to build and see if the tree had grown. But Sango's betrayal stung bitterly, and she knew it affected her badly. Despite the knowledge that she had made the right choices, she wondered if she could have done something differently.

Instead of answering her verbally, she was gratified to feel his ki push against her, tapping her rudely and interrupting the current path her thoughts were taking. She let her own power flow, letting him find the way in, and delved into herself, looking for that place and hoping the tree was there. Maybe it would just be small still, or would need some care. But she prayed it wouldn't be gone.

When she opened her eyes again, she almost fell over in shock.

"It seems you have nothing to fear," Sesshoumaru commented wryly. Kagome nodded dumbly, looking around the field in awe. Tall grass reached up past her knees, and in the center of the endless expanse of grass stood the tree, easily five feet instead of the seedling that had sprouted from the dark earth and their blood.

"This is amazing," She breathed. "It's like summer. Even the sun is shining."

"It is your own mind," He rumbled.

"I wonder," She thought, wishing and thinking, hoping to give her desire some shape. The sound of galloping hooves and she opened her eyes in delight as the horses seemed to appear from the air
itself, galloping towards them.

"Have you ever ridden a horse?" She asked.

"I have," He confirmed.

"Let's go for a ride. I've never seen you on a horse," She cajoled, seeing his steely expression.

"I do not think-" He began even as she was pulling herself onto the bay stallion. Giving up when she stuck her tongue out at him and then set off on the horse, he pulled himself onto the silver stallion that had been seemingly summoned for him. Kicking his heels into the horse's sides, he was surprised by the smoothness of it's movements as it lunged forward, tearing through the field in chase of her.

She watched with growing satisfaction as he seemed to give in and actually enjoy chasing her. Urging her horse to move even faster, she crouched down, laying against the horse's strong neck and holding on to it's mane tightly. The smell of the grass as it was crushed beneath strong hooves wafted up to her, sharp and warm in the light of the sun.

"Miko!" A voice thundered out, barely heard over the galloping of both horses.

"Name's Kagome!" She shouted, looking over her shoulder at the silver blur that was quickly closing the distance between them. Determined to give him a good run, especially since it was her own mind, she squeezed her knees and felt the horse practically jump from under her, it shot forward so quickly. Her laughter rang out in the afternoon, getting lost in the sea of grass.

It was as she was pushing her hair from her face that she noticed the daiyoukai coming neck and neck with her, a look of fierce concentration on his face.

"Scared you'll lose?" She called.

"It is your mind, you have fixed this race," He replied.

"I wouldn't cheat," She laughed, slowing her horse into a stop. It pranced beneath her, as if eager to be off once more. He turned his own mount around and stopped in front of her. Both of them were breathless and she could swear his eyes were smiling and that he was fighting back an actual grin.

"If you smile here, I won't tell, promise," She laughed, a full, throaty sound that surprised her. "They probably wouldn't believe me anyway."

"It has been many years since I was able to ride," He admitted.

"Why?" She asked quizzically.

"My aura and scent, it frightens the horses. It is why I use Ah Un." His explanation, once brought to her attention, made sense.

"Will horses be making an appearance in your core?" She asked at last.

"Perhaps. How long do you think we've been here?"

"No idea. Does it matter?"

"We do have duties to attend to in the morning," He reminded her.

"One more race, no cheating, I promise."
He urged his horse into a gallop, getting several yards ahead of her before she even started. "That's cheating!" She called, laughing anyway. Joy rang out in the sound and echoed over the plain as she forced her horse to move more swiftly. A light rain began falling, and it plastered her hair to her face, refreshing in the heat of the sun. When she came up next to him she saw he too was soaked and uncaring, a smile dancing on his lips and his hair flying behind him despite the added weight from the water.

"Your hair looks like a banner!" She called out. He didn't answer, just urged the horse on, shooting ahead of her again.

When they finally stopped he was smiling a full smile, looking up to the sky. She took a moment to appreciate the smile, and felt more than just a small measure of pride that she had been the cause.

"Rain?" He asked at last.

"Rain is healthy, the earth needs it. Plus I love the smell of grass after a rain," She admitted. "Maybe it's just my brain showing that it's happy."

"Perhaps. There is no need to fear this place anymore," He told her.

"Maybe you'd still come here though. Racing is more fun with two people."

"Perhaps."

They both dismounted and Kagome thumped into the grass as the horses galloped off into the distance, shimmering and fading into the air. Telling herself they were just out of sight, but always there, she inhaled deeply as the rain continued to hit her face.

"We should be going," He reminded her again.

"I know," She groaned. Instead of looking as she normally did, she let her mind drift and floated lazily along the strands of power, thinking wistfully of the field and the tree. Promising herself another visit soon, she sighed and suddenly felt as if she were settling back into her body, a sensation she had never noticed before.

"Thank you," She murmured sleepily, pulling the blanket more tightly around herself. "We have to do that again."

"Perhaps."

"Come on, you had fun," She accused through a yawn. "We got to experience a nice warm, summer day and a rain that wasn't out to kill me. And we rode horses that would make Chonma look slow."

"I did. And we did," He admitted.

"You smiled," She teased, giggling when he frowned dourly. "Come on, just once in reality?"

"It would probably frighten you," He muttered dryly. "Go to bed miko."

"Kagome. Do we have to keep having this conversation?" She asked through another yawn.

"Go to bed, Kagome." She nodded and surprised them both by hugging him tightly before shuffling to her room and dropping onto the futon heavily, falling asleep immediately.

Never had she realized how heavy the stares of children could feel before this, and as she sat
patiently, listening to Sesshoumaru explain in surprisingly honest terms what Sango was doing in the shiro, she couldn't help but feel as if some of those stares were accusing her. Every once in awhile a child would turn to her as if to ask why she was allowing this. Sesshoumaru never mentioned once that it was Kagome's need to save her friend that was causing the upset, and she was grateful. Shippou was being clung to by Rin and two other small children, and he was staring defiantly at his alpha.

"I don't want that woman around us," Zurui muttered when Sesshoumaru had finished.

"I don't either," Sesshoumaru admitted plainly, shocking the children. "But she did much to aid in the battle against Naraku, and she has endured much at the hands of youkai. It is only honorable to give her a chance." Kagome noted that he was speaking calmly, and that any trace of his rage from the previous night was gone. Both of them had emerged looking refreshed, and Kagome noticed a certain lightness in her step that hadn't been there before. Even with the problem looming in front of her, she couldn't help but feel optimistic.

"Guys, I know this is going to be hard. But I promise Sango won't try to take any of you away."

"What about you?" Shippou demanded. "It's not us she cares about, it's you. She wants you and the jewel."

"I won't be going anywhere, I promise. I'm not going to leave you."

"Why does she want to take you away?" Tegatai asked. "She should be able to see you're safe and happy," He insisted.

"Sango's been hurt really badly, in her heart," Kagome began. "And she's angry with me for choosing here instead of living with her, and instead of admitting it hurt, she's letting herself be angry instead, because it's easier. It makes it harder to see that I'm safe and happy with all of you."

"I don't understand adults," Zurui huffed, crossing her arms. Kagome laughed and bent forward to ruffle her hair.

"Me either."

"But you're an adult," Zurui started.

"Doesn't mean I get it."

"I thought adults knew everything."

"I don't. Sesshoumaru might," She added with a conspiratorial wink. "Maybe some day he'll let me in on all the big secrets and then I can tell all of you."

"Doubtful," He rumbled, earning a smack to his arm. Mizu and Kasai chuckled from their positions in the room.

"Is she going to try and play with us?" Rin asked, looking up at Kagome with wide eyes.

"I don't know sweetie. Not for awhile, I don't think."

"If she played with us, she would see that you're happy, and that we need you more than she does."

What a startling thought from the little girl. There had never been any mention of Sango needing her, and that the idea how somehow been born in the child's mind was surprising even as Kagome mused...
on the idea of the taijiya needing her. Sango did need friends, but did she need her, Kagome, in particular?

"I think it'll take awhile for her to do that," Kagome answered honestly. "But Nanmei is going to be staying with us for awhile too, so you all have another friend to play with," Kagome reminded them. "And maybe if Sango sees all of us so happy she'll change her mind, so no gloowering or gloominess," Kagome said, her tone full of mock sternness as she shook her finger, her impish smile ruining any effect her act had. "And we must be polite to Sango. Remember how scared and angry all of you were when you got here? Well, Sango is like that, but she's even more scared and angry."

"Is she an orphan too?" Zurui finally asked.

"She is. Her village was destroyed by a youkai."

"We should be nice to her then," Rin said staunchly, oblivious to the doubtful glances cast her way by everyone. "She's like us, and Kagome was hers before she came here. We'll have to show we can share, and her heart will grow bigger," The child finished in a matter of fact tone. Kagome blinked in shock, once more surprised by the child's observations once more. It couldn't be that simple though, could it?

"A wise child," Miroku murmured. Sesshoumaru was considering his ward carefully, head cocked slightly to the side as if seeing her in a new light.

"Out of the mouths of babes comes wisdom," Quoted Kagome.

"When will she be joining us?" Zurui asked.

"After lessons, which will be held here for the duration of the taijiya's stay." Sesshoumaru answered, receiving a groan in response. Lessons had been canceled for some time because Tenka had been busy with Kagome, and a suitable replacement had not been obtained.

"Guys, you know how important it is to be educated," Kagome reminded them. "And remember, you get to play outside afterward. It's nice and warm today, and the flowers are blooming in the gardens." Their response was halfhearted at best, and Kagome hoped Sango's presence wouldn't diminish their joy too much. They hadn't played outside since the day in the rain, and Kagome wanted them to enjoy the sunshine. She wanted to enjoy the sunshine, if she was honest with herself.

"Tell you what," She offered. "After lessons we'll picnic outside and eat lunch there, sound good?" Kagome asked. A cheer rose up from the group and she nodded, feeling slightly better.

"It is time to go speak with her," Sesshoumaru reminded her. Kagome nodded solemnly, leaving the children to their breakfast and following Sesshoumaru. She noted that Miroku moved to follow them. Once they were out of the room and the doors slid shut behind them, Sesshoumaru turned to her, eyes seeking something, although she wasn't sure what.

"Do you need help?" He asked at last, seeming satisfied with what he saw.

"Nope, I feel a lot better, another day and I should be able to keep up with the kids," She assured him. He nodded and they were moving away from the safety of the family wing. Kagome noted the absence of the two guards and cast the daiyoukai a questioning glance.

"They are currently training. Kotaeru has been made aware of the deficiencies in their skills and they are being educated on illusory magics."

"Oh. Well, better late than never," She shrugged, slightly uncomfortable with the hard look in his
eyes as he stared straight ahead. It wasn't until they had taken all of the stairs that she paused to
comment on it, worried.

"What's wrong?" She finally asked.

"It feels as if I am allowing you to place yourself in danger, that I am allowing the children to face
danger," He admitted. "I do not like it."

"Sango won't harm anyone. You'll keep us safe," She assured him blithely, unaware of the arrested
look that suddenly froze his expression as she began walking ahead. Once they were in front of the
door to Sango's room, where Shinzuru stood, silent and grim, Kagome put a hand on his arm and
smiled gratefully.

"Go get some breakfast. Everything will be fine with Sesshoumaru here," She commanded softly.
She was surprised when the older youkai didn't even look to Sesshoumaru for permission before he
was off, stretching as he walked away, still silent.

"Are you sure you want to be here, Miroku?" Kagome asked, turning to her friend. His deep purple
eyes were even darker than normal, the violence of his own emotions evident. He nodded
uncertainly, and Kagome sighed and opened the door, once again her gaze moving directly to the
woman on the floor. She noted that Sango was no longer tied up, which she was grateful for. Instead
the slayer was sitting in the corner, glaring at all of them angrily.

"Good morning," Kagome murmured, taking a seat across from her. She noted that the slayer hadn't
touched the food given to her. The tray sat untouched, the food probably cold.

"Would you like some water?" Kagome asked.

"You'll just poison that too," Sango retorted. Kagome sighed and settled in for a long, probably one
sided talk.

"Have you thought about our offer?" Sesshoumaru asked from his position behind Kagome. He
stayed standing, muscles tense and ready to lunge should the woman try anything.

"Does it make a difference?" Sango demanded. "You're just going to parade everyone in front of me
and pretend everything is fine and if I don't agree, you'll kill me. Well, I won't agree because I know
everything isn't fine," She snapped.

"You're right," Kagome sighed. "Everything is not fine Sango. It hasn't been fine for a long time. For
months. And I want to fix that."

"You can, by leaving this place."

"No, I can't do that Sango. Even if I knew the right wish and the jewel was gone tomorrow, I
couldn't leave."

"Why? Because of him?" Sango demanded. "You want to be his little pet miko, his new weapon?"
Sesshoumaru growled warningly and Kagome put up a hand, amazed when the noise stopped
abruptly.

"When we first came here, you said he would train me, keep me safe. You knew what it meant when
he offered me his protection."

"But I can protect you now."
"Please let me finish, and I swear, I'll listen to whatever you say," Kagome begged, scared that if she was stopped, she would never be able to finish. Sango nodded, the miko's tone affecting her more than her words.

"There are children in this shiro, and so far we haven't been able to find a single surviving relative to any of them. Orphans, like you. They've adopted me, they chose me, to be their mother. I can't take over half of them to the village because they're hanyou and youkai, and they wouldn't fit in. Even Shippou, despite being a harmless child, would be hated. And would it be right of me to ask the human children to grow up in a place that reviled their brothers and sisters, demanded they train to fight them someday?" Kagome asked, the very idea stabbing at her heart painfully.

"I can't leave them, not after they chose me. Not when they chose me even though I was weak and hurt and scared."

"We were with you when you were weak and hurt and scared," Sango whispered, her voice losing the heat of anger and taking on a new edge, something sharper than anger and more brittle than fear.

"Sango, just because I'm here doesn't mean I'm choosing between anyone."

"But you did!" The taijiya shouted. "You chose the youkai and the children and just left us!"

"Sango, I will never really leave you-" Kagome began.

"Save your stupid platitudes for the children, they're still dumb enough to believe them," Sango growled. Kagome leaned back, eying the taijiya fully and wondering what she had said that had set her off. Her anger had returned the moment Kagome had mentioned choosing, and she wondered if perhaps Rin was right, and Sango was angry she had seemingly lost her best friend.

"They're not platitudes. I'm offering you my friendship. It was always there, even when I was angry at you. I'm still angry, and I won't pretend otherwise. You seem willing to harm my children, you kidnapped Shippou and put him in harm's way, and I'm having a hard time letting go of that. But I don't want to lose you Sango. Every time we see each other it's like another part of the bridge has fallen out from under us and we're scrambling to our sides, looking at each other across this huge gap. I don't like it. I don't want it to be this way," Kagome said with conviction.

"We survived Naraku together. We survived the bandits, the countless battles. We survived losing Inu Yasha together. We found Miroku and Kohaku and we're still here," Kagome reminded her, her tone almost pleading. "Why do we have to fight now? What changed?"

"You changed," Sango accused. "You started acting like one of them," She finished, her glare moving past Kagome to the daiyoukai standing behind the miko.

"I changed. I didn't have a choice. Do you think I could be the person I was after everything that happened? You weren't the only one hurt. You weren't the only one that was suddenly an orphan. I lost Inu Yasha, my family. I'm pretty sure I lost my sanity for awhile. I don't think like a youkai. I'm thinking like me. I've got a family, and I want you to be a part of it. I need you in my life Sango," Kagome finished in a whisper.

"I want no part of your family," Sango spat angrily. "It's nothing but monsters and their pets."

"I am not a pet," Kagome tried after taking a calming breath.

"Then maybe he's yours, a loyal dog," Sango snarled spitefully. The statement startled Kagome so completely that she couldn't stop the laughter before it started. It bubbled up, surprising even her. Turning to look up at Sesshoumaru's face, he looked as clueless as Sango did.
"Him? A pet? It'd be like calling a tiger a pet. Even if he pretended to be tame he never would be," She laughed, mirthful tears leaking down her tears, completely inappropriate.

"Don't mock me," Sango growled.

"I'm not. Just, you-" Kagome started, taking deep breaths and biting the inside of her cheek to stop her smile. "Sesshoumaru, any of them, could never be pets. No one here is a pet to anyone. Well, except maybe Jaken. The children treat him like a pet."

"How can you be laughing and making jokes?" Sango demanded.

"You're the one that said you missed the old me."

"This isn't-"

"It is," Kagome cut in. "I've been laughing, and smiling. I'm safe and happy and healthy when Kotaeru isn't demanding I do drills in the rain. I'm just asking that you watch us for awhile. I want you to try and understand that I'm safe and happy, that this place is good for me."

"And we aren't good enough?" Sango demanded, trying to hold onto her anger, a fight that was becoming more and more visible to Kagome.

"You are. You'll always be good enough to be my friend and my sister. But just like you have bigger things to consider, like your village, I do too," Kagome pointed out. "It's not as simple as traveling was. Back then we had common goals, a common enemy. Now we have to adjust to this life. I want you to be a part of my life and I want to be a part of yours."

Sango sat silent for several minutes, her eyes still narrowed, but the rage almost completely gone.

"I'll watch. But if one youkai comes near me I'll kill them."

"I do not think you have to worry about that," Shinzuru growled. Kagome threw a warning glance in his direction, her own hard eyes far cooler than he would have liked, and he held back anything else he was going to say.

"Now, after the children's lessons, we're going to have a picnic. Some of them are a little wary of you-"

"Good," Sango cut in.

"But they know to be polite. I would ask you do the same," Kagome finished. Sango gave the miko a hard look, but was the first to break the gaze, looking to the side andshrugging indifferently.

"Okay. Now that that's settled, I'm sure you'd like a bath-"

"Saying I smell?"

"Yes, I am. You've been traveling for days and sat in here all night getting stale. It's pretty awful," Kagome replied with a smile. Sango shrugged indifferently once more and Kagome stood and made her way to the door. Happy that Miroku decided to stay behind, she and Sesshoumaru exited silently.

"Do you think I said the right things?" She asked as they walked together towards the stairs.

"I do not claim to understand humans. But I think perhaps you are correct. She is hurt, and is hiding it with anger," He said thoughtfully, and Kagome knew his mind wasn't fully on the subject at hand.
"What's wrong?" She finally asked.

"Harukaze arrived this morning. The timing is-" He began.

"You and Resshin deal with her. He's probably the most qualified to check her. The twins and Shinzuru can stay with us."

"Resshin will not like leaving Nanmei with the woman."

"He trusts the others, right? And me?" Kagome asked. Sesshoumaru nodded, slightly confused.

"Then let him know that Nanmei will be with me, and if the others somehow miraculously fail to stop Sango, I will protect his mate."

"Do you understand what that means?" Sesshoumaru asked, eying her thoughtfully. She nodded, hoping it wouldn't come to that. Prayed Sango would give them a chance.

"I will tell him."

"Thank you," She sighed. "Now, I seriously need some archery practice, and since Kotaeru is dealing with the guards, I'll have enough of your men around me to keep me safe from a human. Go deal with your advisers. They're going to be a handful when they realize you outmaneuvered them."

He nodded once, watching her move down the corridor, eyes unreadable and she waved as she turned a corner.

**A/N:** I am so f***ing fried. I'm sorry for any mistakes. Also, I'm sorry I haven't been able to get back to my reviewers. It means a lot that you all take the time to review, and they (you) keep me going when I just want to set my laptop on fire. Thank you all so much.
Kagome was just aiming when a voice suddenly startled her, sending the shot wide and she hit a completely different target than the one she aimed for.

"You are the miko that defeated Naraku?" A surprised voice asked. Kagome turned and was readying to say something when she stopped, her mouth hanging open as she took in the owner of the voice. Black hair contrasted sharply with pale skin, and pale lavender eyes that seemed almost white in the light. Full, light pink lips were rounded in a small 'o' of surprise.

"I'm Kagome," She finally stuttered. "Sesshoumaru and I both fought together-" She tried, realized how she was babbling and stopped herself abruptly. "And you are?" She asked, when the youkai only stared.

"I expected someone more fearsome," The woman replied shortly. Kagome stomped down any irritation with the woman, knowing she probably didn't look like much of a warrior.

"I meant your name," Kagome asked. "Anyone here is supposed to be known to me," She added, hoping her imitation of Sesshoumaru's aloof command was accurate and not completely over the top.

"I am Harukaze. It seems Lord Sesshoumaru had pressing matters this morning, and I decided to explore."

"Oh, you're the candidate for the fourth house," Kagome chuckled, relaxing. Knowing Bokusenou vouched for her, she felt much better in the unknown woman's presence.

"Strange, a miko living here. Being allowed to live here," Harukaze observed.

"Special circumstances," Kagome said with a shrug, not wanting to get into it with the stranger.

"Yes, I suppose that is," The woman replied, her eyes on the jewel at Kagome's throat. Feeling slightly on edge as the youkai eyed the jewel, Kagome let her aura swell and roll in waves away from her, a brief warning to the youkai. When the pale eyes snapped back up to hers, shocked, Kagome nodded slightly.

"An anomaly," Harukaze announced. "You're not drawing off of the jewel's power."
"I don't need it," Kagome answered shortly.

"I see you have met our guest," A new voice rumbled, and Kagome heard the underlying hints of anger in the words as Sesshoumaru strode over to them, displeasure evident.

"Some might call you suicidal," Harukaze smirked as she looked to the daiyoukai. His ki flared in response as he turned angry eyes to her. Kagome allowed her aura to swell and tangle with his, letting it emanate aimlessly instead of directing it, and taking a small satisfaction in the way the youkai's eyes widened once more in shock.

"How are you doing that?" She asked.

"It is only possible because of our strength," Kagome said softly from Sesshoumaru's side. It didn't escape her that he had moved slightly in front of her, turning so that he was almost in front of her.

"Well, since you've both shown your fangs and put me in my place, I guess it's time to start talking about this territory business," Harukaze laughed. Kagome stopped short and only because she felt the flicker of uncertainty through Sesshoumaru's aura did she know he felt disconcerted by the woman's reaction.

"Well?" She asked again. "I just needed to know who I was dealing with. Can't go anywhere without hearing about you two, and even though I was assured by that tree and several forest spirits that I should come here, I wasn't entirely sure if I was heading into a trap or not."

"Why would you think we were setting a trap?" Kagome demanded.

"Old quarrel between our families," The woman responded, eying Sesshoumaru. Kagome turned with an amused expression on her face.

"Was there anyone that your dad wasn't fighting?" She asked, eyebrow arched playfully.

"The list is unending. What are your people called?" Sesshoumaru demanded.

"We're the last of the aosagibi," She replied quietly, her face suddenly somber, and Kagome wondered at Sesshoumaru's sharp intake of breath.

"Anyano," He finally said.

"That is my clan," She confirmed.

"This was not mentioned," Sesshoumaru said honestly.

"You understand now, why I wondered at my summons. Bokusenou is wise, and we trust the forest spirits that urged me to come. But when I heard of you and the miko, as I said, you can understand my caution," She finished.

"What's wrong?" Kagome asked, looking between the two. "Is it that bad?" She asked, dread pooling in the pit of her stomach and forming a heavy, leaden weight.

"It was not my father, but my mother's people that warred with hers. To claim the rights to my mother's house."

"And you have inherited that title," Harukaze observed.

"Will you use your new power to make war?" Sesshoumaru demanded.
"I would not," she sighed. "But the rage still burns in my father's heart, and many others, for the outcome of the battles they fought. I cannot guarantee that they would not try should I take such a position."

"Then leave and go back to your people," he stated coldly, imperiously.

"Now wait just a minute!" Kagome snapped, seeing the sad acceptance in the woman's pale eyes. "Bokusenou chose her. He knows the history between the two houses, and I'm sure he was taking that into account. We can't look at this at face value," Kagome said, despite Sesshoumaru's hard stare. "Resshin can see into her heart, right? And we need to ask Bokusenou why he chose her instead of dismissing everything out of hand," she argued.

"The land cannot sustain another war," Sesshoumaru began.

"What if there were a way to assure that another war didn't start?" Kagome demanded. "There are such things as peace treaties-

"Which are worth less than the paper they are written upon," Sesshoumaru scoffed.

"Not if both people uphold their end of the deal. Make it so Harukaze forfeits her territory, not to you but to one of the others, if her clan violates the treaty, and the other two houses back them up," Kagome said, suddenly optimistic. "That way they can't think that you're setting her up to take her lands and they'll think twice about attacking. Possibly winning the title of your house can't compare to having a sure thing like a territory," Kagome reasoned.

When both youkai only stared at her, Harukaze slightly impressed and Sesshoumaru as if he'd never seen her before, she frowned slightly and crossed her arms, poking herself with her own bow. "I can think, so stop looking so surprised," she muttered to the daiyoukai.

"I think perhaps, it is time to reconsider your position in my home. You should sit on the council," he told her shortly.

"She's not on your council?" Harukaze asked, eyes wide. "Why not?"

"She can hear you perfectly," Kagome muttered. "And I refuse because I have enough stress without adding that lot of idiots to it. Well, the highborns anyway, although I get my fill of the twins when they're explaining why the children thought I was just perfect for another one of their jokes."

"I will be sure to tell them that," Sesshoumaru replied dryly. "But your idea has merit," he admitted slowly. "But first she must first receive Resshin's approval, and then I will speak to Bokusenou on the matter."

Kagome nodded, smiling that he had accepted her proposal.

"Nice to meet you," she told the woman, offering a small bow. "Good luck."

Sesshoumaru began walking away, noting that Harukaze kept glancing over her shoulder at the miko.

"She is very strange, for a miko," the crane youkai observed. "And the ability for you to twist your powers so, it is perplexing," she admitted. "I did not expect to find such here."

"It is our ability to merge our own energies that allowed the defeat of Naraku," Sesshoumaru answered shortly. "And she is from a distant land, thus her seeming strangeness. She is a part of this Sesshoumaru's pack," he added, noting the sudden surprise that flared in the woman's scent.
"Many would call you suicidal," Harukaze repeated. "But now, I am not so sure." When he didn't ask why, she continued on, oblivious to his stoney expression. "I have never known of anyone that could combine their attacks in such a manner. It is not just strength, it bespeaks a great trust. Even if my clan were to demand war, knowing the power you and the woman hold between you, I would stop them."

"I would not bring her to a war between our houses," He rumbled. "She is not a weapon." The admission surprised him, because with her in his house, and their abilities being what they were, she could be the ultimate weapon.

"Even so, would you be able to stop her from fighting?" Harukaze asked, and he found he had no answer. Whether she would fight or follow his command was an unknown, and his ignorance bothered him, although the idea that she would choose to fight warmed him even as the thought of her in battle scraped against his temper.

"We are here," He replied several minutes later as the door to his council room slid open to reveal an unhappy looking Resshin, who stood and bowed as the door slid shut and introductions were made.

Nanmei sat watching the taijiya warily. Sango had opted to sit beneath a tree, eating sparingly of her own lunch. Miroku had opted to sit with her, and the children kept casting worried or angry glances at the one they considered their enemy. It was a tense, almost silent affair, and Kagome was getting sick of it. The first real day out in awhile and everyone just seemed on edge.

"Guys, anyone want to play a game?" Kagome asked.

"How about tag?" Nanmei suggested, trying to match Kagome's jovial tone. Her smile was too forced, too bright to be real, but the children nodded and stood, moving from their bowls and cups slowly, as if unwilling to leave the miko.

"Okay, I'll be it," Kagome announced. They seemed to brighten at the declaration and Kagome refrained from giving a sigh of relief. She stooped though, when she saw Rin approaching the taijiya. Sango glared at the girl, as if hoping she'd go away, ignoring what looked like some sort of rebuke from Miroku. Kagome watched, unable to hear, as the little girl spoke to the woman. Sango's gaze softened for a moment before going hard again. Rin turned away, looking dejected, and Kagome was surprised by the flash of sorrow she saw in Sango's eyes.

Determined to make her children happy, she began running, the group immediately scattering as she turned quickly on her heel and tried to surprise even more. Several times she almost caught one of them, purposefully letting them escape. It wasn't until she turned and lunged directly into Sesshoumaru that she stopped, rubbing her smarting nose.

"Tag!" She called, poking him before taking off. He stared at her quizzically for a moment, because he had never deigned to play before, but taking note of the taijiya's shrewd gaze, he gave in, leisurely strolling towards the group of children before picking up Kagome's act and letting them only barely 'escape' his tag. Eventually he gave up and touched a claw to one hanyou child's forehead and walked to a breathless Kagome.

"You are still unwell," He observed.

"It's nothing," She said, waving off his concern. "I'll be fine in a day or two. Thank you though, for playing."

"They seemed to enjoy it," He replied blandly, taking his seat next to her. Nanmei had been tagged
easily, and she chased after one child then another joyfully.

"How did it go with Harukaze?" Kagome asked, leaning back on her hands.

"Resshin says that she appears to be a good choice. My council will advise against it, the main reason being the feud between my house and her own. But your plan circumvents it quite neatly."

"You're welcome," She chuckled, rolling her eyes when he gave her a haughty look. The sun was warm as she leaned back further, pillowing her head with her arms as she soaked up the warmth of the sun. Something furry began insistently moving under her and she growled.

"I thought we agreed no weird fur things unless I'm sick," She muttered.

"You are still recovering. Remember our deal," He reminded her. Seeing Shinzuru and the twin's grins, she huffed indignantly, but allowed the pelt to move beneath her head and pillow it.

"She's going to be a great mom," Kagome said as she heard Nanmei's laugh ring out through the gardens.

"She will," A new voice confirmed. Kagome opened her eyes and saw Resshin moving to stand over her, smiling gently off in the distance, she assumed at his mate. "Thank you, for being such a friend to her. One that understands and accepts with such ease is rare."

"Everyone keeps saying that, and I don't get it. She's nice, you're nice. It's not like she tried to mate Naraku," Kagome sighed, reluctantly shifting and sitting up. The fur was quite comfortable.

"That woman, the one you seek to save, she would not be so kind."

"At one time she would have," Kagome sighed. "And hopefully she will be again. It's just going to take some time. All wounds take time to heal, and some never heal at all," She finished, the last almost a whisper as she looked to the ground. It was one of the few times she'd alluded to her own healing in front of them, and blushing brightly when she realized what she'd said, she forced a bright smile.

"You are much too serious," Sesshoumaru informed her, his eyes blank. Kagome stopped, and for the second time that day laughter was outright startled from her, bubbling up, a rich, light sound that carried through the gardens.

"You're telling me I'm too serious?" She asked. Resshin was chuckling as well as he moved to join his mate in the games. It seems that tag had shifted into monsters and heroes, and the kitsune twins suddenly joined in, creating a whirlwind of chaos wherever they went, gleefully playing the monsters as they roared after the children. She laughed again, watching their antics. When Resshin reached them, he lifted his arms and tried to look as intimidating as possible, his strange pseudo roars making his expression comical.

"This is our pack," Kagome murmured. "Even the guys, whether it's official or not. Our family," She sighed happily. Her content was short lived however, turning to slight panic when the older youkai and Nanmei seemed to herd the children their way, the stampede of little ones cackling gleefully and faking screams as they headed for their 'protectors'.

"Save us!" They chanted, all of them slamming full force into Kagome and Sesshoumaru, knocking her back while Sesshoumaru barely withstood the tidal wave of children suddenly clamoring on and around him. He gave them a sly glance and a great series of echoing barks erupted from his throat, startling the birds from the trees and delighting everyone. Kagome laughed and clapped her hands cheerily, smiling as the children begged for Sesshoumaru to join them.
"Who would protect your mother?" He asked.

"Nanmei can!" They elected. Nanmei pretended a look of hurt, then sighed dramatically and dropped down next to the miko, breathless and giggling as Sesshoumaru eyed Kagome evenly and then took off with the children. Unlike his friends, he affected no fake roars, but mock chased them, getting just behind them and letting out one of his strange barks.

"That man is a great father," Nanmei observed.

"You know, we were just talking about how you would make a great mom," Kagome laughed. "Resshin is going to be a great dad too."

"Don't I know it," Nanmei chuckled. "Heaven knows he's tryin'-oh kami I can't believe I said that!" She squeaked in embarrassment, covering her mouth with one hand and blushing hotly. Kagome chuckled, poking her friend in the side.

"I'm glad you're happy," She finally said. "You guys deserve it. And lots of babies."

"Not as many as you," Nanmei quickly amended. "But yes, we'd like children. I'm happy Resshin's clan isn't adverse to hanyou."

"Lots and lots of babies," Kagome repeated ominously. Nanmei looked startled, then began laughing and poked her friend in the side, parroting the miko's actions. Kagome mustered a mildly affronted look, then smiled slyly.

"Resshin!" Kagome called, her hands cupped around her mouth. When he turned in her direction, eyes alert, she shrugged off Nanmei's sudden questions. "Nanmei wants a litter of kids as big as mine!"

"I said no such thing!" Nanmei screeched indignantly, missing the almost goofy, wistful smile on her mate's face as she covered her face in her hands. Shinzuru and the twins both began cackling, which resulted in the children tackling them, taking down the 'monsters'. But it was Sesshoumaru's strange look that gave her pause. When the children trying to pull him down, heedless of his reaction, he further surprised her by allowing himself to be 'vanquished' as Rin announced loudly.

Kagome turned to see Sango staring at the group, mouth open in astonishment. The moment she saw Kagome looking at her however, she settled back against the tree, her expression closed. Knowing it would take more than a day for her friend's fears to fade, she sighed heavily and then turned her attention back to the children, who had turned the tides and were 'chasing' the adult males. Surprised that even Sesshoumaru was running, although knowing his speed Kagome thought it more of a stroll, she clapped her hands again, allowing her joy to take the forefront.

"You're a lot happier now," Nanmei confided. "I'm glad. You deserve happiness more than anyone I know."

"I am, and thank you. I won't say I deserve it, but I'm glad to have such an amazing family. You included," She confided back, shouldering her friend. Nanmei smiled, her eyes on her mate once more.

"You do deserve it," She said at great length, not looking at Kagome. "You're giving them all something precious, even the men. Although I admit, I never pictured Sesshoumaru playing." She giggled at last, turning to Kagome once more. "War is hard on everyone, but they fight, you've fought. Their laughter and joy, a chance to just play, that means a lot. It's what they fight for."

"For play?" Kagome asked, chuckling at the absurdity.
"For the people they love. Moments like this remind them why they make the sacrifices they do. And even if this is, well, not at all what I pictured Sesshoumaru doing, perhaps he has the most need of it. He has more responsibility than most, and to be reminded of the help he's given, the things he works for, it's a good thing."

"It is, isn't it?" Kagome sighed, her words less of a question and more of an affirmation. Their ride came back to her and she hoped that perhaps she was helping to bring joy into his life. He'd certainly earned it, and although she had never pictured him as someone that expressed it, he had to feel it. Puzzling over the idea of a joyous Sesshoumaru, and laughing at the mental images it evoked, she settled back on her palms, noting for the first time that when the daiyoukai had left, his strange pelt had been left behind, part of it on her lap as she unconsciously stroked it.

"How did the meeting go?" Kagome asked when Sesshoumaru moved into the room outside of her own. The wall between them wouldn't hinder her voice from reaching his sensitive ears, so she didn't need to speak loudly.

"They reacted as expected," He replied in a bland voice.

"They didn't try to kill her did they?" She asked at last.

"No, they are much too cautious to attempt such a thing, especially since it would provoke the feud if done within my home. No, they are merely trying to stop it or change the terms of her being given the territory."

Noticing how tired he sounded, she wrapped the blanket around herself and walked to the door and opened it, sitting and leaning against the door frame. The light from her own room spilled into the small area he had claimed as his own and cast flickering shadows over his features.

"What are they trying to do?" She asked after settling down.

"They wish to supply their own candidate should she break the treaty. Each is determined to have his own named heir. I've no doubt if I did such a thing they would somehow provoke a war."

"I could purify them," She offered.

"Do not joke of such things," He replied stonily, and Kagome stopped the chuckle as it was leaving her throat. "They are too tempting," He added, making her smile sympathetically.

"Thank you for today. The children, they had a really good time," She told him, hoping to turn his attention to a happier subject.

"It was strange, and I felt very foolish. But they laughed and did not fear me when I gave chase."

"Because you weren't really chasing them. You looked like you were having fun," She accused gently.

"I did. You and Resshin's mate seem thick as thieves now."

"It's good to have a female friend."

"You are no longer uncomfortable with the idea that she and Resshin are intimate," He remarked. Kagome face flamed and she hid it behind a fold of the blanket. "Perhaps that was too bald a statement for friends," He intoned several minutes later when she still hadn't emerged.
"No, not that. Friends, I mean, you're right, and I didn't realize it. Maybe I'm getting better," She sighed. "I just never expected you to say something like that. It's kind of weird."

"You are mending," He stated. "As alpha, and as a friend," He started, the last word still seemed to be pulled from him reluctantly, awkwardly, "It is something to be grateful for."

"Maybe I'll be able to explain where babies come from to the kids by the time they start asking," She joked. "The girls at least. The boys are your job," She added thoughtfully.

"Even the kit?"

"Especially him," She laughed. "I think he'd be mortified to have me talking to him about it. Most boys are when a woman tries."

"You are perhaps correct. My own father explained it to me long ago, and it was not a talk I would wish to have with my mother."

"Precisely. Boys are yours, girls are mine. Deal?"

"Hnn. Get to bed miko, Kotaeru said he will have you riding again tomorrow."

Kagome nodded and moved, closing her own door. Before it was all the way shut, she whispered a small goodnight. He didn't respond, and she finished closing it, telling herself his response wouldn't matter. When she was settled several minutes later, she was surprised by him once again when he murmured a quiet 'sleep well', into the darkness.

Sango was staring at the wall over her shoulder. This had been going on for well over fifteen minutes, and she was beginning to get antsy, wanting more than anything to begin screaming, shouting, something, anything to break through the unnatural silence.

"If you're going to put on a show for me, you could do something more convincing."

She'd be grateful for the sentence if the words didn't immediately infuriate her.

"Why do you think we're acting?" She asked through gritted teeth, afraid she'd chip a tooth if she got any angrier.

"The playing. You might do that, the others might even play like that. But Sesshoumaru would never act like that."

"Obviously he does."

"Playing with his food before he eats it?" The taijiya asked snidely.

Red hazed her vision.

"What are you accusing my alpha of Sango?" She demanded, her words eerily calm. She knew she was angry, why didn't she sound angry?

"He's evil, and you're just blindly following him like one of Naraku's-"

"He's not like Naraku," She replied, mind going numb. Even her blood seemed to still in her body as she stared her once friend down.

"He worked with him-"
"He helped me destroy Naraku," She replied frostily.

"So he could have the jewel-"

"This jewel?" As she asked she pulled the necklace free of her kimono. "The one that was around my neck when he was keeping watch over me while I was sick and unconscious? The jewel still around my neck?"

"He's waiting-"

"There is nothing to wait for. Whatever you think is happening here, it's not. Sesshoumaru has been a good alpha and a true friend."

The sound of Sango scoffing cut through whatever she had been about to say next. Standing and walking over to her friend, she felt more angry, more vindictive than she had in years, and she couldn't control it. When she'd closed the distance she bent over until the jewel swung back and forth.

"It's there, right in front of you. You can take it and make the wish before anyone can get in here and stop you."

For a moment all of the world was still, Sango's hand coming up and hovering inches away from the swinging jewel. Fear and confusion warped in the cinnamon brown eyes and she saw her once friend's lower lip tremble.

The door slid open.

"Kagome." In that one word there was anger and warning.

"She won't do it Sesshoumaru. She wouldn't do it even if you weren't here."

Sango's hand dropped back to her lap, her eyes going blank.

"Kagome-"

"Because she doesn't really believe it. She might not like you, she might even hate me. But underneath all of the anger and all of the blame, she remembers that not every youkai is evil."

"Get out."

The voice was a strained whisper, one that sounded as if it was trying not to scream.

Not saying anything she walked past Sesshoumaru, who was radiating pure fury and into the hall, where Shinzuru and Resshin both waited, eyes wide in disbelief. The door slid shut behind her, the click echoing in the silent hall.

"You knew she wouldn't take it," Shinzuru rumbled, his one good eye wide and almost black.

"I didn't know," She whispered, her blood beginning to flow again. The strength in her knees evaporated and she felt herself falling before she understood that she was falling. Clawed hands gripped her arms and she was looking into calm, carefully neutral gold eyes.

"You based a gamble on faith?" Shinzuru croaked somewhere above her.

"Kagome-"
"Sesshoumaru, I'm sorry. She just, she said you were like narku, I snapped, I'm so sorry," She stutered, the magnitude of what could have happened, what almost happened crashing down on her all at once. But the claws in her arms dug in, pierced flesh and she yelped, drug from her almost panic attack.

"Come with me," He stated quietly, pulling her to her feet and releasing one arm, but dragging her by the other. Words built in her chest and scrambled up her throat but when they hit her tongue they jumbled and tied together, his fury sealing her lips shut for her as he led her outside of the shiro and into the outer gardens.

The blow was as unexpected as it was painful, sending her flying back several feet until she was a sprawling mess.

"I'm sorry." She started again, getting to her heet.

"Fight back," He commanded, voice cold as another wave of his youki whipped out and pushed against her. Her breath whooshed out of her lungs for a second time and this time she stared up at the sky, more than ready to accept whatever punishment he wanted to dole out.

"On your feet," He snapped.

She got to her knees when another wave of youki buffeted against her senses.

"Fight back!"

"I'm willing to accept the punishment for screwing up," She sighed. But her declaration was met with a long moment of curious silence, and readying herself for another blow, she looked up at Sesshoumaru, who in turn was staring down at her as if she'd lost her mind.

"I'm not punishing you," He finally sighed, walking over to her. "You're still angry."

"Of course I am!" She exploded, the fury that had been so mysteriously absent boiling to the surface. "She said you were like him! You're not, you'd never."

"I know that," He said, going down on one knee next to her and making sure she was looking him in the eyes before continuing. "And you know that. Our pack knows that. I care not what that woman thinks of me, nor should you."

"But-"

"Do you think it is because she still assumes you're a victim?"

That question silenced her, mostly because she felt herself mentally shying away from the answer.

"Both," She finally whispered, looking back down at the ground.

"Then you can fight it out," He told her in a quiet voice. "Or you can find some way to make peace with it."

"How?"

"I don't know."

"You've lived so much longer than me," She started, feeling very young and very small in the face of his years.
"Perhaps, but I have fought almost all of my life. I do not know peace. For that you should seek Resshin's council."

"Maybe we both should," She tried joking, but her weak chuckle stopped when he stiffened and moved away from her. It was only an inch, perhaps less, but she saw it.

"Or not."

"Since you have interrupted the council meeting today, perhaps now would be the time to ask him."

"I'm sorry-"

"I dislike apologies."

"How did I interrupt the meeting?"

"I felt something strange, a flash of you that echoed and then pulled back. It was as if you had vanished."

That didn't make any sense, and she was more than willing to let it go in the face of his tone. There was something tight about it, as if he didn't want to talk about it, was angry.

"How was the meeting going?"

"As expected."

"Oh."

A/N: I'm sorry this is so short, but a family member recently passed and we're about to head out of state and I wanted to post something since I'd be gone for at least a week. I hope you all enjoyed, and once again, your reviews are wonderful, and I'm so sorry I haven't been able to get back to you personally.
Kagome took breakfast with Sango the next day, this time alone, with Shinzuru standing guard in the corridor. She had specifically requested time alone with her friend, and had fought for it dearly. Thus their breakfast was more of a brunch than anything else, and Sango kept casting wary glances her way.

"Is the food alright?" Kagome asked, glad to see Sango eating.

"It's fine," Her friend murmured quietly. Unsettled by the sudden change in the slayer, she sat her bowl down and stared at the table for several minutes before starting, determined to pick her words carefully.

"I know you don't trust me right now, but I'd really like to know where things started going so wrong between us," Kagome whispered. "It was before the battle with Naraku. Before we even started traveling with Sesshoumaru. I'm scared of losing you," She admitted in a small voice.

"It's your decision," Sango muttered darkly.

"No, not just mine. It's yours too.

"Leave the shiro? Leave my children? You saw yesterday Sango, you saw all of us. That's my family! Would you give up Kohaku?" She asked, straining to keep from raising her voice. "That's what you're asking me to do. Each and every one of them means as much to me as Kohaku does to you," then added, "As much as you mean to me! How am I supposed to make that kind of choice?" Just the idea hurt her more than she could fathom, and she hugged her sides, trying to stave off the anguish the thought provoked.

She looked up to Sango, expecting to see rage. Seeing the stricken look on her friend's face, she stopped hugging herself to reach forward. Slowly, she placed her hand on Sango's. The taijiya, lost in a thought that obviously disturbed her, flinched and pulled her hand away. Her eyes, suddenly full of tears, looked away from Kagome's.

"May I see Miroku, please?" Sango asked at last, inhaling deeply, a violent shudder wracking her tense frame. Kagome nodded, and unable to understand what had happened, fled the room. Once the door was closed, she nodded to Shinzuru, who seemed to sense her own sudden emotional upset.
"The monk said he'd be in the gardens meditating this morning," Shintzuru offered, expression neutral. He had obviously heard the exchange, and said nothing else as Kagome hurried away. When she ran into Miroku coming in from his meditations, she counted herself lucky and began tugging him in the direction of Sango's room.

"What's wrong?" He asked, concern lacing his tone and forcing them both forward.

"I don't know. She just seemed to shut down," Kagome whispered. "I don't know what I did, I didn't mean to." Miroku brought his hand up, and Kagome paused, resting her hands on her knees as she caught her breath. When she straightened, he was eying her thoughtfully.

"What was said just before she asked for me?"

"I asked how I was supposed to choose between her and the children," Kagome tried. Miroku groaned and pinched the bridge of his nose. "What, was that wrong?" Kagome asked, panic pitching her voice octaves higher.

"No, it was not. It might have been the best thing you could have said, although it may be hurting her like hell right now," Miroku sighed. When he was met with a confused, blank look, he looked to the ceiling and then met her eyes once more. "When we were inside of Naraku, she got separated. Naraku tricked her into giving herself up by trying to make her choose between puppets of Kohaku and I. Despite it being unintentional, you may have reminded her by holding up a mirror, so to speak."

"I would never, she's not-"

"Not intentionally, but Naraku was formed out of the perverted love Onigumo bore Kikyo. Can you not say that her feelings have been twisted? That what she's doing isn't selfish? This is probably the best thing that could have happened," He explained in a gentle voice. "I'll go to her, maybe she'll listen," Miroku told her before rushing away. Kagome watched him retreating and wondered why she felt so ashamed and left out suddenly, then forced the thought to the back of her mind, determined to be optimistic. Knowing she'd hurt Sango in such a way made her feel awful, and she felt guilty for feeling glad that the hurt could somehow begin to mend the rift between them.

"This is just stupid," She huffed angrily. "I should be happy. Lots of lives in the balance, Kagome. Her life. Hurting is better than dead," She reminded herself out loud, stamping her foot.

"Is everything alright?" A voice asked from behind her. Kagome turned and almost threw her hands into the air in frustration.

"How is it you keep sneaking up on me?" Kagome demanded, only to realize how rude the question had sounded. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to snap. It's been a long morning," She supplied once she saw the stricken look on the crane youkai's face.

"I can see," She replied, curious, pale eyes on the miko. "I was on my way to the gardens."

"Oh, these are the doors to the inner gardens, only family is allowed there," Kagome supplied. "I don't really care, but I know the guys do, and I don't want anyone in trouble."

"Oh, one of the advisers- Never mind," Harukaze sighed, the sound heavy with exasperation. "Could you tell me the way to the regular gardens? I need some air."

"I'll go with you, if you'd like some company," Kagome offered, gesturing to lead the way. They fell
in step together as Kagome guided her through several halls.

"I'm beginning to understand why you refuse to take a seat among Sesshoumaru's council," She sighed at last. "If I were you, I would have purified them into oblivion on the first day."

"I almost did," Kagome chuckled. When she received a blank look from the elegant youkai, she chuckled and allowed herself to remember her first time sitting amongst the youkai.

"I used to not have full control of my powers. When they kept talking over my head, acting like I was some sort of animal too stupid to realize they were insulting me, it combined with a lot of other stress and my powers reacted. Every once in awhile I offer to purify them, and Sesshoumaru says not to tempt him," She giggled as she slid open the doors to the outer gardens and allowed herself to enjoy the feel of the dew covered grass beneath her feet.

"You are a very strange human. And very strange for a miko," Harukaze observed.

"So everyone keeps saying. People are people, no matter the species. Some are good, some are bad," She answered with a careless shrug.

"I see. Could you tell me something?" When Kagome nodded blithely, she pressed forward. "If Sesshoumaru were called to battle, would you go with him?"

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"Why do you ask?" Kagome demanded. "If you're planning something despite the treaty-"

"No, it was something Sesshoumaru said yesterday. After seeing you both combine your powers, knowing that I only saw a fraction of the whole, I told him even if my family wanted to end the feud through violence, I would stop them. He said he would never use you as a weapon like that."

"It doesn't matter," Kagome said, her voice heavy with warning. "Because I'd go with him and fight."

"I thought so," Harukaze said, some suspicion Kagome couldn't discern confirmed.

"Thought what?" She demanded, no longer caring about being polite.

"You are pack, not just for the sake of convenience. But truly pack. Please, don't mistake my curiosity for something sinister. I won't let my family try to attack Sesshoumaru, not knowing what you both can do. I'd be allowing them to die," Harukaze breathed. "Sesshoumaru is powerful enough he could easily hold off any attack my clan could bring against him. But against the both of you, there would be no chance."

Slightly mollified, Kagome nodded, moving forward again and resuming their walk, although her muscles were tensed and prepared for attack.

"Why did your family want the title so badly?"

"It is the House of the Moon," Harukaze replied, as if that explained everything. When Kagome merely blinked at her, she tried to explain. "The title is an honor, and held only by the strongest. It is said that several generations ago my family held the title, and that Sesshoumaru's ancestor won it in combat."

"It is said, but does anybody know?" Kagome asked. When Harukaze shook her head, she sighed. "There's already been so much fighting. Titles and honor and jewels and souls. It seems so pointless."
"I'm beginning to understand it to be so. Sesshoumaru told me that asking anyone to fight right now, starting a war, it would be too much. The land needs time to heal. I promised him my family would not make the first move to war. He is with Bokusenou now, trying to discern the reasoning behind his nomination of me."

"You sound as if you still don't believe it," Kagome observed.

"I don't. I'm the heir apparent in my clan, but I'm not the most powerful."

"You've been taught to lead though, right?" Kagome asked. When Harukaze nodded she smiled. "Bokusenou wouldn't have chosen you if you could be corrupted easily or if you would harm your people. And Resshin said you were a good choice. Just take care of your lands."

"You make it sound so simple," Harukaze huffed. Kagome chuckled dryly.

"No, I see what Sesshoumaru does every day. It's not going to be easy, especially since you're inheriting land ravaged by war. But with Naraku gone, hopefully other evils will give everyone a chance to pick themselves back up and renew it."

"You are a very idealistic person. Another thing I find strange."

"Then I guess I'll just have to be strange," She chuckled. Harukaze allowed herself a fond smile as they walked side by side through the paths set out in the gardens, contenting herself with what knowledge she had. Kagome forgot about the strange questions and decided to enjoy the day. Things were looking brighter each time she woke up, and she refused to wonder when it would all go wrong.

She dragged herself to the inner gardens and slumped onto the blanket next to Nanmei, groaning as every muscle in her body screamed in protest.

"You need a bath," Nanmei murmured. Kagome groaned again at the thought of moving, even if it was for hot water.

"Kotaeru had her doing mounted drills today. Didn't take long for her to get out of shape," Kasai laughed as he sat down beside her.

"That man used to rule over hell, I know it," Kagome muttered darkly. "And I'd like to see you fall off a horse twice and be told to 'stop fooling around'. Boufuu's mad I haven't been riding him, at least that's what Taru said. And Kotaeru's mad at me for getting myself sick, like it was somehow all my fault."

The others were laughing as the children played merrily, oblivious to their mother's misery. Kagome pulled herself into a sitting position and was surprised when Miroku walked out, eyes bloodshot and face slightly red. Despite his haggard appearance, he seemed in better spirits than when he had arrived.

"May I join you?" He asked quietly, as if expecting to be refused.

"Sure. Everything okay?" Kagome asked, making room for him and ignoring her protesting muscles. Even her bones hurt, surely that was a sign that she was doing too much.

"She's going to need some time. Her fear of youkai is still there, but she's beginning to understand what she was doing," Miroku sighed, accepting a cup of tea gratefully. "Unless I am utterly mistaken, I think if you continue inviting her to watch you with the children, she will understand."
"Your words shook something in her," He finished.

"What occurred?" Sesshoumaru asked quietly.

"Naraku once asked Sango to choose between her brother and myself. Despite that being a trick, Kagome unknowingly reminded Sango she was doing something similar," Miroku answered quietly. "The memory of being forced to try and choose still haunts her, she often dreams that instead of puppets, Kohaku and I were really there, and that she wasn't given the option to give herself up."

"I didn't know," Kagome murmured, a new wave of guilt washing over her.

"It's not your fault," Miroku commanded, his voice both stern and gentle. "She needed to see how she was acting. Better to hurt now than something worse later," He reminded her. Kagome nodded, still upset that she had only poured salt on an open wound.

"I will see her again," Resshin conceded at last. "And see if the change is true."

"You're not allowed to throw her in the river," Kagome told him sternly, then smiled to show her joke. "Seriously though, just give her some time. Things won't get better overnight. But maybe now she'll actually look instead of just assume."

"I think so," Miroku sighed, a small smile beginning to form. Kagome touched his hand gently and smiled, happy that he was beginning to hope.

"Harukaze said you spoke to her this morning," Sesshoumaru interrupted.

"Busy morning," Mizu observed.

"It was sort of an accident. She wanted to see the gardens and apparently one of your advisers sent her here instead of the ones outside of the wall. We talked. I don't think she'll let her family make a move on your title though," She added thoughtfully. "She said since we can combine our powers, it's too risky."

"I would not allow you to fight," Sesshoumaru retorted, surprising himself with the vehemence of the statement.

"You'd have to stop me," She snapped back just as quickly, her brow raised in challenge.

"You are a human, it would not be difficult," He scoffed. If they had paid attention, they would have noticed the other adults beginning to shift away.

"Just a human huh?" Kagome asked, smiling slyly. "Even though I'm a miko?"

"It would make no difference. If I wanted to stop you, I would," He replied imperiously. As soon as he finished the statement the hair on the back of his neck began to stand on end and he saw the power just as it hit, knocking him in his chest solidly and pushing him back onto the ground. He sprawled for a moment before fluidly standing, his eyes taking on a purely predatory gleam.

Kagome laughed and despite her aching body darted away, determined to beat him. The children stopped and walked over to the blankets, content to watch the rare show of their alpha and mother using their powers in any capacity.

"Why doesn't Sesshoumaru play with us like that?" Zurui asked.

"Kagome is the only one strong enough to play with him in such a way," Shinzuru tried to explain
through his laughter at the innocent question. "This is how pack mates of equal power play."

"He never played with us like that," Kasai chuckled. "Good to see them at it though. He needs a challenge."

"None of you see it, do you?" Nanmei asked. When even her mate looked at her blankly she rolled her eyes and muttered something suspiciously like 'men' under her breath. The sound was lost when the children gasped in delight as Kagome pulled herself into one of the trees, using it's low lying branches as a ladder as she scampered up it.

"You have nowhere to go miko!" Sesshoumaru called up the tree as he prowled around the bottom.

"Doesn't matter, because you'll never climb a tree and the foliage is took thick to fly through," She boasted. "So hah!" She added childishly.

"Did she just challenge him?" Shinzuru asked, expression incredulous.

"I believe she did," Mizu laughed.

Sesshoumaru shocked everyone by vaulting into the tree with ease and pulling himself up it's branches effortlessly. Kagome continued scampering up branches until there was nowhere else to go but down, and they were both hidden from everyone's view.

"You are caught," He declared. "Accept defeat."

"Defeat?" Kagome replied thoughtfully, her finger tapping against her chin, her eyes serious for a moment before mischief lightened them to a pale blue and she grinned impishly. "Nah!" She crowed, launching herself from the tree. Sesshoumaru's choked gasp was lost in the screams of children and the shouts of several youkai as they all rushed to where she would land.

Or would have landed, had she not been floating on a cloud several feet above the ground, grinning very much like a cat that had gotten into the cream.

"Not funny, Cat!" Shinzuru said, the top of his head just below the bottom of the cloud. "Get down here right now!"

"No, Sesshoumaru's gotta stop me, or else he loses," Kagome replied petulantly. She did not expect the hand to reach through the cloud and grab the waist of her hakama and pull her through the fluffy pink materialization.

"When exactly, were you going to inform me that you had achieved flight?" Sesshoumaru growled as he dropped her to the ground. It was only by the grace of her training that she managed to catch herself on her hands and push herself up.

"Well, I was going to wait until I had perfected it-" She began.

"You threw yourself from a tree not knowing if you could save yourself?" He demanded quietly, his tone strangely bland. Kagome looked up at him, her smile fading as she began to understand her error.

"You wouldn't let me fall, neither would the guys. I'd have been fine," She tried laughing, but the sound was nervous and awkward.

"Miko-" Sesshoumaru started.
"Kagome," She reminded him.

"Kagome," He began again, "You will never do such a thing again."

"Or what?" She challenged. Sesshoumaru remembered that flash of fear, the feeling of being frozen as he'd watched her dive, and stifled the urge to throttle her.

"I will thrash sense into you," He threatened.

"Only if you can catch me," She teased, breaking the tension as another cloud materialized with a pop and she was on it, lifting into the air. She leaned over it, sticking out her tongue before winking at the children, who cheered her on.

"Going to let her get away with that?" Shinzuru asked idly as they watched the cloud hover twenty feet above them, Kagome still staring over the side. Sesshoumaru growled low in his throat before launching himself into the air. Kagome laughter rang out as she maneuvered the cloud like a chariot, going high and low, even circling around the group of children, who in turn were delighted to be included in their mother's new game.

"Think he'll catch her?" Kasai asked.

"Not on your life," Nanmei said. "She's going to win."

"You seem very invested in this love," Resshin replied, looking down at his wife intently.

"The one woman that can beat you all into the dirt against him? You're right, I am invested. Womanly pride is at stake here," She told him, laughing even as she tried to pretend sternness.

"Oh no-" Miroku mumbled. Kagome was sailing low over the pond that was filled with lotus blossoms which had only begun to bloom, and Sesshoumaru caught her wrist. They all saw his triumphant smile and Kagome's sudden puckish grin.

"She wouldn't," Mizu breathed.

He was rewarded with a splash as Kagome allowed the cloud beneath her to vanish and the sudden weight pulled at Sesshoumaru, dragging him down into the water as well. Just as quickly as they had fallen in, two heads emerged, one laughing from behind a curtain of black hair and the other glaring as he pushed the hair plastered to his face away.

"You are only now getting better," A voice growled. "Do you seek to make yourself ill?"

"Oh come on, you're just mad I got you in the end," She scoffed as she began swimming for the edge of the pond. Once she reached it she drug herself out and flopped onto land breathlessly, smiling as she was crowded by several awed children and worried looking adults.

Sesshoumaru followed, still glaring. Once he was fully out of water, Kagome couldn't help but let out a snort.

"And they said I looked like a drowned cat," She giggled, taking in the sight of the soaked daiyoukai.

"Now you both do," Shinzuru chuckled. Sesshoumaru leveled a glare at the older youkai, then one at the miko before raising a brow archly.

"A cat?" He asked, just as his features began to shift and change.
"Everyone move back," Kasai called. "Oh you've done it this time," He laughed at Kagome, who still lay on the ground, watching in awe as a flash of light burst in the gardens and a giant dog was hovering over her. What could only be described as a doggy grin lit his features and understanding dawned as Kagome began trying to get up and run.

"No! Don't you da-" She got out before curling into a ball as the giant dog began shaking the water off of himself. The drops pelted her, stinging like small rocks before he stopped and looked down at her, red eyes bright with amusement.

"Not funny!" She called up to him as she stood. "And not even close to fair! I can't change into some huge beast and-" She stopped abruptly when he came to eye level with her, both red eyes focused intently on her, making her shuffle her feet.

"Okay, I'm sorry," She muttered. "Now change back before you destroy any more of the flowerbeds."

A flash of light and a dry daiyoukai was standing in front of her, his face flat except for the triumphant glint in his eyes.

"Aww, you let him win!" Nanmei exclaimed, voice filled with disappointment. Resshin laughed and put his arm over his mate's shoulder and kissed the top of her head.

"For now, the males hold dominance," He chuckled.

"He is correct," Sesshoumaru informed her, raising a brow at her. Kagome stalked off, still soaking, muttering under her breath. Nanmei followed, muttering just as darkly and joined the miko as they made their way inside.

"Little hellcat, at least she'll keep you on your toes," Shinzuru observed.

"Seems to me she could have won, especially if she could control that cloud of hers better," Mizu cut in before Sesshoumaru could reply. When he chose to glare at the kitsune, Mizu held up his hands in a placating gesture and couldn't hold in the chuckle that escaped. "Hey, don't blame me for speaking the truth. You like that about us," He offered.

"Perhaps it is time to go to the council," Sesshoumaru informed the men. "And inform them that I will be signing a peace treaty with the new lady of the south."

"I call duty over the children," Mizu and Kasai said at once, moving off to watch the children, as they always did.

"The girls will be fine in the bathhouse on their own, and there's a pair of guards on the slayer's room. We'll join you," Shinzuru said. Resshin looked ready to protest and the older youkai leveled a look in his direction. "I know you might enjoy watching you mate in the baths, but you seem to be forgetting she's there with another." He laughed heartily at the sudden blush burning the tips of Resshin's ears and clapped him on the back.

"Soon enough this mess will be over and you can go back to your forests and working on that litter your mate wants," He laughed, earning an even deeper blush from the green haired youkai.

Kagome shuffled into her room that night, still sore but feeling better after an extra long soak in the bathhouse. She and Nanmei both had luxuriated in the warm water and traded stories. She shared her fears and hopes for Sango with someone, glad to be able to unload on another woman. There was something about speaking with a female friend that was different with a male friend. Or perhaps it
was that all the males she knew were either children or warriors, she reflected wryly.

She stretched and groaned once she was in the first room of her suite and the door closed behind her.

"You seem to be feeling better," A stiff voice said. Kagome jumped, realizing that Sesshoumaru was already in the rooms with her.

"I can't wait for this to be over," She groaned. "Privacy is already hard enough to come by with so many kids, I don't need you here constantly too," She grumbled, moving to sit across the table from him.

"I'm sorry it is such an inconvenience," Came the retort. Kagome rolled her eyes and slumped over the table, limp with exhaustion. "Resshin said your friend is conflicted," Sesshoumaru informed her. She jerked back, any sleepiness fading at the news.

"Meaning?" She asked after he stared stoically ahead, his gaze fixed on some spot over her shoulder.

"It is possible she could go either way. But he feels that she will give this a true chance. He cannot see anything else."

"Oh. Well, that's better than before, and definitely more than I'd hoped for," She admitted. "I'm sorry about the pond, I thought it would be funny. I didn't realize you'd get so angry."

"It was not the pond. Though you insist you are fine, you are still recovering. And that trick with the cloud, I would not have you doing something so foolish," He sighed. "Why would you attempt such a thing?"

"Like I said, you guys were there, I'd be safe."

Her easy faith stroked a wound on his pride he hadn't been aware of, and he pinched the bridge of his nose, allowing himself the display, if only to reenforce his words.

"If we had not caught you the children would have seen you seriously injured. Please refrain from such things in the future," He commanded tersely. "I do not ask much. Being sure of your own abilities before jumping out of trees, off cliffs or any other heights is one of those things."

"You could just admit it worried you and I'd feel a lot worse," Kagome giggled sleepily. He eyed her warily, wondering how she could be so careless in the face of his disapproval. When he realized how tired she was, indeed, exhausted, he understood there would be no getting through to her.

"I was worried," He admitted after her eyes closed. "It is not something I am used to."

"Get used to it," She murmured sleepily a minute later. "I'm here, and besides jumping out of trees, I'm good at falling off of cliffs, getting deathly ill, and being kidnapped."

"Are there any other talents I should be aware of?" He asked dryly. When she only shrugged her shoulders, or tried, seeing as her her head was resting on her arms and she was slumped over the table again, he gave up and allowed himself a chuckle. Her heartbeat was slowing and her breathing was evening out.

"Few challenge me in the manner you do," He conceded at last, thinking she had finally gone to sleep.

Shaking his head, he moved over to the miko and scooped her up, surprised that she smelled lightly of some sort of flower. Inhaling deeply, he found the scent of clover and honeysuckle beneath it, and decided that the flowery smell was her soap, and that he did not appreciate it covering her natural scent, which he decided must be the smell of a summer field. Warm.

Shaking his head at his own wandering thoughts, he carried her to her room, setting her down gently and pulling a blanket over her. She mumbled something sleepily, burrowing into the covers, and he pulled the pelt from his shoulder and watched as it began wrapping itself around her. Deciding his last act of revenge for her actions was complete, he moved to the small room he had claimed and closed the door behind him, a small smile on his face.

She had been playing, her challenge nothing more than a game, although it had proved one thing. If he ever tried to leave her behind, she would find a way to follow him. Still unsure if it was a good thing, he leaned back against the wall and lay Bakusaiga across his lap, allowing himself to drift into a light doze.

Kagome peeked her head into Sango’s room the next morning, surprised to see the taijiya staring out the window wistfully. When the slayer turned her attentions to her, her greeting was shy, almost timid.

"Are you okay?" Kagome asked. "If I said something yesterday," She started.

"No, it needed to be said, I think. Miroku told me if something made me feel guilty, then there's obviously something wrong. I think he's right," Sango replied quietly. "I just don't know what's wrong. I don't know why I'm so mad all of the time," She confessed. Hesitantly, Kagome moved over to the taijiya and sat next to her, close enough to feel the warmth radiating off of her.

"I think it has a lot to do with our group breaking apart. When we escaped Naraku, it was just you and me. What we went through together, it was awful." Sango made a small noise in the back of her throat and Kagome kept pushing on. "You know I saw them again? Sesshoumaru and I were going to meet one of his men, Kato. When we got there, they'd killed Kato because they hadn't received their payment yet."

"What happened next?" Sango asked quietly.

"I wanted to leave, to just get out of there. One of them slipped up and Sesshoumaru put two and two together. He-" Unable to say exactly what the daiyoukai had done, she hedged. "He disabled the leader. He was alive when Sesshoumaru executed the others. He gave me the chance to kill the leader. I didn't take it, I couldn't do it. Sesshoumaru did."

"I've been scared of seeing them again, of somehow crossing paths with them and seeing all of them. I would have killed them," Sango admitted. "Did they suffer?"

"I didn't watch, but I heard. They suffered."

"I'm glad they're dead."

There was a long silence and Kagome felt a surge of gratitude when Sango leaned against her, knees still pulled up to her chest and arms wrapped tightly around them. She was stiff as a board, but she was leaning against her!

"I know you think I'm choosing, but I don't want to. You know Nanmei, the human woman you saw with me?" Kagome asked. Sango nodded once. "She doesn't live in the citadel. Resshin, her mate, prefers the forests. They came because they heard I was sick. But we're friends, and I'll visit her, and
she'll visit me. I want us to do that."

"I wish you could always be there, like it used to be," Sango admitted. "Everything is so different."

"I guess none of us really thought about what our lives would be like after Naraku was defeated," Kagome sighed. "I mean, we had hopes, goals. You and Miroku would get married, Inu Yasha-" She stopped, tears burning her eyes. She was surprised when Sango's arms went around her and hugged her tightly.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," Sango whispered. "I was so scared of losing you that I didn't think about everything you lost." Kagome allowed the tears to flow, lamenting the future she had lost, the hopes and dreams that she tried to forget.

"We both lost a lot," Kagome sniffled later, after she and Sango had both cried on one another's shoulders silently. "But we always assumed we'd have lives that were next to one another, not, not like this," She concluded. "I hate that it's happening this way. I miss you," She admitted. "I've missed you for months, and I keep wondering what I did wrong-"

"No," Sango said, shushing her. "Not you. Miroku made me look at some things. I don't know if he's completely right. I still don't trust youkai, especially Sesshoumaru. But I've been selfish, and you have every right to be mad at me. The things I was planning, gods. After seeing those kids, everyone was so happy. It was like watching my father and Kohaku."

"Only with more Kohakus," Kagome smirked.

"Heaven forbid. One is enough. But, even Sesshoumaru was playing. And you were smiling. You used to not smile, not really. Ever since Inu Yasha, well, since we escaped, I didn't see you really smile. Something else was always there. Fear, sadness. Something. But I saw you playing with them, and watching them play with Sesshoumaru and the other youkai. It was wrong of me to ask you to choose. If I was in your place, looking at me, I would have told me to go to hell," Sango admitted. "Nothing is more important than family."

"But you're part of my family. Even if we have to live apart, you're always going to be family."

"How can you say that after-"

"Sometimes family does stuff to make you mad, or hurts you. Sometimes you don't like family. But you never stop loving them," Kagome quoted, another of her mother's truisms.

"I don't think I'll ever stop being amazed at your capacity for forgiveness," Sango admitted several minutes later.

"I need to forgive so that I can hope," Kagome sighed. "I need hope more than anything. Besides, if I can forgive Sesshoumaru trying to kill me, I'm pretty certain I can forgive anything."

"I tried to kill you once. I was preparing myself to do it again," Sango admitted after several more minutes of silence. "If I couldn't convince you-I was so stupid, telling myself you were tainted or you were being controlled. Kami, I almost made the biggest mistake-" She didn't finish, her shoulders trembling as a fresh round of tears started. Kagome wrapped her arm over her friend's shoulder and allowed her to cry, and let herself cry as well, for all of the things that could have happened and didn't.

"We must look awful," Kagome chuckled later. Unsure of how much time had passed, she finally moved from Sango and stretched. Sango looked up at her shyly, as if trying to figure out what to say.
"What's up?" Kagome asked.

"What do we do now?"

"We try and fix it. I mean, it can't be forced or anything, but just hang out with me. Try to get to
know the kids and the guys, even Nanmei. You said you still don't trust them, and I can understand
that. But now that you're open to the idea, you need to actually work on it. I won't promise you
everything will be warm and fuzzy," Kagome sighed, dropping her arms back to her sides and giving
the taijiya a speculative look.

"The kids know you as the woman that kidnapped Shippou, and someone tried to separate them
before they came here. It's something some of them still have nightmares about. But if you give them
time, they'll move past it. They know that you're been hurt. Not how," She quickly added, seeing the
panic in the other woman's eyes. "I wouldn't do that to you. But they know you've been hurt, and
you're scared. Resshin, if you're making an effort, he'll see it and try to meet you halfway. The
others, I really have no idea."

"Sesshoumaru hates me," Sango sighed. "The older one too."

"I hate to say it, but can you blame them?" Kagome asked. "You know about youkai, you know
about packs. I'm Sesshoumaru's, and so is Shippou. As for Shinzuru, I don't know, he feels sort of
like a dad I guess. I don't really remember mine, but he feels like I imagined a dad would." Kagome
admitted shyly, voicing a thought she had kept close for some time. When Sango just looked at her
blankly, Kagome shrugged defensively. "What?"

"You're claiming he acts like a father?" Sango sputtered.

"I don't know what having a dad is like," Kagome retorted, her cheeks blazing in embarrassment. "I
always imagined my dad as well, different, human. But the big things, the important things, those are
the same. I'm not saying he treats me like his little girl, but he's, oh never mind," Kagome snapped,
turning away from her friend and hiding her mortification while she wondered why she had even let
that secret slip, especially to Sango.

When the taijiya's hand touched her shoulder gently, she turned and felt a stab of guilt at her friend's
shamed expression.

"I wasn't thinking, I'm sorry. My dad was a demon slayer, but we were really close. I really respected
him, you know? He was the headman. I didn't think about you not knowing yours," She murmured.
"I don't know what I would have done without my father in my life. It was wrong of me to think you
wanting one was strange. Even if you did choose a youkai."

"Give them a chance, they're not so bad. Shinzuru, he's kind and honorable. All of the guys are.
Shinzuru's just, well, maybe it's because he's older. The twins feel like little brothers sometimes.
Resshin is like this older, wiser brother that I'm just beginning to understand."

"And Sesshoumaru?" Sango asked.

"A pain in the butt," Kagome snorted. When she heard the chuckle outside of the door, her eyes
opened in horror and she looked to it, groaning, completely mortified.

"What?" Sango asked, confused.

"Shinzuru. He's right outside the door. He's been listening the whole time."

"Wouldn't be a decent guard if I didn't," Came the reply from the other side. Kagome moved to it
and slid it open part of the way, just enough to peek her head outside and stare at the grinning youkai.

"Oh no, not after that little slip," He laughed, sliding the door the rest of the way open and forcing her into a bone crushing hug. Kagome gasped for breath and laughed when he tossed her in the air and caught her easily.

"You're a fine girl, and I'd be a fool if I wasn't proud to call you mine," He chuckled, setting her down gently. "Now, if you and your friend are done with the waterworks, it's past time for lunch, and I'm sure the children are driving Sesshoumaru crazy."

"That long?" Kagome gasped, eyes widening.

"Time's a funny thing," Shinzuru commented, casting an eye in the slayer's direction. "Can do all sorts of funny things if you're not watching carefully."

"I'm sorry, for the things I said," Sango began. Shinzuru shrugged carelessly, as if the woman's behavior didn't matter.

"Fear is another thing that does strange things if you're not looking. Cat's had her fair share, and you too. Can't say as I'm entirely happy with how you treated us, but if you're willing to try, well, I should too. Be kind of hard not to after some of what I heard," He added thoughtfully.

"I can't wait for privacy again," Kagome sighed, repeating her sentiment from the night before. "I'm never alone anymore."

"The price you pay," The older youkai reminded her as they began walking the corridors. Sango trailed behind slightly, and Kagome slowed, taking her hand and squeezing it gently. When they finally made it to the doors leading outside, Kagome paused and looked at her friend.

"You ready?" She asked. Sango looked absolutely terrified.

"It'll be fine. Remember how you were acting before?" Shinzuru asked, a smile on his face. When Sango looked at him and nodded, her face ashen, he let out a chuckle. "Don't do any of that and you'll be okay." His recommendation didn't soothe the taijiya at all, the joke in his tone completely lost on her. Kagome gave him an exasperated look before he slid the door open.

It was another warm, sunny day, and Kagome was thankful that at least the children seemed occupied with the twins. She stepped out, and when Sango hesitated, tugged on her hand gently.

"I can carry you if you'd like," Shinzuru offered. Sango shook her head quickly and hurried out, almost lunging to get away from the demon. His rich laugh echoed through the gardens and Kagome pulled Sango behind her, to where the adults sat watching their approach silently, most of their expressions neutral. Miroku's was almost painfully hopeful, and Kagome prayed that they were truly fixing things. Reminded by the look that it wasn't just her relationship with Sango on the line, she squeezed her friend's hand gently as she guided her to the blankets.

"Hey everyone," Kagome told them, sitting down and allowing Sango to sit next to her. The taijiya was practically clinging to her, leaving no room between them. Shocked by the sudden shyness that gripped the normally bold slayer, she refrained from moving too much as she nodded and looked to each face.

"Nanmei, this is Sango. Sango, Nanmei is a good friend, and Resshin's mate. I think you've met everyone else here."
"Nice to meet you Sango. Kagome's told me some wonderful stories about you," Nanmei said cautiously, inclining her head slightly to the taijiya.

"It's nice to meet you as well," Sango replied quietly.

Kagome heard the running steps of children come up behind her and turned, surprised to see not just Rin, but Shippou as well.

"Hello Sango," Rin lisped. "Are you feeling better?"

"I- I am," Sango stammered.

"Good," She said, then elbowed Shippou gently. He was still giving the taijiya a confused look, as if his anger had melted when he saw how unsure the woman suddenly was.

"Rin and I, we both want you to know we've gotten really good at sharing mama. She told us when you love more people, your heart gets bigger instead of trying to share the space, it just makes more room," He told her, his words slightly garbled as he sat down, staring at her seriously. "We don't mind sharing her with you. But, you used to love us. Why don't you like youkai anymore?" He asked. "Did I do something wrong?"

"No, you're fine," Sango whispered, her voice thick with emotion. "You didn't do anything wrong."

"They didn't either," He said, gesturing to all of the adults at the blankets. "Or them," He finished, his hand pointing in the general direction the other other children, who had long since stopped playing to watch the drama unfolding.

"I know," She answered, voice deepening. "So you won't take mama away?" He asked. When Sango shook her head, he ventured further. "You won't try and take anyone away?" Another vehement shake. "Can you share too?" He asked. Sango blinked tears away and nodded.

"Good," Rin said, smiling brightly. "Come on Shippou, the grownups were talking," She urged, her apparent goal accomplished.

"What was it you said before?" Sesshoumaru asked, his voice deep and thoughtful. "Out of the mouths of babes comes wisdom?" He directed at Kagome.

"It is because they have such a wise mother," Sango answered. "And I am a fool."

"We are all fools at one point or another," Resshin answered, his gaze considering. "It is learning and growing past that foolishness that makes us wise."

"I don't think I'm wise," Kagome answered finally, breaking the silence.

"Doubtless," Sesshoumaru murmured. Kagome threw him a withering glance before cupping a hand next to her mouth.

"See, pain in the butt, just like I said," She mock whispered to Sango, loud enough for even Miroku and Nanmei to hear. Nanmei let out an unladylike snort before bursting into giggles, her hand over her mouth as she glanced once at her mate and then to Sesshoumaru, hoping they didn't find her breach of etiquette terribly offensive. Resshin was smiling slightly, containing his own mirth, and Sesshoumaru only glared at the miko dourly.
"I was merely agreeing with you," He finally said.

"You're still mad I managed to drag you into the pond yesterday," She scoffed. Sango choked on a startled laugh, her eyes swinging from the miko to the daiyoukai.

"After I stopped you," He retorted.

"All right children. Cat and the girl haven't eaten yet. Spent the morning caterwaulin' and they need to keep their strength up."

"Why's that?" Kagome asked.

"Oh I dunno," Shinzuru replied lightly. "All of us youkai, we're too strong to try hand to hand with you. Seems to me the slayer might as well be useful while she's here and train with you."

"I do not think-" Sesshoumaru began.

"It is a good idea," Resshin interrupted. Sesshoumaru stopped, giving his friend a long hard look before giving them a one shouldered shrug.

"As you please."

"Miroku could help too," Kagome added.

"I'm fairly useless now that the kazaana is-

"All the more reason to train with us," Kagome cut in, her eyes narrowed at the monk. He stopped, his eyes widening when he understood her meaning. Once that nonverbal communication was finished, she swung her gaze to Sesshoumaru. "How is it going with Harukaze?"

"The treaty was signed yesterday. My council is, as of yet, unaware."

"They don't know?" Kagome asked, blinking at him rapidly.

"I'm certain I just told you that. Was I unclear?"

"Oh, I'd kill to be a fly on the wall for that conversation."

"Consider yourself invited," Sesshoumaru smiled, though it held little actual joy and more bitter triumph.

"Oh no, no way. Last time I had to let my powers slip when they kept calling me 'the human woman'."

"If you don't I will tell them the treaty was your idea," He threatened.

"No you wouldn't, you don't want them thinking you have a human, a woman less, coming up with brilliant ideas," Kagome snapped back. "Ideas you probably neglect to mention aren't yours!"

Sango looked behind Kagome, her eyes meeting Nanmei's. "Do they always do this?" She asked in wonder. It was like watching her with Inu Yasha, only Sesshoumaru's tones were fairly modulated and he didn't curse.

"From what I've seen while I've been here, yeah," She answered, shrugging. "That's part of the reason they call her Cat. They get along about as well as a dog and a cat."
"I will have you know we can get along perfectly fine," Kagome huffed. "When he's not being a great big furry fathead." She stopped, realizing that everyone around the blanket had gotten suspiciously silent. Looking around her, she saw that almost everyone found either the sky, a distant tree or even the design on the blanket completely fascinating. Only Sango seemed to be watching the two of them, her eyes wide in shock.

"You are an immature human brat," He answered when she finally looked at him.

"That comes up with brilliant ideas."

"The treaty was one idea-" He began.

"Dunking you in the pond," She added, ticking off on her fingers. "The great tree escape-"

"Not a brilliant idea," He growled.

"Tenseiga being able to defeat Magatsuhi," She continued, ignoring him. "The horses," She added with a meaningful glance. "Asking Bokusenou for help with the candidates, playing games, the hug deal, using Bakusaiga to escape Naraku-"

"Enough," Sesshoumaru cut her off. "Since you seem to insist that you are so wise and intelligent, you will take a seat on my council," He commanded. Kagome eyed him before smiling, triumph lighting in her eyes.

"You know what, I'm wise enough and intelligent enough to say no thank you," She answered smartly, leaning back, her posture and expression daring him to come up with a rebuttal.

"I think that's a win for the women," Nanmei said after several moments of shocked silence where everyone watched the two, as if expecting the scene to suddenly erupt in bloodshed.

"You might be correct," Resshin answered. Sesshoumaru sent a sharp glare in his direction before turning back to the miko and arching a brow.

"Scared of some weakling highborn youkai?" He asked archly.

"No, we've already established that I can outsmart you," She quipped.

"You will regret-" he began, but was pushed back before he could finish his statement. A small pop rang out and Kagome was rising into the sky, smirking evilly as Sesshoumaru launched himself into the air.

"Not what you expected, is it?" Shinzuru chuckled as he took in Sango’s confused expression. When she shook her head dumbly, watching the daiyoukai chase the miko angrily, he allowed it to become a full laugh.

"She can provoke him with frightening ease," Nanmei observed. "But I do believe if we go by our representatives, the women are doing a fair job of beating you men."

"How so?" Resshin chuckled.

"The tree, the pond, those two comments before she took off. Need I go on?"

"I think a point should be deducted for taking off without giving him time to reply."

"But he did, with a generic, 'you will regret that' sort of statement, nothing witty. So women are ahead," She replied haughtily. When Sango only watched the exchange blankly, Nanmei leaned to
the side with a conspiratorial smirk. "It's women against men. Kagome's our representative, Sesshoumaru is theirs."

"My mate has very strange notions. I blame the shrine maidens she lived with," Resshin sighed. Shinzuru let out a strangled sound.

"She was the only maiden among that lot. The rest could have been older than me," He snorted.

"They are not!" Nanmei huffed indignantly.

"Oh look, duck," Miroku said, just in time as Kagome came flying just overhead. Everyone ducked down as she and the daiyoukai flew past, her laughter ringing out and mixing with an impatient snarl from the inu.

"Ready to rethink your position?" Nanmei asked, smiling brightly at the dumbfounded slayer. Once more, all the slayer could do was nod.

A/N: I hope you enjoyed, and as always, thank you for the reviews. I'm sorry I haven't been able to get back to all of your personally lately, it's been hectic in my little sphere of the world.
"Resshin says your friend is recovering more quickly than expected, but that you are unhappy," Sesshoumaru said later that night as she stumbled into the room.

"No. Not now," Kagome muttered. "I've dealt with you, barely escaped dealing with your council, and I had to train not only with Kotaeru, but Shinzuru, Sango, and Miroku. Not tonight," She muttered, stomping past him angrily. The door to her room slammed into place with enough force to make the whole wall shudder in protest.

"You will have to speak of it at some point," He pointed out. The trunk in her room slammed shut loudly and he was taken aback with the viciousness with which she pulled the door open, her eyes bright with anger.

"A lot of great things happened today. I'm happy they happened. Couldn't be better. Now let me get some sleep," She forced out through a fake smile. Sesshoumaru resisted the urge to roll his eyes as she so often did and held the door when she tried to close it again.

"Something is obviously bothering you. Your aura is erratic."

"This is why I need privacy," She muttered. "I can't get five minutes to myself to just have a good cry anymore. I always have to have an audience. Well I'm getting tired of it," She snapped. "Sometimes I just need to be alone."

"You do not do well left on your own," He quipped. Kagome glared up at him and huffed, her energy suddenly moving to shock him, not enough for it to hurt, but he was shocked long enough for her to close the door. He stared at it, stunned by her abrupt dismissal.

Ignoring every sense of propriety, he slid open the door and stalked forward. Her back was to him and he could see her face in her hands, her shoulders shaking. Tears salted the air and he paused, wondering why he was so determined to find out what was wrong.

"Just leave me alone," She commanded.

"What it wrong? Resshin said-" She spun around and he saw the anguish in her expression and stepped back, completely unaware of the retreat.

"The last thing you want to hear about is your brother," She told him. "So get out."

He was surprised that he stood his ground. Instead he stepped forward, not reaching for her, standing there, unsure of what to do.
"Please leave?" She begged.

"No."

"Please. I can't, you won't, please," She begged again, the words becoming more and more strangled.

He moved forward, taking her hand in his and pulling her to her bed. He sat down and pulled her down with him, unsure if it was the right thing, finding a measure of comfort that no fear spiked in her scent. She curled up against him and let out a choked sob.

"What is wrong?" He commanded gently.

"Everything that could have been. After practice I saw Sango and Miroku holding hands, and it hurt. I just thought about Inu Yasha. We were supposed to be like that. We should have been mated by now. I'm supposed to be happy for them and all I can think about is how it was supposed to be. It'll never happen now."

He was surprised the whole situation didn't make him feel more awkward, or even angry or annoyed. He pulled her more closely to his chest and sighed.

"It is true there was no love lost between he and I," Sesshoumaru finally answered. "But you cared for him deeply. It is your right to feel loss at what could have been."

Like his words had broken a dam, she let out a piercing wail that rang in his ears. Some mental part of him flinched at the despair in the sound, something not quite human echoing in the sound. She clung to him and cried for the better part of an hour, dampening the kimono he wore, then soaking through it. That he allowed it surprised him as much as the depth of her sorrow. Rarely did she even mention his half brother, although it made a certain sense, that it would build and break like this.

When she finally quieted, hiccuping and trying to pull away, he held fast and even squeezed her gently.

"I know you grieve for what was, and what might have been. But if you had mated the hanyou, would you be able to give so many children a mother?" He asked, hoping he was finding the right words. "And Shinzuru told me, quite proudly, that you saw him as a father. For a man that has never found someone to start a family with, to be called a father is a potent thing, and one that I can see brings him great joy. Resshin's mate has a friend that cares nothing for what she and her lover are, but who they are."

"I know that," She whispered. "But I still miss him," She admitted. "I keep wondering what if-"

"What if is a dangerous question. One could easily lose themselves in such thoughts, and forget what is," He told her sagely.

"Maybe I'm just selfish," She sighed. "For wanting everything. Sango and I talked about what we used to dream about, after the battle. I didn't dream any of this."

"Dreams rarely come true," He replied after a time. "I once dreamed of conquest, of controlling a vast kingdom."

"And now?"

"Now I am content with my lands, and my pack. I don't think I'd have time for anything more," He added. Kagome managed a weak chuckle.
"It's still strange. Sometimes I just stop and look around, and it's so surreal. The kids, being here. Being your friend," She admitted.

"I still find it strange. This is strange."

"Oh, I can move-" She started.

"Strange, he corrected, keeping his hold on her. "But not unpleasant. It is a unique challenge," He conceded.

"I have no idea whether you just insulted me or not."

"It is a compliment. Little challenges me."

"And there's the youkai we know and love," Kagome huffed, giggling even as she sniffed. "Well, I'm not entirely sure I know you. You keep surprising me."

"Perhaps it is only fair, as I find you puzzling."

"Oh, well then. I guess we're just doomed to remain mysteries to one another," She joked.

"It is strange, that we both seem to understand one another so little, but we can access one another's cores and combine our powers. Even Bokusenou finds it strange that we can accomplish such."

"How is he?" Kagome asked. "I haven't been able to escape long enough to see him."

"Escape?" He asked, brow arched, finally looking down at her. She was steadfastly avoiding his gaze and chewing her lip nervously. "How is it you planned to get to him?" He asked.

"Cloud," She started.

"You've gone before," He accused.

"I promised not to tell," She hedged. Disbelief apparent, he let it go, instead answering her own question.

"He is doing well. He does wish to see you, as well as your friend. Since you are now able to create your own transportation, something I would still appreciate knowing how you accomplished," he added thoughtfully. "We can go go tomorrow, if you would like."

"Don't you have anything to do here?"

"Resshin convinced the council that my choosing a candidate outside of their choices was somehow their fault. They've fallen to blaming one another. There will be little to do with them for now, and I've gotten most of the problems here seen to. The refugees are swiftly leaving, eager to rebuild and plant so they can have something to eat this winter."

"Oh, I hadn't realized."

"There should be little trouble in my territory. It is the others that have their work cut out for them. It will take a year or two before the land has truly righted itself, but it will right itself," He added, conviction ringing in his tone.

"Do you think I'll ever be right again?" She asked quietly.

"I think you are in the process of healing. Part of that is grieving, part of that is fear. Although, if you
were not healing, would you so easily trust us, defend us?" He asked, once again feeling as if he was floundering verbally.

"All of you make it really easy," She answered honestly. "Shinzuru is like I imagined a dad being. The guys are like brothers, everyone feels sort of like a family."

"You give precious gifts to those around you, and you don't even seem to understand," He murmured. "Being a mother to those that have none, and a daughter to a man I know has often craved a family. Resshin has expressed his joy in his mate's new found friendship more than once, and the twins are good warriors, but they are more at peace watching the children."

"They've been so good to me, despite the crazy ups and downs. I'm glad they're able to find happiness."

"Perhaps you should seek happiness as well," He said at last.

"Won't be hard," She mumbled. "Thank you," She finally whispered. "Every time I turn around and I expect you to head for hills, you stand by me. It's surprising, but comforting."

"I am still learning how to deal with humans," he admitted. "But you would do no less. There would be no honor in running away."

Several minutes passed in silence and he was surprised when he felt her aura swell, a silent invitation. Knowing that she needed the visit, and his help, he could do no less than accept the invitation and drift lazily along the path of her power and into her core.

When he was aware of solid ground beneath his feet again, his eyes opened and he inhaled sharply. The field was still there, the grass taller than before. The cool night air added a sharpness to the scent and he realized that her core was beginning to take on scents, coming one step closer to being real.

"It's grown," Kagome murmured from behind him. He turned and saw that in the short time since their passing, the tree had grown. It was still young, but could longer be called a sapling. Easy the height of two men, it's limbs spanned all directions, covered in wide green leaves..

"So it is," He agreed.

The horses galloped out of nothingness, shimmering into being even after their hooves were beating at the ground. They both mounted silently and shot off, their horses lunging forward. He could feel the difference between their first ride and this one. Something felt sharper, as if she rode to escape, and he rode to stand watch.

A scream rent the air, inhuman in it's anguish. He flinched, surprised that such a sound had come from her. The horses, creations of her own mind, paid no heed to the noise and continued on, gaining speed and momentum.

The sadness he felt pressed at him, oppressive in their insistence. Her every thought was open to him, and the spikes in her emotion came with jagged images, another scream tearing itself from her throat. The disconnected images were there and gone so quickly they should have been hard to grasp, but the sharpness of their edges stabbed at him, their clarity too vivid to go without comprehending. Feeling like a voyeur as her most intimate dreams and memories pressed at him, he followed, suddenly afraid. Their breakneck pace was only gaining speed, and he still did not have an answer on if one could die in such a place.

The cliff appeared from nothingness as the horses had, suddenly there and too close to stop the horse in time, even if it was an unnatural being. Ignoring his commands, it jumped gleefully, following the
miko. When it vanished from beneath him him felt himself plummeting, faster than he had ever flown, into the churning waters of an ocean below. He broke the surface, hurtling down as the water tried to slow him and failed miserably.

Salt stung his eyes and pushed up his nose, burning bitterly as he pushed for the surface. Once his head emerged, he looked around frantically for Kagome, panic forcing his heart to beat out a heavy rhythm against his chest.

"Kagome!" He roared, treading water as he whipped his head around in all directions, trying to find her dark hair or pale skin somewhere in the choppy water. The fear he'd felt when she jumped out of the tree so carelessly was nothing compared to the terror twisting his stomach. "Kagome!" He called again, trying to make himself heard over the sound of the waves crashing against the cliff. Finding nothing, hearing no answer, he dove beneath the water and tried to see anything in the swirling, murky depths.

A flash of white where there should be none caught his eye and he dove deeper, eyes barely able to focus on the fluttering white cloth that jerked and swayed in the water. Pulling himself closer and closer to it, determined, triumph roared within when his fingers caught hold of it, tugging it to him and bringing the miko into view.

Kicking his legs for the surface he struggled to hold his breath and prayed one could not die in such a place. When he broke the surface he looked to the cliff, seeking a shore of some sort. Seeing nothing, he headed that way anyway, the other option swimming into the distance and praying a beach suddenly appeared. Once close, he felt the rocky ground beneath them beginning to level up, the water becoming shallower as he was able to gain his footing and drag the miko into the shallows. Waves still crashed against the cliff face, but he was able to find rocks to hide behind and sat in a foot of water, pulling her too him and shaking her.

"Kagome, wake up!" He demanded. Her face was paler than it should be and he shook her harder, trying to force down the panic and think logically. "Kagome, wake up. You can not die!" He whispered furiously. "I will not let you," He stated imperiously, forgetting the world they were in wasn't real, that she could control everything within it. He slapped her once, the action leaving a red mark on her cheek. When that did not work, an angry howl rose from deep within his chest at his own impotence.

Pinching her nose, he forced her jaw open and began pushing air into her mouth, then turned her over, holding her face inches above the water as he thumped her back soundly.

"What happened?" She asked at last.

"You should be the one telling me," He snapped angrily. We were suddenly going over a cliff and you almost died!" he accused, relief fading into anger. "What were you thinking? That your cloud would save you?"

and he sighed, pulling her to him again and reveling in the sound of her breath and little whimpers.

"Never do that again," He commanded.

"I'll try to avoid it," She muttered.

"Perhaps," He began several minutes later, unsure of the offer even as he made the decision to finish. "Perhaps we should go to my core."

"Really?" Kagome asked, and he looked down at her to see a glimmer of hope in her eyes. He nodded once, despite the internal battle he was fighting. He had trespassed on her own more than once, but offering to lead her to his own, willingly, was harder than he had guessed it would be.

As she closed her eyes, he allowed his own to drift shut, and forced himself along the paths of power, surprised that as they traveled among them, the weight of her never left his arms.

When he opened his eyes again, she was still there, held tightly to him as if he was afraid she'd vanish, and they were sitting in the grove she had found him in before. The light rain still fell, and the sky hinted at neither day or night.

"Thank you," She whispered.

"Do not do that again," He commanded, mentally flinching when it came out as more of a plea.

"I won't. It's still hard, accepting that it's all gone," She whispered.

"Then try to remember all that you have gained in it's stead," He reminded her. Kagome nodded once, and pushed herself from him, moving to stand and walk. The bitter tang of salt was gone, replaced with the familiar scents of clover and honeysuckle. His own trees and the grass and rain added to the scents, but hers remained dominant.

"The last time I was here, afterward, I was afraid to tell you everything," She admitted softly.

"And now?" He demanded, moving to walk beside her. Paths seemed to open up before them as they walked, tree branches overhead sometimes blotting out the sky and rain, then breaking to allow the drops to rest in their hair.

"I still don't know if it would make you angry. When I'm here, I feel you, everywhere. You're more than just the body you wear here. It's a part of it, but everywhere there's this strength," She admitted.

"There's so much, pulsing just beneath the surface image."

He was silent as they continued on the meandering paths for several minutes, digesting her words, her insinuations.

"It is strange to think that you can know so much and yet so little about me," He admitted at last.

"Doomed to remain mysteries I guess," She replied with a laugh.

"The youkai, Kagura," He began, then stopped abruptly, startling Kagome. She stopped, looking at his back curiously.

"Is everything okay?" Kagome asked, putting a hand on his arm. His eyes stared stonily ahead.

"It is nothing," He stated before starting forward. Kagome's grip on his sleeve stopped him and he looked down at her, his expression bland and eyes blank.
"Please tell me," She finished. He waited for several minutes, looking down at her, expression shifting from blank to something just edging at sorrow.

"I felt angry at her passing. I was, I felt-" He stopped again, suddenly at a loss for words.

"It's okay to be sad," Kagome answered. "I don't know what your relationship was, but it's okay to miss her," Kagome told him. When he said nothing, just turned to stare ahead again, she moved to him and circled her arms around his middle. "I was there, when she passed. She betrayed Naraku and tried to save us."

"Many times she asked for my aid. I refused it. She only wished to be free," He replied, his voice brittle.

"She is now," Kagome whispered. "She said she was the wind. Now she is."

However long he let the woman embrace him, he didn't know, and although he told himself it was just her needing to feel useful, the comfort of the embrace, the easy acceptance of his own admission, soothed him. A secret he had never told anyone, it felt good to have someone hear it.

"We should be going back," She whispered at last. He nodded, and they tried to drift along the paths of their power. When they tried however, Kagome gasped in shock.

"Did they, are they-" She started, eyes wide in wonder.

"They have somehow merged," Sesshoumaru confirmed.

"How do we get back?"

"The same way we always do," He rumbled.

"But how-"

"Just allow yourself to settle back in your body," He commanded. She nodded, and they tried once more, this time succeeding. When they opened their eyes, they were laying on her bed, him on his side and her form still cradled to him.

"Sleep well, Kagome," he told her, moving swiftly from the bed, suddenly uncomfortable, puzzled and acutely aware of his ignorance. The door slid shut behind him with a quiet, final click, and he moved to sit against the wall, letting his head fall back. Staring blankly at the ceiling as he tried to decipher the convoluted events of the evening, their powers merging at the forefront, he barely noticed when the door opened and she stepped out, closing it behind her. The blanket rustled around her as she moved to a sitting position, her eyes trying to find his in the dark.

"Go to bed," He rumbled.

"I can't sleep," She admitted.

"I thought you were exhausted," He reminded her.

"I am. I'm tired and I feel wrung out, like everything has just been squeezed out of me. Can I, I mean, I know it's weird. Can I hug you?" She asked, her voice small once more. Cursing the day he had ever given her such a silly promise, he nodded once and she was scrambling into his lap, not so much a hug as her seeking some sort of shelter. She cuddled into him and suppressing the urge to sigh, he brought his arms around her.
"Thank you."

A sort of rumble rose from his chest, not one of displeasure, an uncertain sound that hinted at nothing. When she was asleep moments later, he sighed, telling himself he would return her to her bed in just one...more...minute...

A/N: Short and sweet. And a bit sad.
Chapter 24: But I'm Still Breathing

When Kagome awoke the next morning, the pain of the day before had dulled from a the sharp stabbing of a knife to a dull throb. Immediately recognizing where she was, she snuggled deeper into Sesshoumaru's chest and allowed the giggle to escape.

"There is something you find amusing?" He asked archly.

"Inu Yasha's probably having an aneurysm right now," She admitted. "Here I am, sad he's gone, and my friend was his arch rival, and we're cuddling."

"What is an aneurism?" He asked. Kagome stopped chuckling and tried to figure out how to make the daiyoukai understand.

"It's where a person's head explodes," She explained, deciding the metaphor was the easiest explanation.

"Perhaps you are correct. He would no doubt be displeased by our friendship. Although it seems a rather violent reaction. If I had known, I would have befriended you sooner," He added. Kagome looked up and saw a smile tilting up the corners of his lips.

"Of course you would have," She replied, rolling her eyes. "Thanks again, for last night. You're turning into a regular knight in shining armor."

"Knight in what?"

"My hero," She corrected.

"I am your alpha."

"Don't forget, you're also my friend."

"Perhaps soon you should turn to saving yourself again. It would not do to depend on me for everything," He told her as she moved from his lap, staring at her intently. Shrugging the strange comment off as a reprimand, she stepped through the door to her room and closed it gently behind her, smiling softly.

"Sesshoumaru's not taking us?" Kagome asked, her tone filled with utter disbelief. "But he said-"

"An urgent matter has come up that he must take care of," Shinzuru told her kindly. "I'm to take you both."
"Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to seem ungrateful, it's just strange," She apologized. He nodded gently and threw an arm over her shoulder, his ever ready smile back on his face.

"Probably one of those idiots on the council trying to ruin his day. Now that all of the seats are filled and the refugees are going home, we can go back to meetings twice a week." He sounded more than happy when he informed them, the joy more in keeping with someone that was being released after a long prison sentence.

"It will be nice to have everything quieting down. Jaken's been going crazy from all the paperwork," Kagome giggled. The harried looking imp was often seen carrying a number of scrolls and was never without ink splatters on his clothes anymore. The only times he had perfectly clean clothing was when he changed, and it was stained quickly enough.

"I've never met one of the koboku no kai," Sango confided as Kagome materialized the cloud with a resounding pop. She wondered if the cloud did it because of it's sudden materialization or because she secretly loved the noise.

"Bokusenou's really nice, and one of the wisest people I know," Kagome confided as she and Sango sat on the soft fluff and began floating in the air. Shinzuru flew next to them, the air pushing his auburn hair from his face.

"I've known him since before Sesshoumaru was born. The pup's father took me to him after I lost my eye. The tree was old even then, set me straight on a few things."

"Like what, if you don't mind me asking," Kagome murmured.

"It's no secret, although few remember. My people are usually beautiful creatures, unearthly, that's what's said. I was an anomaly. Power and ability to spare, but a big lumbering oaf, and it shamed my parents."


"Doesn't matter now. By then I knew Touga, Sesshoumaru's father. He saw use for my talents. But the shame still clung to me, even though my appearance was not so strange to those in court. A woman caught my eye, a highborn and beautiful at that. One of my own kind, made me forget the shame for awhile. She dallied with me, then when I offered to mate her, she laughed, called me a fool for even thinking she'd chance having a child that looked like me."

Kagome growled, and if he hadn't been so startled by the noise, he would have appreciated the fact that she was so angry in his defense.

"Doesn't matter now. Her house fell long ago. But after her rejection, I tried to take my sight, make it so looks wouldn't matter so much."

"You mean you-" Kagome gasped softly, horror and sadness burning in her eyes as she realized what he was saying.

"I got one. The other, well, Touga saved it, brought me to Bokusenou. Tree's got wisdom to spare, if you can get past his sense of humor."

"I'm sorry you went through something like that," Surprisingly, it was Sango who said it, and he turned to her, seeing the sadness in her gaze. "My father taught me that demons don't really love, don't have hearts like humans do. Your story, I never, I mean-" She faltered then, looking to the cloud and running her fingers over the fluffiness. "I am beginning to understand that my father was wrong."
"The tree'll set you right. He's not the end all be all, but he's pretty close," Shinzuru chuckled. Kagome was still fuming silently, tearing at her cloud, the pieces she tore off and up settling back into the larger whole.

"Let it go. Doesn't matter anymore," He commanded her gently. Her eyes still burned with raw fury and her response made him ache with joy that one felt so moved for an age old hurt and also with sadness that she could feel such rage. "I've got the pack now. Better family than I could have asked for."

"Good. We love you and appreciate you. And I think that you're wonderful. My mom would probably like you, actually," Kagome giggled. "You look a lot like one of her favorite actors. Except more like a pirate, because of the eye patch. She'd probably call it 'dashing'."

"I should like to meet her then," Shinzuru laughed. "Especially if she raised a girl like you."

They were descending before Kagome could formulate a proper response, and she ignored the stab of pain at the thought of her family in the future. Another loss she had not expected having to cope with. As they touched down in the clearing, Kagome saw Sango looked around, obviously searching for the tree youkai.

"You've brought your friend," A voice observed. Sango jumped a good foot in the air before swiftly turning in all directions, eyes wide as she searched for the owner of the voice.

"Be nice," Kagome sighed, moving closer to the giant tree and settling herself at his roots.

"He doesn't have a face?" Sango asked. "How does he- AIIEEE!" She had been perusing the trunk of the tree, searching for any abnormalities in the bark, her face no further than three inches from it. Once she was at eye level, the tree decided to let his face appear in the bark, startling the screech from her.

"It is very rude to invade one's personal space so," He commented dryly. "If you had but asked, I would have shown you." He looked down at Sango, who had landed hard on her posterior and was looking up at the newly formed face in shock.

"Bokusenou, be nice to the girl, she's having a hard enough time of it as it is," Shinzuru chuckled, taking his own seat, moving to the right and leaning against the tree trunk.

"As rude as you ever were," Bokusenou grumbled. "Not even asking to lean against me."

"You going to do something about it old man?" Shinzuru groused, letting his eye drift closed. An indignant huff escaped the tree and Kagome saw his branches shaking in mock irritation, although mirth danced in his eyes.

"It's nice to meet you, Bokusenou-sama," Sango said at last, crossing her legs and leaning back on her hands so she could meet the youkai's eyes. "I've never met a tree youkai before."

"I suppose not. We're fairly inoffensive creatures, no need for taijiya to come after us."

"Where the wild wood exists, I can see," He answered cryptically. "What I have seen disturbs me greatly. I have listened to the miko's stories of her courageous friend, and they do not match the
woman I have observed. Now, being such an old man," He said this with a glare in the general direction of the moth youkai, "I have learned that people can change drastically, for good or ill, very easily. Humans, being such short lived creatures, are more susceptible. I think it is because you all try to pack so much into a single lifetime, but that is another talk, for another time. I would have your explanation for your actions," He demanded sternly, although not without kindness.

"I thought Kagome was choosing them, and they, I mean, youkai-" She founedered, realizing there was nothing she could say that would not offend the tree before her or the man her friend had claimed as a father.

"I understand. You were raised to hunt youkai, and I know the motto of most exterminators. The most dangerous are the ones that can take the shapes of men, no?" At Sango’s shocked expression he continued on. "All your life you've been taught to hunt and perhaps even fear youkai, and your experiences with them has only confirmed those lessons. To see your friend blindly walking into a pack while seeming to leave you behind probably forced two different fears to cross, and they only fed off of one another."

"I suppose," Sango admitted, unsure if she liked having her fears simplified in such a manner. He spoke so plainly that every few words she flinched, unable to tell if he was accusing her or sympathizing.

"It is not such an uncommon occurence," The tree said dismissively, but his gaze grew serious as he stared down at the slayer. "What is uncommon is that your friend guards the shikon jewel. I know your plans, and I know what has been brought to your attention, how your feelings have changed. But one thing has not been brought to your attention slayer, and I would do so, even if it causes great upset."

"What is it?" She asked, heart in her throat as that heavy gaze bore down on her, as if weighing her.

"Have is occurred to you that since the miko refuses to act on it's will, it is using you to carry out it's desires?" His voice was deadly serious, and all of the warmth she had felt from it before was gone. But it was not cold either, or even condemning.

"But it wouldn't, I mean, I haven't even been around it since-"

"When did the idea enter your head, that the jewel belonged with you?" He asked gently.

"After Kagome had completed it, right before, oh no," Sango groaned, covering her face with her hands as she realized with horror that her will might have been subverted by the jewel. "Do you really think it was trying to use me? But why?" Sango asked, eyes bright with frustration.

"The jewel, something tells me it is more than any of us can guess. It's creation was an aberration that I felt even here. In all the centuries it has existed, I have yet to know it's intent, or understand the reason for it's existence. But I have seen it subvert good youkai and humans alike, bending them to it's will."

"It's will?" Kagome asked, staring at him strangely.

"It is sentient, that much I do know," He told her solemnly. "I can feel that it is angry at you, that it is afraid of you."

"Magatsuhi said something about sealing me because of my purification powers. Do you think he meant that I can dampen it's ability to influence people?" Kagome asked.

"Perhaps. But I fear that until it is gone, nothing will be safe."
"Do you know the right wish?" Kagome asked, looking up at the tree hopefully. "I mean, you're really wise and-"

"Child, wise I might be. But the right wish, no, I am sorry, I do not know. I do not often wish. But I will think on it," He added.

"I dream sometimes, about Sesshoumaru killing Kohaku. Sometimes Kohaku turns into Kagome," Sango whispered into the silence, refusing to meet anyone's gaze. Shinzuru started at the quiet declaration, staring at the taijiya as if she'd lost her mind.

"He would never do such a thing!" The moth youkai exclaimed. "Cat's pack!"

"It's okay Shinzuru. I know why. In Naraku's fortress, the illusion you saw?" Sango nodded, still staring resolutely at the ground. "Miroku told me about it. You know Sesshoumaru would never hurt Kohaku, right?"

"Kohaku told me Sesshoumaru kept him safe, even when he was taken to hell. It was so real, I could hear Kohaku's neck-" The taijiya stopped, hands fisting in the grass at her feet as she tried to control her emotions. "And when I dream and it turns into you, he's just looking at me, staring as if daring me to do something about it."

"I think the jewel is using your distrust of Sesshoumaru and amplifying it. Few of the people surrounding Kagome want the jewel, and those that might have the strength of will to resist its call. It chose you because you can get to her, to it, and are the most susceptible to your fears," Bokusenou guessed. Sango looked as if his words were a physical blow.

"So I'm weak," She mumbled, shoulders slumping in defeat.

"No, not weak. You have a great darkness within you. It makes it easier for the jewel to manipulate you."

"Why isn't it now though?" Kagome asked. "It's been near her this whole time, and she's getting better."

"Perhaps your will to help your friend overrides the jewel's desires. I cannot rightly guess, I know little of the jewel itself."

"Touga called it an abomination, wouldn't have anything to do with it," Shinzuru added. "I was with him when he went to see it for himself after it was first created. The only time I ever saw him look that disgusted with something was when he first handled So'unga, and he subdued the soul in the sword. Wouldn't have a damned thing to do with the jewel though."

"So, you think the jewel's been manipulating me through the darkness in me?" Sango finally asked, looking more defeated with each word.

"Very few have truly pure hearts, and it is almost unheard of in adults," Bokusenou sighed, comforting the taijiya, though only slightly. "You will have to confront that darkness, again and again. I hope perhaps now you understand what it is you fight against, and what you fight for."

"I'm such an idiot," Sango sniffed, holding back her tears. Kagome moved to her friend and hugged her tightly, choosing silence as the best course. The taijiya allowed herself a few tears before straightening and looking up at the tree, determination straightening her shoulders.

"I can fight it though, right?"
"Yes. Let your friends help you, they understand, and care for you. Remember to let them in," He advised sagely, although his smile belied his serious tone. Sango nodded, dashing the tears from her eyes before letting a small smile come to her face.

"I never thought youkai could be like you guys," She admitted. "I thought they were all like Se- umm, never mind."

"Sesshoumaru is a special case. He rules a territory, and is head to the house of the moon, both of which come with specific responsibilities. And he is changing, slow though it might be, I have seen it."

Sango considered the youkai's words carefully before murmuring something.

"What?" Kagome asked.

"The kids. He was playing with them, and you. I thought it was for show at first, but seeing how I was wrong about everything else, I mean, it's just very strange," The taijiya admitted with a blush.

"Not so, if you understand youkai, especially those of his ilk, other inu, ookami, even felines. Playing is similar to training," Shinzuru replied without even opening his eyes, a slight smile playing on his lips.

"Like real animals. Puppies play to begin gaining their strength and it teaches them to defend themselves, it hones their instincts," Kagome supplied, surprised that it hadn't occurred to her before.

"Don't forget, it also gives them basics in hunting. By 'playing' as you call it, he is doing his duty as alpha to teach them," Bokusenou chuckled.

"What about me though?" Kagome asked, confused. "It's not like I need lessons in defending myself." At this Shinzuru and Bokusenou both laughed.

"You're a challenge for him, and I've no doubt he finds it refreshing to just spar with someone, no matter how playful it seems. You make him think in different ways than a typical sparring partner would, keep him on his toes. That you're a match for his power probably adds to it, though I'll wager he doesn't realize any of it," Shinzuru explained, a grin on his face.

"I think you guys are crazy," Kagome laughed. Bokusenou only stared at the miko thoughtfully, noting that Sango was doing the same.

"I wish you could stay longer," Kagome sighed, hugging her friend. "It feels like I just got you back."

"I need to go stop this before it gets worse," Sango told her, squeezing her tightly before stepping back. "It shouldn't be too bad. Most were hesitant to deal with it, it'll just be a few that need to be convinced. Once that's done though, you'll be getting a wedding invitation, so watch for one," Sango told her, smiling shyly at the monk, who was blushing brightly.

"I'm glad you guys are going to be okay," Kagome told her, smiling brightly at the pair. They both nodded and mounted Ah Un. "Take care of them and be nice," Kagome told the dragon, stroking it between each set of eyes gently. They made an irritated noise and tossed their heads, and for a moment she was reminded of Boufuu and his temperamental personality. Once she stepped back, the dragon launched itself in the air, much to the monk and slayer's surprise, almost unseating them.

"I had thought it would take much longer," Sesshoumaru commented dryly.
"Bokusenou thinks it might be the jewel influencing her."

"Have you figured out the 'right wish' that you spoke of?" He asked.

"When have I had time to?" She grumbled, then shook her head sadly. "It's so hard. I know a selfish wish taints it, but what wish isn't selfish? Even if it's for another person, the jewel could still twist it. Do you have any ideas?" She asked with a hopeful look.

"I have not had the time. Is it not a priority to get rid of it?" He asked as they began walking along one of the stone paths in the garden.

"It is, but the kids are first priority, and then Sango. And, urgh. I just can't find time for anything anymore. It's like every time I turn around another crisis is in effect. I just wi-" She stopped herself in time, realizing the words that had almost escaped. "This thing is going to be the death of me," She snapped.

"Possibly. It is why finding the right wish is paramount."

"Well, now that you've got everything sorted out with the territory leaders, maybe you could help me. You've got centuries of experience on me," She quipped.

"I am young yet for a youkai," he rebuffed, rising to her sally. "Have you asked Bokusenou, he is the oldest and wisest among demon kind."

"I did," She sighed. "And even he doesn't know. This is impossible."

"Doubtful. They would not have sealed your power if they did not consider you a threat."

"I can purify it, I think that's different than knowing what wish to make," She groused. Her shoulders slumped as she gave a small sigh of defeat. "I miss home. I want to see my mother again, and grandpa. All the time I'm so scared of saying the magic word thoughtlessly."

"Perhaps it is karma. It is more than time that you learned to be more careful with your words."

"No, that was when I was trying to avoid saying 'sit' in Inu Yasha's presence," She giggled. Surprised that the memory didn't hurt as it had before, she allowed a small smile to creep to her lips. "So is there anything crazy coming up? Big events, parties, reasons to get away from the shiro?"

"Do you miss traveling that much?" He rebutted as they stepped onto the bridge over the pond. Once they had reached the center, Kagome stopped and leaned against the railing, staring into the reflective surface of the water.

"Kind of. I love it here, it's amazing. But sometimes I feel like I should still be out, wandering the land. Maybe I'm still getting used to staying in one place so long."

"The wolf has sent a letter stating that his mating will be held during the full moon after next. It is about a month and a half away," He informed her.

"That means two weddings to go to," She sighed. "I don't doubt Sango and Miroku's will be soon, they've been putting it off, and once they get the village settled, I'm pretty sure they'll go ahead with it. They've waited over three years after all. And Kouga and Ayame, well, at least the kids can go to that one."

"They will not," Sesshoumaru rumbled. "The only reason we are going is because he is the eastern lord and you are apparently considered a sister to their clan."
"He's not that bad, and why can't the kids go? They behaved at Nanmei and Resshin's mating," She protested. He was staring at her strangely, then sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose, looking at a loss for several minutes before muttering something she couldn't hear.

"What?" She demanded, arms crossing over her chest angrily.

"We will discuss this later," He snapped, suddenly stalking away from her. Stunned, Kagome watched his retreating form, wondering what she had done to upset the daiyoukai. Temper returning quickly when she could think of nothing to have raised such ire. Huffing and turning on her heel to walk in the opposite direction, she decided she needed to take Boufuu for a ride. The stallion was still temperamental and moody because of her irregular visits.


"What did'ya do?" Kasai asked as he moved into Sesshoumaru's study and lunged indolently on one of the floor cushions. Sesshoumaru didn't acknowledge the kitsune's presence, didn't even look up from the scroll he was reading over.

"Cat's ten shades of mad, and you're grumpy. What did'ya do?" Kasai asked again, a bright red apple appearing as if by magic in his hands. He bit into it, the flesh crunching loudly in the silence of the study. Sesshoumaru continued trying to read, but the sound of sharp teeth digging into the crisp flesh of the apple was driving him to distraction.

"She wants to take the children to the wolf's mating ceremony," He sighed at last, giving up on reading the document. Another angry highborn trying to worm his way into the treaty between Harukaze and himself. The treaty was iron clad, it had been carefully worded for that exact reason. Now if only the twits would realize it.

"Put them to bed early. That's what the wolf tribes do with their pups."

"That's not the only problem," He muttered, still staring down at the scroll, the carefully inked lines suddenly making no sense to him.

"I know. I've heard about wolf matings. Put her to bed early too."

"I do not think I can get away with it."

"Explain it to her," Kasai said blithely, the apple core disappearing with a resounding pop that echoed through the room. "I doubt she'd fight you on it."

"It is not that. She will have to stay for all of it. Leaving early insinuates disapproval. Add that to her history with the wolf, it would cause trouble."

"History?" Kasai asked. "Were they an item or something?"

"Or something. At one point he tried to lay claim to her. She never accepted, but all of the wolves are aware. If she doesn't go, especially after voicing her support, it will also be considered a disapproval." Damning the situation, he gave in to the urge to close his eyes and rest his forehead in his hands. Kasai, though the more annoying of the twins, had always been able to come up with ways to slither out of things, and he was hoping that the kitsune could be moved to come up with something.

"It'll be fine. She can handle it," Kasai dismissed. "Make her aware of the situation. Bring the kids, they'll help her feel safer, even if they are tucked in bed asleep. All of us will come along, well,
probably not Resshin, he wants to get back to the forests. But Mizu and Shizuru will be there. It'll be fine," He said again, staring at the ceiling looking rather pleased with himself.

"I'm not sure I heard you correctly, which is very strange because I have rather sharp hearing. Did you say 'she will be fine'?" Sesshoumaru asked, incredulity flavoring his words as his brows rose in disbelief. Kasai looked over to the daiyoukai and smiled at the blank stare he was receiving.

"Cat's getting better. She may never have a relationship, but she's gotten more comfortable knowing other people do, even you have to acknowledge that. And it's not like they'll be mating in front of her."

"How have you come to that conclusion?" Sesshoumaru asked.

"I've never heard of wolves mating in front of others, even their clan, during the-"

"Not what I meant."

Kasai sighed and smiled at him slyly. "You'd have to listen while she's in the bathhouse."

"I will inform the miko of your spying," Sesshoumaru rumbled, his features taking on a sharp quality, as if the beast was suddenly at the forefront, closer to the surface than normal.

"You know me better than that," Kasai laughed. "I love my own skin too much to risk it. Not to mention she almost always bathes with Nanmei now, and if Resshin thought for a second I'd seen his mated naked, well, he's third on my list of people to never cross."

"The first two being?" Sesshoumaru asked, a brow arched.

"Cat and you. Both of you have some nasty tempers," Kasai said as he stood and stretched. "Well, now that that's settled, you should go apologize. She's already ridden Boufu, trained with Kotaeru, sparred with Shizuru, and she's still spitting mad."

"I do not apologize," Sesshoumaru muttered as the door closed. The kitsune's laughter was his only answer as he looked back down the document, trying to compose a proper response in his head. When the first thing he wrote was not what he intended, but 'Complaints on this matter are now punishable by death,' He gave up and scrapped it. Resolving not to respond to any of them in the hope that they would give up, he stood and stretched, his movements not nearly as feline as the kitsune's had been.

His muscles were still tense after the stretch and he felt the urge to move, to fight, anything. Restless energy still danced beneath the surface of his skin. Remembering the kitsune's words, he formulated a plot. An irate miko would make for a good fight more than a placated one anyway.

Kagome stared at the daiyoukai with barely suppressed fury.

"You want to what?" She demanded.

"Are you deaf?" He asked, his voice it's normal, modulated tone.

"No, but I must be going crazy. I'm not going to indulge some whim of yours. I have things to do here."

"Such as?"

"I still have to get the children bathed," She retorted quickly.
"Something the servants can see to for a night, they have before. Now, summon your cloud and come with me," He demanded.

"No."

"You will do as this Sesshoumaru commands," He rumbled, although he was secretly delighted. For some reason he was enjoying the sight of her so angry.

"Or else what?" She snapped. Pretending to be apathetic and hiding his own satisfaction at the way she stepped neatly into his trap, he moved swiftly and grabbed her around her waist, lifting her over his shoulder like a sack and launching himself into the air.

"You jerk, put me down!" She demanded angrily into his back.

"If I do so now, you will fall to your death," He pointed out. Her small fists began to beat against his back only to be thwarted by mokomoko, the pelt shifting around her arms and tightening to where she could no longer move them.

"This is a new low, Sesshoumaru. At least let me ride my own cloud there," She shrieked.

"I think not. You would go back to the shiro given the chance." He replied tonelessly as he pushed forward, summoning enough energy for another burst of speed. They were there in minutes and he dropped her unceremoniously onto the ground. She blustered and shouted at him as she stood, only to be shocked when his power pushed against her rudely.

"You- you-"

"Yes?" He asked, raising a brow.

"Jerk!" She shrieked, her power rising with ease as she pushed at him. Thrilled that his ploy had worked and she had taken the bait, he jumped out of the way smoothly, landing gracefully on his feet. Knowing the smirk on his lips would only infuriate her more, he stared at her for several seconds before sending out another rude push of his ki. And then he did something she would never expect.

He bolted. He was almost giddy with the adrenaline surging through his veins as another bolt of energy, this one suspiciously shaped as an arrow, came hurtling close to him. Her shouting grew in volume and he could only assume she had created her own cloud and was following fast on his heels. In an instant he was in the air, flying away from her even as he turned to face her. Rage reflected clearly in her features, and in her aura.

Taunting her mercilessly, he sent jagged spikes of his youki at her cloud, watching them tear at the fluffy materialization. Wondering if she even noticed that it regenerated on its own, he sent another push at her, brute strength with little finesse. He wanted to push her to losing her temper, curious to see what she would do.

"You stupid, oh, damn it Sesshoumaru!" She snarled as she clung to the cloud, barely, when the wave pushed and broke against her. Her position approximated a bow, and when she moved to release the 'string' another lancet of energy bore down on him. Avoiding it by inches, his interests sharpened. Her training was paying off.

Swooping down at a steep angle, he made her chase him over the field and then over the forest, cursing him the entire time. Once he began circling back, he slowed and called his whip forth, his hand gracefully circling and sending it flying at her. Shields slammed into place, whether instinctively or from some new aspect of her training he wasn't sure, but they pleased him.
"Will you just stop and wait for one second?" She demanded shrilly. "What is up with you today?"

"I merely seek to test your abilities," He mocked, suppressing the urge to laugh at the sudden fury that flared, her rage growing even stronger at his apathetic tone.

"You know what, you can kiss my butt!" She snarled, the cloud beneath her suddenly disappearing. She dropped, soundlessly, toward the ground. His chest tightened and it felt as if something stabbed him as he flew at her, determined to catch her before she hit the ground. He felt his arms going around her and then nothing.

"Now can we have an adult conversation?" She demanded, a foot to his left, floating on a cloud, face still set in mulish indignation.

"You will not do such a thing again," He began.

"Then you will listen and understand something. Today is not a day to pick fights with me. I hurt everywhere and I've had a bad enough time of it as it is. Don't you know anything about women?"

"I fail to see what that has to do with this conversation," He snapped, still angry that she'd been able to manipulate him in such a manner. His gold eyes were narrowed and meeting her wide blue ones.

"You don't know? Do youkai women not? Never mind. I should ask Tenka first," She muttered, flushing brightly.

"You can ask me," He rumbled, angry at her sudden nervousness.

"Do youkai females bleed?" She asked at last, face still burning like a small sun. Knowing he was staring at her dumbly, how could he not after being asked such a question? But it bothered him that she was asking such a pointless, rather stupid question.

"You know they bleed, you have battled-"

"Not that kind of bleeding," She muttered. It took him a moment to grasp her meaning, and when he did, he stared at her quizzically.

"What has that to do with anything?" He demanded. "Your courses are natural." Indeed, they were a natural occurrence, and besides the change in her scent, which he had understood immediately, he didn't understand her sudden reticence.

"Granted. But painless they definitely are not," She argued. "I don't know how it is for demons, but for human women it hurts," She informed him.

"Youkai women are more resilient."

She sputtered for a moment, which was followed by a remarkable imitation of growling, then she stopped and huffed once.

"I have never complained before. Not once. In fact, after the bandits, I was happy for it. But right now, no, most of the day, I've been hurting and just gone along with it. Training. Playing with the kids. I just want a hot bath and some time to relax, okay? You being a pushy well, you, is just making it all worse," She groaned.

"I apologize," He quipped, terse and angry with himself. He had not been aware of such a weakness in human women. In youkai females it was always something to watch for, their tempers and strength making them trouble waiting to happen. A smart male learned to recognize the signs and
avoid them. But pain? This was the first he had every heard of such. That it was bad enough that she seemed to curl in on herself as she lay on her cloud, shuddering now and again, bothered him. That she had accused him of making it worse irked more than he cared to admit.

After such an outburst, she was frighteningly quiet, only whimpers escaping now and again as she lay curled on her cloud.

"Do you need to be taken to Tenka?" He asked as they neared the shiro.

"No. I wish I had something warm for my stomach."

"Like soup?" He asked, confused as to how that would help.

"No, like a heating pad, umm, something warm to put on it," She corrected, not even looking at him. He nodded once, his thoughts already on solving the strange puzzle. Normal methods of warming her apparently would not be enough, and more extreme means, such as those used to warm her bed in winter, would be useless, as they would be too much for her human skin. Huffing slightly, he wondered why human women were so different from youkai. He'd never heard of a youkai female being felled by her courses in such a manner, although he'd never heard much of a female's courses to begin with. Such topics were not spoken about in polite company, and very rarely, if ever, spoken of while males were present.

Once they landed he picked her up carefully, surprised by the sudden whimpers the movement ripped from in her throat. Feeling as if he were carrying something more fragile than glass, he elected to move just a few inches above the ground, determined not to jostle her any more than she had to be. Her hands were pressed to her stomach, and he wondered how it helped, if it did at all. Thankful he encountered no one, as the children were back to having lessons downstairs and there were no servants in evidence. The only people he did move past were the two youkai standing guard over the family wing, both of which continued looking ahead, silent and stoic, as they should be.

She didn't even seem to notice when he moved to the guard room -her bedroom was too personal a place to invade lightly now that she was no longer ill- and sat himself gracefully, barely shifting her at all. It wasn't until he arranged her in his lap that she noticed their location, and began mumbling, and he could feel her shudder violently as she tried to move, only to hunch over her stomach again.

"Move your hands," He rumbled. She shook her head vehemently and he used his hands to pry her own away. A low groan escaped her, and he could smell the salt of her tears as they began to form. Unsure if he would harm her, he put his large hands over her stomach, an approximation of where hers had been. Through the layers of the linen hakama he could feel the jerking motion beneath the skin and pulled his hands back.

"What was that?" He demanded, eyes wide.

"Cramps," She muttered, moving her head back.

"The heat is to soothe the muscles?" She only nodded, moving her hands back, but stopped when his own were over her stomach again. For several minutes she stared at him, confused as to what he was doing. When a subtle heat began to penetrate the linen of her kimono and high waisted hakama, it met her skin. When the cramps did not stop, the heat grew a little, and the muscles began to relax. Within minutes she was sighing softly and growing limp in his arms, the pains fading as the heat maintained it's current temperature.

"How are you doing this?" She asked through a yawn, suddenly sleepy. He looked down at her and felt reluctant to give an answer.
he admitted, even if just to himself, that he liked doing this for her, although why he couldn't fathom.

"Youki" He replied instead, hedging around the truth.

"So unfair," She mumbled as she snuggled into him. The protest was halfhearted at best, and his baser instincts, those he often ignored in the face of higher thought and reasoning, seemed to purr from within him, a content rumble in direct response to her sudden sleep and his apparent success. Although he often ignored and even fought against those instincts, for once he allowed the inner beast to slip it's restraints and a satisfied noise rolled from deep in his chest, resulting in nothing less than a deep purr.

"Why do we never see the babies?" Kagome asked him at last. It was a question that often bothered her, and she was beginning to worry about the smallest three, two youkai and one a hanyou. She wondered if their blood had given them the resilience to survive the ordeal the others had. Human children would not have been able to live in such conditions.

"They are no longer here," He commented, his eyes still on the game of kemari the children played with the twins and Tenka. Jaken was among them, freed from the overload of paperwork that had been bogging him down for weeks. The toad was getting trampled on by the stampede of children, but the imp looked more than happy, glad to be out in the sun and close to the children he had adopted as easily as the others had.

"What do you mean?" She gasped.

"I found wet nurses, and once they found the children were orphans, offered to adopt them. The mothers lost their own children in one fashion or another."

"Oh," Kagome murmured. "That was really kind of you. Do the others know?"

"They do. I asked their permission before I accepted the mother's requests. They seemed happy for the babes." He did not offer the full truth, that the children had eyed the women with distrust and anger at first. It hadn't been until one of the wet nurses cried and told them her own child had been still born that they had acceded to the woman's desires and allowed her to adopt the babe.

"I feel bad for not asking before this. Sometimes it feels like I forgot them."

"You have had your fair share of troubles," He commented at last. "And as they were so young, I took pains to make sure they were kept separate. There has been too much danger here recently."

"Danger?" Kagome asked, eyes wide. "I wasn't aware of anything dangerous. Why didn't you tell me?" She demanded hotly, looking wounded and betrayed by the lack of confidence.

"I did. It is no fault of my own that you did not perceive it as danger. Harukaze was here, and she is part of a long standing blood feud with my mother's people. And the taijiya was a danger," He added. Kagome looked ready to say something, then snapped her mouth shut smartly, forgoing any comments. He felt satisfied that she was, in her own way, agreeing with what he said. There could be no denying that either female had not been a threat, and although he knew she would disagree, he would always view them as such.

Kagome sighed at last and rubbed her stomach absentmindedly.

"Does your stomach trouble you?" He asked, breaking the silence.

"It's not as bad as yesterday. Thank you, by the way," She nodded with a blush. "Normally they
don't get like that. It's only every once in awhile that they get that bad, and I was stupid and kept training instead of relaxing like I should have."

"I spoke to Tenka. He has not often dealt with human women with that," He searched for a word, because 'affliction' which almost slipped out, seemed too harsh by far. "Ailment. He is writing to a friend for any herbal remedies that would help in the future."

"If you would just teach me that trick it wouldn't be a problem," She grumbled.

"Youkai secret," He repeated. "It keeps the females from attempting murder."

"I'm trying to figure out if that was a joke or if you're being serious."

"I do not joke."

"I think you do, and you just don't know it."

"How could one do something and not know it?" He demanded.

"Well, your delivery can disguise it, but remember after Naraku, when you almost hit the ground going a thousand miles an hour?" He nodded once, eying her warily. He did not remember making a joke then. "Well, I was freaking out, and I remember you making a comment about doing that when I could enjoy it," She finished sourly, giving him a glare. When the memory came back to him, he allowed himself a small smile.

"Perhaps it was my own joy at defeating the hanyou and escaping alive."

"Or you're just a prick," She muttered, then clapped her hands over her mouth, staring at the daiyoukai with quickly dawning horror.

"Tenka informed me that human women are as likely to be temperamental as youkai women, so I will let that pass. This time," He warned. From the corner of his eye he could see her mocking him silently, her lips moving and her face doing it's best to imitate his own and only coming up with an ugly sneer and crossed eyes.

"Your face will stick that way." She stopped and turned to him, eyes angry and then a sudden sadness engulfing the anger.

"My mom used to say that," she whispered. Preparing himself for another wave of tears, he was more disconcerted when she moved closer to him and leaned against his shoulder, the scent of her sadness lingering about them, a melancholy that began to affect him as well. Disturbed that her own emotions had such influence over his own, he allowed her to stay, but forced his mind to other matters, doing everything in his power to blot out the scent of her dolor.

A/N: Before anyone notes it, Sesshoumaru mispronounces aneurysm, thus the misspelling.
Kagome was stretching lazily in the sun, enjoying her free day with the children. After having envied Americans their two days weekends, she had decided to implement the idea at the shiro and it was working well, if she did say so herself. Even Sesshoumaru seemed to enjoy the time off, which she had insisted upon and won, only by giving in when he told her emergencies would be seen to. The daiyoukai was once again playing the monster to the children's heroes, the other males acting as monsters as well. Screams of delight and laughter filled with joy echoed through the gardens, and more than content to watch, Kagome pillowed her head on her arms as she let the sun warm her back.

"So this is the pack my son has gathered around him," A voice said as a shadow fell over her. Kagome started, surprised that the massive amount of youki was suddenly just there, all smooth, sharp edges in her awareness. Her white hair and gold eyes were a perfect match for Sesshoumaru's own, and Kagome could see the similarity in their features. Not to mention the cold stare, which was at odds with the daiyoukai as he was currently, but was a perfect model for the expression he wore while dealing with his council.

"Son?" She finally asked, staring up at the pale youkai in awe. If anything, she was as beautiful as Sesshoumaru, a perfect, female version.

"Yes, ma'am. My name is Kagome," She said, standing and inclining her head. She looked over her shoulder to see Sesshoumaru standing perfectly still, the children around him watching her and the newcomer warily. Shinzuru and the twins were stock still as well, as if they had been struck by lightning.

"Dear son, is that any way to act when your mother is present for a visit?" She asked sweetly. Kagome eyed the female daiyoukai warily, surprised by the sudden flash of petulant anger from Sesshoumaru's direction. He moved from the children, who hung back with the other youkai, stalking forward angrily.

"What are you doing here?" He demanded once he had closed the distance between them.

"You lack your father's charm," His mother commented dryly, then brought her hand, covered by the flowing expanse of a silk sleeve, to her face and sniffed delicately. "I'm hurt that you can't even greet
"Sesshoumaru-" Kagome hissed, but was stopped by his ever hardening eyes.

"I will ask again, what are you doing here?" The woman's sadness didn't seep away, it disappeared completely as she took in her son's appearance.

"I was not invited to the ceremony when you took this girl in. I'm surprised, perhaps even offended." Her words were cold, but her golden eyes glittered in amusement. Kagome let her gaze swing between the two, wondering what she was missing. "And you haven't even introduced me to the rest of your pack. I'm hurt."

Sesshoumaru answered with a growl that started low in his chest but didn't even have time to escape before the woman was turning to Kagome again.

"I'm Yuugao, little miko. Are all of the human ones and the hanyou, yours?" She asked delicately. Kagome blushed furiously and stuttered for several minutes.

"No!" She cried out, mortified. "Well, I mean, they're mine. Ours. We adopted them," Kagome corrected.

"Mother is being foolish. She can smell that none have your blood," Sesshoumaru snapped. "Why are you here?" He demanded again.

"I told you, son. I am here to meet the additions to the pack. As much as it pains you, I am still a part of it," She replied, brow arched haughtily.

"You're pack?" Kagome choked, then berated herself for not realizing it sooner. Of course she was pack, she was Sesshoumaru's mother!

"Yes, little miko. Where is that delightful little imp you keep, oh, never mind, he's hardly important. What is important is why you have suddenly decided to take in so many children."

"That is none of your business or concern," He growled. Yuugao sighed heavily and slanted her eyes in Kagome's direction, mischief making them shine as she allowed a small smile to dance on her lips.

"You know, his father was quite the charmer, and I'm not entirely without my wiles. I wonder how it is my son never developed any. Such a rude pup."

"He's perfectly fine," Kagome said stiffly, suddenly angry the woman, mother or no, was saying such things. "He has everything that matters," She finished through clenched teeth, glaring at the inu when the pale female gave a delicate laugh.

"We shall see. I have arranged to stay for a time," She suddenly announced. Kagome heard the strangled noise from behind her, and realized it was coming from one of the twins. Yuugao heard it as well, and waved over the daiyoukai's shoulder. "Hello boys, it's good to see my son hasn't maimed you!"

As quickly as she had come, she was off, exiting the gardens and leaving stupefied silence behind her.

"How is she your mother?" Kagome asked at last.

"I do not think I have to explain the process to you," Sesshoumaru growled.
"I mean, I know that," Kagome sputtered. "But she's nothing like you."

"You mean I am nothing like her," He finished before stalking into the shiro, the door sliding shut with a decidedly loud bang after him. Kagome turned to the crowd that had gathered and saw Shinzuru with his head in his hands, groaning. The twins both looked positively horrified.

"What's wrong?" She asked as she jogged over to them. "Is she really that bad?"

"The Lady is-" Shizuru started, but stopped, at a loss.

"She loves torturing everyone! She's devious!" Kasai started. "We're harmless compared to her!" Kagome tried to understand exactly how they meant it, wondering if the woman was a prankster or evil.

"If she is here, something is happening that we do not yet have wind of. That woman never leaves her fortress," Shizuru groaned. "This can only be bad, and she will make it worse," He guaranteed.

"How bad can she be?" Kagome asked.

"She meddles in her son's life," Mizu tried explaining. Kagome uttered a small 'oh', suddenly realizing just what that meant. Sesshoumaru did not like people messing about in his life, and she could only imagine the amount of meddling the mischievous woman could do, when moved.

"Any uproar we have so far endured will be small compared to the chaos she will wreak."

"What kind of chaos? I mean, it's not like she's after the jewel, and I'm sure she won't harm the children."

The three adult youkai stared at her incredulously.

"She won't, you know, try to hurt the kids, will she?" She squeaked.

"No, pack is pack. And she does not try to harm," Shinzuru tried again. "But she often seeks to get her own way."

"So she's a pushy mom. We'll just have to be here for Sesshoumaru," Kagome told them, smiling brightly. Really, they had to be making too much of the problem. Yuugao seemed nice enough, if lacking tact. And her mischief might be good, heavens knew Sesshoumaru needed to relax.

But her comment was only met with another groan from the moth youkai as he pinched the bridge of his nose, warding off a headache while the twins shook their heads and muttered to one another.

Kagome was surprised later that night by knocking on the door to her room. Pulling on a simple yukata to go over her shift, she moved through the rooms to the outer door and slid it open curiously. When she was met with the smiling face of Yuugao, she smiled brightly in return despite the sense of foreboding that made her want to close the door.

"May I come in?" The woman asked, her voice hinting at cheer. Kagome moved aside to let her in and watched as the woman practically floated into the room and gracefully sat herself at the table. Kagome closed the door and followed, seating herself on one of the plush cushions and staring at her alpha's mother. The woman looked ready for bed herself, her hair was down and she was dressed in a silk kimono that Kagome assumed was for sleeping, even though it looked too ornate for such a thing.
"I have decided to have a portrait of the pack commissioned," The inu said at last. Stifling the urge to sigh in relief, for the woman's seriousness had worried her, Kagome nodded happily.

"That sounds wonderful," Kagome commented.

"I'm glad you think so. My son will fight it tooth and claw. The last time I managed to get him to agree was just after he became western lord two centuries ago."

"Why would he fight against it?" Kagome mused aloud, smiling at the thought of an irritated Sesshoumaru snarling as the painter tried to paint him as quickly as possible.

"He does not appreciate being told to sit still for any length of time," The woman confided, as if it were some great secret. Kagome shrugged. The daiyoukai seemed to take his relaxation time easily enough on the newly designated 'weekends', lounging around, reading, or playing with the children.

"My son has changed much since I saw him last. It was not so long ago, and yet I find him vastly different."

"He hasn't changed much," Kagome defended, angered by the woman's amused tone.

"You are blind if you think so. In less than a year he has brought children of every possible race into his pack, as well as a miko. And don't think for a second I did not see him playing with them this afternoon."

"He deserves a break!" Kagome snapped angrily. "He works hard all week dealing with those crazy advisers and the problems left over from the war, not to mention just trying to keep everything going smoothly. And he feels partially responsible for the children being orphaned in the first place. He did an honorable thing, by adopting them. So who cares if they're not inu youkai, or even youkai at all-" She started, stopped when a hand raised to quiet her. She took a deep breath and waited for the inu to speak.

"I have no issue with my son bringing in humans and hanyou. It is you I do not understand. My son is many things. Honorable, intelligent, strong. But he is not known for his compassion."

"It wasn't compassion," Kagome snapped. "He was trying to avoid another situation like the one with Naraku by giving me his protection."

"Child, either you are incredibly naïve or blind. Since I know some of your story from the old tree, I cannot write it off to the former, and yet you seem perceptive." Kagome bristled, wondering why the woman had really come.

"Yuugao-san, please speak plainly. I don't like riddles."

"Those are what I am best at, I'm afraid," She sighed, interlacing her fingers and resting her chin on them. Kagome felt the weight of the woman's stare and the hair on the back of her neck stood on end and goosebumps formed on her arms. Refusing to shiver in front of the woman, she stared defiantly at her. Then the woman smirked and stood, covering her mouth as a small yawn escaped.

"The painter will be here in a few days. We will need time to find proper clothes for the children. And you of course."

"Proper clothes?" Kagome asked dumbly, more than stunned by the sudden shift in conversation. But even as she was saying it, the door was sliding shut behind the strange female.

Kagome was beginning to understand why Sesshoumaru didn't like having his mother around.
"I'm not wearing this!" Kagome hissed, looking at the layers of kimono laid out separately on the bed. A maid, the first one she had ever had in her room, at least while she'd been present, was wringing her hands at the miko's violent reaction.

"It is a gift from Sesshoumaru-sama's mother," The maid began, seeing the power sparking along Kagome's skin. Nervously she began edging for the door. Her efforts were in vain as the miko stomped past her, and she released a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding.

Everyone that was anywhere close to the miko fled, knowing her intent. Barely suppressed fury pulsed out in irate waves. She was never so angry as this unless she was seeking out their lord, and knowing where he was and the path to him gave them an outline for a new no man's land.

"Your mother has got to stop this!" Kagome snarled as she slammed the door to the study open. Her words were out of her mouth and into the open before she realized that Sesshoumaru had been joined by none other than the female in question.

"Stop what dear? Oh, you aren't ready yet, and the painter is already setting up his things. You should hurry, it could take you well over an hour," The woman said with a smile.

"I am not wearing that, that-" Kagome sputtered, at a completely loss for words.

"It's is traditional and is only proper since you are now part of Sesshoumaru's pack. You will-"

"No, I am not wearing a hundred layers of kimono just so I can stand and suffocate for a painting!" Kagome snapped. "We covered this the other day. Simple kimono or my normal miko clothing. I thought you agreed."

"I don't remember stating any such agreement," The female stated simply, as if baffled by such an idea.

"It was a very kind offer," Kagome ground out, more than ready to lunge at her. "But I am afraid I must decline."

"All of the children will be well dressed. Do you want to stand out, look shabby for such an important portrait?" Yuugao demanded.

"I want to look like myself. Not like some fairy tale princess! It's a beautiful ensemble, it truly is. But I cannot and will not wear it. I refuse to pretend I'm anything but what I am," Kagome finished, trying desperately to reason with the woman. Yuugao had been a hurricane whirling through the shiro since her arrival, and Kagome understood the men's grumblings about her. The children had, much against their wishes, been given clothing, elaborate clothing, for the painting. Kagome had resisted and she was sure she and the older woman had come to an agreement.

And damn his eyes, Sesshoumaru was watching the both of them as if he found the whole thing amusing.

"Fine, if you want to look like some pauper-"

"I do," Kagome snapped.

"Then go ahead. I see how grace is treated here," Yuugao sniffed before turning smartly on her heels and walking away, but not before Kagome saw the tears in her eyes. Immediately she deflated and felt awful about what she'd said.
"My mother likes to have her way," Sesshoumaru said, breaking the silence. She finally turned to him, angry at him for not intervening, and even more irate that he was saying something so mean after his mother had left the room in tears!

"You are a jerk!" She snapped before turning and running after the woman. As luck had it, Yuugao had not gotten far, and Kagome was able to reach her.

"I'm so sorry," She said, afraid to take the woman's arm even though she felt like doing something, anything, to try and reinforce her words. "I didn't mean to get so angry. I just, I don't wear formal clothing. I'm a priestess. And it is a beautiful outfit, but it's too extravagant for me," She tried explaining. Yuugao regarded her solemnly before tapping her bottom lip with a clawed fingertip.

"A compromise, perhaps?" She suggested at last. Kagome smiled brightly and nodded, grateful that the woman's anger had seemed to vanish at her apology.

"That would be nice," Kagome agreed. Yuugao smiled at the girl and they began walking for the family wing. Lost in her relief, Kagome didn't notice the mischievous glint in the inu's eyes.

"Painting so many will already be a great difficulty," The youkai grumbled as he sat with his sketchbooks out in the gardens. "I do not need vain females making it worse."

"You will cease your complaining, or I will cut out your tongue," Sesshoumaru said in a quiet voice, finally tiring of the bird demon's whining. Grateful when he heard his mother and Kagome's voices on the other side of the door, he turned to it expectantly. His mother exited first and turned to the figure hiding behind her, cajoling first and then outright demanding.

"Stop dawdling, the painter didn't come here to stare at a bunch of children and men!" Yuugao finally snapped, her hand shooting out to wrap around Kagome's wrist. Given no choice, the miko followed, head down, and his mother stepped aside.

He heard the others gasp and felt his own eyes widen as the miko smiled shyly at everyone.

"Is it that bad?" She asked, nervousness making her tone waver. She unconsciously smoothed the blue furisode and it's white obi, her eyes fixated on the ground. A chrysanthemum was painted in a light blue on the bottom, and they way it shown in the light it looked as if it was underwater as she fidgeted nervously.

"You have my compliments on your choice, mother," Sesshoumaru finally acknowledged.

"I thought so. See child, it wasn't that hard," Yuugao laughed.

"Oh, her eyes," The painter breathed from Sesshoumaru's right. "I've never seen such eyes. They are magnificent."

"Blue eyes are not uncommon," Yuugao remarked, obviously miffed that her work on the miko's clothing was not being appreciated.

"Not among youkai, but our eyes are different. Our pupils, they give us a different appearance than that of a human. Her eyes, they have the round pupil. They make her look soft, ageless. I would be honored if she would sit for me after I finish the commission," He said with a bow, his head never moving as he continued staring at Kagome.

"That is up to the miko," Sesshoumaru rumbled. "What would you have us do?"
"It's too many to try and get standing, the children would move too much, and the women would tire. Perhaps a seated arrangement?" He suggested politely, finally tearing his gaze from Kagome, who had long before started feeling uncomfortable under such intense regard.

"We could tell the kids a story to keep them occupied, unless that would disturb you," Kagome suggested.

"No, that shall be more than fine. I must make several sketches, and a long story should do. Perhaps two," He added thoughtfully, looking once more to the group of children. Kagome nodded and tried to move gracefully past him despite the geta she wore. The boots she was accustomed to had been sneered at by Yuugao, and she'd been forced into the tall sandals, her toes protesting the width of separation.

"You look lovely," Shinnzuru said as she came near. He was just close enough to catch her when she stumbled some on unseen rock or root. Chuckling richly, he helped her to the blankets they had set out earlier for their picnic. After settling herself, the children began arranging themselves, completely ignorant of the expensive silks they wrinkled as they settled on their stomachs or lounged on one another.

Sesshoumaru -in his normal clothing, she noted sourly- sat next to her, much closer than he normally would have. Shinnzuru took her other side, lounging, putting his weight on his elbows instead of sitting up as everyone else was. The twins took positions to the outside of the children, and last of all Yuugao took a place near Sesshoumaru's right.

"So what story would you all like to hear?" Kagome asked after everyone had settled in.

"You've never told us how you and the pup met," Shinnzuru observed. Kagome flushed brightly, looking to Sesshoumaru for help.

"I'm not sure that's a children's story," She started.

"It is alright," Sesshoumaru said with a slight incline of his head. "They hear tales far bloodier, and it will do them good to know that all warriors suffer defeat at one time or another."

"You make it sound so noble," She muttered, rolling her eyes. "Not at all like you attacked an innocent girl and tried to kill her."

"And what innocent girl would that have been?" Yuugao asked, her eyes narrowed in interest, a smirk dancing on her lips.

"Me."

"He didn't!" Shinnzuru asked, laughing uproariously.

"He did," Kagome replied hotly, as if he had been accusing her. "It all started when-

"It seems the painter has been inspired," Sesshoumaru told her three days later. "My mother says he is almost complete, and she finds it satisfactory. It is rare for her to be so happy."

"Maybe she'll settle down and stop meddling," Kagome giggled, sighing as another thought occurred to her. "I don't know how I feel about him painting me. He's been so good, even if he is getting paid, and working so quickly. It's strange though, to have someone so focused on me like that."

"I will accompany you, should you desire it."
"You don't have to," Kagome demurred, although the idea of the daiyoukai sitting with her made her feel more secure with the idea.

"I do not know him," Was all the youkai said. Something was suddenly blocking their light, and Kagome again cursed the fact that Sesshoumaru's mother was able to dampen her own aura so that she was practically invisible until she decided to make herself known.

"The painting is ready," She told them both. "Would you like to see it?"

"Already?" Kagome asked, stunned. "Yes, we would, come on!" She urged, taking Sesshoumaru's hand as she stood. He allowed it, letting her to drag him along. Both women chatted about the picture, and Yuugao only hinted at the masterpiece the youkai had spun from his brush tips in a matter of days. After several twists and turns throughout the halls of the shiro, they stopped in front of a guest room. Sesshoumaru could smell the paints and the artists unwashed body. Wrinkling his nose, he tried to ignore the urge to bring his sleeve to his nose as the door opened and the excited youkai urged them all to come in.

Kagome gasp drew his attention from the scent of stale sweat, and his focus moved to the painting suspended on a frame before him.

"It is perfect," His mother sighed happily, as if she had been the one to paint it.

Colors blended and moved together, and though the traditional style usually wouldn't have left much room for realism, the artist had captured Shinzuru's faint wrinkles, the indolent grace of the kitsune twins, and even his mother's mischievous grin. The children were listening, some awestruck, others merely skeptical, but all of the expressions were vivid and close to their living counterparts. But it was the artist's depiction of himself and Kagome that captured his attention.

Kagome's eyes were bright, and it seemed as if she were the only person in blue. Her eyes seemed to glow in the context of the painting, and she was leaning against him, almost lounging, and his expression was one of utter contentment. The effect was one of a true pack, a family, spending a spring afternoon together.

"It's amazing, like a memory in my head put on paper exactly as I remember it, warm and peaceful," Kagome breathed, her eyes looking over the painting one inch at a time, giving it it's due. Sesshoumaru only nodded, silent, but his appreciation was clear in his eyes for both his mother and the painter to see.

"I think, perhaps, that in time, you will be called to make more paintings," Yuugao murmured to the painter, who was almost crying from the expressions on the miko's face. Rarely did anyone appreciate his work so, and for the lord of the west to give his approval, it meant almost as much as the miko's.

"I am humbled by your praise, Miko-sama," He mumbled at last.

"Well, son?" His mother asked at last.

"This Sesshoumaru thanks you for the gift," He admitted, still awed by the enormous painting and what it revealed to him.

"Good boy. Now, I remember you saying something about the miko sitting for you. Have you considered his offer, Kagome?"

"I will, after what he's done for us, I can't do anything else," She murmured, eyes still on the painting.
"I will be guarding her," Sesshoumaru replied almost as soon as she was finished.

"Oh, perhaps both of you could sit for me. Two such beings, it would be the first time anyone has had the opportunity to study and paint such a pair," The youkai stuttered, as if unable to believe his good luck.

"My son doesn't often sit for paintings," Yuugao tittered.

"I will," Sesshoumaru said, to spite his mother more than anything else. He did not enjoy being in her debt, and this commission easily put him there.

"It will be magnificent," The painter exalted, as if the painting in his mind were already taking shape.

"When would you like us to sit for you?" Kagome asked.

"I would like time to rest, if that is agreeable," He replied, suddenly shy. "Perhaps tomorrow?"

"The council will be convening tomorrow," Sesshoumaru rebutted.

"The day after then?" The painter asked hopefully.

"That is acceptable."

"Thank you both, this is a great honor," The youkai said with a steep bow. Kagome only blushed and waved the words off with an awkward shrug. Sesshoumaru turned to leave and felt Kagome following after him, her aura still radiating a quiet joy that warmed his own.

"What a strange man. I don't see what the big deal is in painting both of us," Kagome murmured. "But his work is gorgeous," She admitted with a sigh. "Especially for only three days. I can't imagine how he did it."

Sesshoumaru looked to her again, and felt a small amount of awe that she could be so oblivious to what the painter had alluded to. A daiyoukai and a miko sitting together for a painting. It would be a first, and both he and the miko were not unattractive, which would be all the better for the youkai. That she was completely unaware of this no longer phased him. He had grown to accept that her position and power did not figure into her way of thinking. That it was not false humility or a way to fish for compliments, as many often attempted, warmed him.

"He has earned the right to paint the guardian of the jewel and the lord of the west and the house of the moon," He informed her after they had been walking for several minutes in silence.

"You make it sound like such a privilege," Kagome giggled, rolling her eyes and looking pointedly at the daiyoukai.

"It is. He will be celebrated among his peers for attaining such an opportunity, and it will draw more of the nobles to him, demanding their own commissions."

"I hadn't thought of it that way," She admitted.

"You do not often think," He murmured, just before a fist slammed into his left arm. Stopping, he turned and stared down at her, his expression bland. She stuck her tongue out and made a huffing noise before stalking away, her hands still clenched in fists at her sides.

"Miko," He called.

"It's Kagome, jerk!"
"Kagome," He answered, knowing it would stop her just long enough.

"What?" She demanded as she turned back toward him. But it was too late, he was in front of her one moment, and the next she was slung over his shoulder and being jostled with each step he took. Ignoring her angry sputtering and her expressive use of creative -but not overly colorful- language.

"It sounds like you have been around the children too long. Your insults lack bite," He commented as he opened the door to the outside garden and launched himself into the air. The rush of wind blocked out her muttering ramblings, but nothing could dampen the sudden feeling of teeth sinking into his back, the only barrier between them was his silk kimono. Her jaws clenched together and though he knew human teeth were dull compared to a youkai's, they were sharp enough to hurt. Most of all, her actions shocked him. Shocked him so much that he almost dropped her.

"Sesshoumaru, don't you dare let me go!" She screamed. He quickly shifted her back over his shoulder and dropped down the ground, ignoring her undignified screech as the ground rushed up to meet them. He landed gently, but when he dropped her, it was with a vehemence that suggested her very touch burned.

"You will never do that again," He snarled.

"Oh, so you can be a jerk but if I-"

"Biting is an act of intimacy." He shot out, trying his damnedest to steady his breathing. Why was he so angry? He could just coolly inform her. In fact, that was probably the best way, seeing that she looked as if he'd struck her.

"I'm, I- Kami, I didn't, I'm sorry," She stuttered, her eyes growing ever wider as her skin paled. Sesshoumaru forced the sudden onslaught of emotions down, and felt himself calm when he won another battle with the baser instincts.

"I am aware. Do not do it again."

"Can we please go back home?" She mumbled. He nodded, but didn't move to touch her. Seconds later her ki materialized into a cloud, and she was on it, hugging her knees to her chest tightly. Her face was still ashen, and her eyes big pools of stormy, dark blue. Energy sparked erratically all over her skin as they pressed forward. Within moments they were back at the shiro, and she moved inside without saying a word to him.

"Cat's been acting off all evening. Did something happen? Was it the painter?" Mizu asked, firing off questions so rapidly Sesshoumaru didn't have time to answer. He was still in his study, burying himself in work he could have left for Jaken, or even left alone period.

"It is nothing," Sesshoumaru muttered, still angry at his own extreme reaction to the miko's mistake. She had not known, and all he had done was upset her by treating her as if she had understood what she was doing.

"She looks ready to cry, and Shinzuru refuses to stop cuddling her. Did the painter say something-"

"She bit me," Sesshoumaru sighed at last, wishing more for Resshin's presence than anyone's. Mizu was an intelligent being, but still a kitsune. Jokes and mischief would always be a part of his personality, and Sesshoumaru was not in the mood to hear jokes.

However, the kitsune surprised him by sitting down across from him, staring him down thoughtfully.
"How did you react?" He asked, his voice carefully neutral.

"I informed her that she should not do so again, and what it meant," He intoned stonily, feeling defensive at the caution in the other man's tone.

"How did you inform her? Was it calmly?"

Sesshoumaru glared at the kitsune, strangling the growl before it rose any further up his throat.

"I might have been more harsh than I intended," He admitted at last. The kitsune's knowing nod bothered him, and he wanted, just for a moment, to pick a fight with him. To lunge at him and see if the kitsune would fight back, to feel flesh rending beneath his own claws. Shaking his head as if he could physically shake such violent thoughts, he focused on the kitsune again.

"I'll talk to her. It was an honest mistake, on both your parts. She didn't know what she was doing, and you're none the lesser for having instincts," Mizu sighed as he stood.

"What have my instincts to do with this?" Sesshoumaru demanded with a growl at his friend's careless dismissal of the problem.

"You're kidding right?" When Sesshoumaru continued to stare at him blankly, Mizu sighed and allowed a small smile. "Never mind, doesn't matter anyway." With that he left, the daiyoukai at the table still in his own state of confusion. His muscles tensed, bunched, longed for a fight, for blood, for relief. Deciding that his people had seen too little of their lord, he shoved the papers aside in disgust and stalked from his study and then from the shiro.

The change overcame him, and instead of rushing through the process, he allowed it to take him slowly. There was a measure of comfort in the jolting pain of his bones breaking, snapping, reforming themselves to suit a bigger body. Embracing his natural shape and the instincts that roared to the surface, he lunged into the air, seeking a forest to hunt in. With one savage howl, he threw himself into the night, determined to quell the burst of inexplicable, savage rage.

Kagome shivered once, hearing the emotion within the howl.

"What was that?" She whispered.

"That's the pup, seems he's in a right state, dunno what could have got him that way though," Shinzuru sighed as he cuddled her to his side. She leaned against him gratefully. No matter what else he was, Shinzuru had become a father, and all that entailed. In her dreams and wishes her father's arms had always been a safe place to hide, and the reality of his warm, gentle strength almost made her weep as he made the comment.

"I did it," She whispered, careful to keep her voice low enough so that the children wouldn't hear. Shinzuru started a little in surprise, then nodded once for her to continue. "He was being a jerk, and had me over his shoulder. I bit his back," She whispered in as low a voice as she could muster without it being pure breath.

"I see," Was all Shinzuru said.

"I didn't know what it meant," She admitted. "He said my insults lacked bite, and I told him I'd give him bite. And the rest, yeah. He was really angry."

Mizu showed then, a small, sad smile playing on his lips as he walked over to them.
"You talk to the pup?" Shinzuru asked. Mizu nodded once, then extended his hand to her, that sad, knowing smile still on his face. Shinzuru nudged at her, urging her to accept his hand. She did, and was led from the children and to her own suite of rooms. He followed her in and took a seat from her across the table, the whole time looking as if he wanted to say something, but dared not.

"We are all very instinctual creatures," Mizu began at last, his eyes meeting her own evenly. "Sesshoumaru, being who and what he is, has stronger instincts than most. He keeps a tight leash on them, make no mistake, unless it suits his purposes to do otherwise. I know you didn't mean to provoke those instincts, and he does as well. I think, perhaps, he was angry because they flared up so easily."

"Why, I mean, if they're instincts, and he controlled them, everything is okay, right?" Kagome asked. Mizu gave a small sigh, as if he were bearing the weight of the world.

"He is more angry at the perceived slip. It is my opinion that is was so unexpected, he did not think to keep a tight grip on them. Even you must admit that the idea of you trying to provoke those baser instincts is absurd to you both." Kagome nodded, agreeing with him wholeheartedly.

"I didn't realize it was that sort of thing," She admitted in a small voice. Mizu looked ready to laugh for a moment before sobering quickly, as if a joke, once considered, was no longer funny.

"It will be fine. A good run and hunting will soothe what ails him."

"Is he mad at me?" She asked at last.

"No. I think he regrets his harshness with you, although I don't know if he'll apologize for it. I'm fairly certain he won't want to mention it again."

"I'm more than fine with that," Kagome confided. "It was a stupid accident, and I don't want either of us bothered by it."

"Then perhaps it is best to pretend it never happened," Mizu answered, once again that small, sad smile playing on his lips. Kagome smiled and thanked him, watched him leaving her rooms, then slumped on the table.

At least that was over. A stupid misunderstanding, and he wasn't mad at her for it. And neither of them would apologize. It would be as if it never happened. That worked for her, more than worked for her. The very idea of trying to initiate anything intimate with anyone sent a jagged bolt of cold running through her, followed quickly by nausea as the memories of her rape assaulted her.

"Not tonight," She muttered. "Not ever. I will not let them get to me." Determined to get a good night's sleep and wake to a new day, she walked to her rooms and prepared for bed. When another long, hungry howl echoed from somewhere in the distance, she shivered and pulled her sleeping robe more closely around her, then scampered under her covers.

The painter eyed them both nervously. Despite their unspoken agreement to pretend nothing had happened, their manners were still stiff around one another, stilted. They sat side by side, postures painfully erect, and the easy comfort they had held with each other during the painting of the first portrait was gone.

"Perhaps another day," He murmured. Kagome sighed, trying to figure out what to do. Everything was suddenly so awkward, and Sesshoumaru had taken the first step often enough that she wanted to try and break the rapidly forming wall between them. She just didn't know how. An idea occurred to her, and she turned to the painter, a small smile on her face.
"Do you need us in any particular position?" She asked.

"I suppose not, why?" He asked, bewildered. Kagome chuckled.

"Sesshoumaru, I'll be back in a moment," She assured, moving quickly from the room. Since the incident, Shinzuru had never been far, and though she had begun to wish for true privacy again, this time it would work in her favor.

"Shinzuru, I need a favor," She informed him.

"Anything, child, so long as it is in my power to give it."

"I need you to guard Sesshoumaru and I while we are being painted." His confusion was more than evident, he was stupefied by the request.

"Why would you need me to guard you? He should be more than sufficient," Shinzuru started, but followed her when she returned to the painter's room. He took a seated position near them, watching her closely.

"Mirror me," She told Sesshoumaru as she sat with her legs crossed. Warily he did as she asked, and she took his hands in her own, interlacing their fingers. His eyes widened a fraction, but she was already sending out a thread of her own power. She ignored the painter's frightened gasp.

"Shinzuru will keep us safe. Please, follow," She urged. It was hesitant, but Sesshoumaru's power eventually reached out to her own, and she dove inward, feeling him follow her along the path of her energy, down into the strange place that was not a place.

"Why have you brought me here?" He demanded, still formal with her, still distant. The coolness of his tone cut at her, making her feel as if they'd moved forward only to step back.

"Because, I don't want something stupid to mess up everything. We're friends now, I think. I hope so, anyway. I don't want to lose that because of a misunderstanding," She explained, feeling much more free to speak now that she was in her core. The tree had grown, kami, had it grown. No longer remotely able to qualify as a sapling, it easily looked as if it were several decades old, something not quite an oak, although that was the closest thing she could think of when she saw it. It stood, a giant beacon in the field of tall, emerald grass. It's foliage was thick and it's branches heavy with the weight of them. Moving under it's shade, as the sun shone down brightly on them, she sat on the bare ground beneath it, smiling up at the light that filtered through in patches.

He joined her, still reluctant, and sighed deeply. "I do not like this," He admitted. She started, then flushed guiltily.

"We can go back, I'm sorry-" She started.

"I do not like this strangeness between us," He interrupted, correcting her assumption. "I am sorry I spoke so harshly." Kagome was floored. Mizu had said he probably wouldn't apologize, or ever mention it again. Her face must have reflected that astonishment, because he pressed on.

"My instincts, they responded. I did not think to leash them-"

"Because the idea of me doing something like that is crazy," She finished, laughing softly. "Mizu said something like that, and you guys are right. I'd never, I mean, no offense, I just-" She didn't finish, staring into the distance instead.

"It is probably for the best, you already have more than enough children," He tried, suddenly
uncomfortable with her silence and the blank look in her eyes. His comment did the trick, and the jolt of pain that had lanced through her core was gone as quickly as it had come, and she smiled at him gratefully.

"You're right. I have kids, I have a pack. I don't need anything else. I've got more than I ever dreamed of," She admitted. "Definitely more kids than I planned on!" She added with a rueful smile.

Several minutes passed in companionable silence, the awkwardness had passed, and both felt that they were on even ground again. How simple it had been! And Kagome admitted to herself that she was glad she had taken the first step. Sesshoumaru had almost always been the one to try and span the gap between them, and although she still didn't understand why, she had lost the desire to find out. It was enough that they were friends, as unlikely and surreal as it was.

"I wonder if I can fly here, without the cloud," She sighed. "I envy you guys that. You just zip into the sky, as if you had invisible wings."

"I suppose that anything is possible here," He admitted slowly. Kagome stared at him expectantly.

"Well?" She demanded.

"Well what?" He asked, caught off guard by her sudden impatience.

"How do you do it in real life, that way I can just do it here."

At a loss, he tried to find the words to explain that there was no thought behind it, it just was. As natural as breathing, he could take to the air, gravity nothing but a silly notion. As if sensing his inability, she sighed and stood, brushing the back of her hakama off and moving back into the sea of grass.

"In a story in my time, one way to fly is to think happy thoughts," She murmured. Only a foot or so behind her, she could feel the weight of his incredulous stare.

"Happy thoughts?" He asked, as if the idea were not only absurd, but so far removed from reality that whoever had come up with the idea was completely mad.

But Kagome was no longer listening. Instead she was thinking about the pack. About her family. 'No, best not think of them,' she told herself. 'Just the pack.' And she did. Picturing them vividly in her mind, playing monsters and heroes, even Sesshoumaru, his strange bark echoing through the gardens seemed to echo through her own mind and around her.

"You are not flying, but you are not touching the ground," His voice observed.

"It worked," Kagome squealed in delight, then a grin stretched her smile wide. Giving out a delighted squeal, she shot up into the sky, exhilaration blending with curiosity. How much had changed in her mind these past months? Was there anything besides the tree and the fields? Was the ocean still off in the distance, or was it like the horses, only there when she wanted it?

Sesshoumaru was up in the air with her, looking amused and she flew loops in the air, simulating the twists and loops of a roller coaster. Childish delight overshadowed any sense of silliness or embarrassment she might have felt.

"This is amazing," She exclaimed breathlessly as she came up to him again. He looked ready to shrug indifferently, but refrained, nodding instead and allowing a hint of a smile. With an impish grin she darted forward, quick as any pixie from the stories, and poked his shoulder.
"Tag, you're it!" She crowed, suddenly yards away. When she turned to look over her shoulder, he was following, giving chase and looking more than just amused. He looked happy, and more than anything else that made her smile back.

It felt like hours had passed when they finally touched the ground again and she leaned back against the tree.

"I do believe this is the most fun I've had with you yet," She admitted. "I wish we could do this in reality."

"I am glad we cannot. It is hard enough to keep track of you as is," He confided. "I am supposed to be protecting you, and you make it difficult to do."

"You were silly to think anything with me would ever be easy," She retorted as he took his seat against the tree. "Experience tells you I'm a pain in the butt."

"Indeed. And yet you have enough redeeming qualities to keep me from strangling you." It was out before he could stop it, and once again he wondered if being in such a personal place didn't force the truth from people. Certainly he had admitted to things he normally would have kept to himself.

"Good to know. Same for you," She chuckled. "We should probably head back," She sighed. "I'm pretty sure we've freaked out the painter by now. And Shinzuru will probably have a few things to say to me when we get back. I didn't really warn him."

Silently agreeing, he let himself drift along the motes of power that seemed to coalesce in the air, not quite visible, more like air shimmering over a fire. The sensation of settling back into himself was no longer so unsettling, and his eyes blinked open, instantly gauging their surrounds when he realized two things.

One, that they had drawn an audience. Chief among them being his mother. And two, that at some point, somehow, the miko and he had bent forward perfectly so that their foreheads touched. Her blue eyes blinked open, and startled by his breath on her face, jerked back.

"We wondered when you two would come back," Yuugao stated dryly as the daiyoukai and the miko moved apart. "But the painter is beside himself. Your auras are very visible, and the way they tangled, then merged," She said the word in such a tone to convey a question, "Has given him any number of ideas. He's currently resting his eyes."

"How long were we gone?" Kagome asked.

"About two marks, give or take. I've never seen any youkai quite so happy to see a miko's powers. I have no doubt there will be several rather interesting results," Yuugao commented. Her words were dry, almost funny, but her eyes were sharp, and Kagome felt pinned beneath the stare, like a mouse under the eyes of a particularly large owl.

Her stomach however, broke that stare, especially when Shinzuru allowed a booming laugh to erupt.

"Let's get you some food, Cat," He chuckled, helping her to her feet. Sesshoumaru was standing before she had finished, and she stretched her legs cautiously, feeling more than a little resentment. Apparently youkai limbs did not fall asleep.

I hope you enjoyed, and remember, reviews feed starving artist's souls.

A/N: I truly hope you all enjoyed this, as I enjoyed writing it. I do love Yuugao, and I'm hoping you
all do to.
Kagome was very aware of her audience as she rode on Boufuu, bow in hand. Kotaeru watched silently as he always did, but the other presence easily swamped his, and pressed against her. The owner of said aura was not trying to be a distraction per say, but she was doing it anyway, and Kagome was determined to impress her.

The arrows hit either in the bull's eye, or just outside of them as she rode past, Boufuu making no attempts to be slow or steady. She reached back to the quiver at her back and found nothing for the last three targets, then brought her hand back to the bowstring, simultaneously trying to concentrate her ki into an arrow and stay mounted on the galloping horse. Kotaeru had seen fit to have her ride bareback today, and it was difficult enough to stay on while the stallion even when she was able to cling to his mane.

But determination won out. Like machine gun fire, she rapidly produced three arrows of her own ki for the targets, watching them hit and then pierce clean through the wood, dispersing after they had created a gaping hole in the center of each one.

"Well done!" Kotaeru called approvingly. One hand in Boufuu's mane, she used her knees and the barest of suggestions with her hand to guide the horse back to the two youkai. He slowed himself to a canter, then a trot, and stopped completely once he reached them.

Yuu ga o was looking up at her thoughtfully, and Kagome felt dread create a knot in her stomach. It had been several weeks since her alpha's mother had arrived, and though the daiyoukai did not often have that particular expression, Kagome had come to anticipate it, knowing that it always preceded one plan or another to meddle.

"I think I should like to spar with you," Yuugao said at last, earning a sputtering, choked noise from the weapons master.

"What?" The miko asked, unsure if she had heard correctly. Surely she was hallucinating?

"I would like to spar with you. Unmounted, of course. No weapons, just our own power." Her eyes were still thoughtful, still considering, and Kagome felt as if she was being weighed and judged, and
the youkai was trying to reach a verdict.

"Okay," She answered, smoothly dismounting from Boufuu. Kotaeru was still making small, choked noises in the back of his throat, and Kagome was vaguely worried that he might have a hysterical fit.

"I'll be fine," She assured him. Yuugao was pack, and pack didn't kill each other, right? If the woman was judging her, Kagome was determined to surpass the woman's expectations. Yuugao hadn't been unfriendly, far from it. But the past several weeks had left Kagome with the feeling that she was still an undecided factor in the inu's eyes, and she was determined to settle the matter. Handing off her quiver and bow to the weapons master, she nodded once to the youkai before summoning a cloud and darting quickly away, taking care not to move too far from the ground.

The cloud gave her the advantage of speed, for the moment anyway. She felt the older woman pursuing, felt her gaining on her. Just as Yuugao was about to catch her, she dropped the five feet to the ground, dropping into a roll as the daiyoukai shot past her. By the time Yuugao had turned sharply back, Kagome was on her feet and summoning her ki.

Yuugao stopped short of the shield that had suddenly formed a perfect dome, and Kagome watched her carefully. The inu stalked around the dome, searching for weak points. Knowing the shield itself would not be impressive, would only look childish and weak to the woman, she began formulating a plan.

"Are you going to stay in there all day?" Yuugao asked, a predatory smirk lighting up her features.

"Nope," Kagome muttered before the shield dropped. Yuugao lunged, intent on her prey, but the miko darted to the side and Yuugao was about to turn when she felt energy wrapping around her legs, moving much like her son's whip. Seeing her son's influence on the miko's abilities, she smirked. The boy had strength, power, and cunning. But he lacked imagination.

Kagome jerked back, trying to trip the inu up, but when Yuugao allowed herself to fall, Kagome let the 'rope' slacken and was surprised when the woman vaulted into the air by pushing against the ground with her hands. The inu was several feet in the air, and coming down fast, her claws ready, eyes burning. In a split second she was in the air, and the next she had her hand around Kagome's throat, her grip loose but her claws pricking the flesh regardless.

"It seems I win," She murmured.

"Look down," Kagome answered, breathing heavy and pupils dilated from adrenaline. Yuugao's eyes swung down to her stomach, where Kagome had positioned one of her daggers, the point barely pushing against the fabric. The dagger was glowing, charged with holy power. Yuugao blinked blankly once, then allowed a warm smile to grace her features.

"The last time I was engaged in a draw was with my mate," She informed the miko. Kagome pulled the knife away and felt the fingers fall from her throat. Kagome refused to touch her throat, however much she wanted to.

"Mother," A voice ground out. "From now on, you will speak to me before engaging any of the pack in a sparring session." Both women turned to the source of the voice and saw Sesshoumaru, his eyes narrowed on his mother. "And if you please, never put a barrier between myself and a member of my pack for something so trivial."

"It wasn't trivial," Yuugao announced lightly before taking to the sky, making a swift exit.

"We ended it in a draw," Kagome commented.
"I saw," He acknowledged, looking her over for any injuries, as if unable to believe his mother would leave her in one piece.

"It was from your lessons."

Stopping, he looked to her eyes and accepted the thanks for what it was.

"Congratulations," He replied solemnly.

"Doesn't this call for some sort of celebration?" She joked lightly.

"Perhaps. One where my mother will not be present. Despite her seeming grace, I doubt very much that she enjoys the thought of a human besting her in any capacity." Kagome elbowed him in his side as they walked from the field, chattering, adrenaline still pumping through her blood despite the absence of danger. Sesshoumaru allowed it, listening to her suggestions. Small things, things he noticed everyone could enjoy, including the children.

"Don't you want something for yourself?" He finally asked. Kagome looked up at him, as if the thought hadn't really occurred to her. Fumbling for several moments, he knew the moment an idea came to mind, but she seemed hesitant to voice it.

"What is it?" He asked, curiosity getting the better of him.

"Your mother said the painter saw our powers twisting and merging. I-" She stopped for a moment, as if unsure. He made a small whuffing noise, not unlike those he used to direct the children from time to time. She continued, blushing heavily. "I would like one. Nothing big or anything. I have photos of the others, except the children. I would like a picture of us now that we're friends."

Her request was as humbling as it was novel. Surprise kept him for responding for a moment, and she looked back up at him, worried by his lack of response. She knew paintings were costly, and she had hoped a small one wouldn't be too much, but apparently it was.

"I'm sorry, I should have-"

"It is fine. I will speak to him tomorrow."

"Are you sure it's not too expensive?" She asked, worry still evident. He chuckled, surprising her out of her fear. The noise and expression of emotion was so strange that she completely forgot her expression, caught up by the sudden smile, small though it was, as he looked ahead, greatly amused.

"You forced my mother into a stalemate. That image will linger as long as I live. Anything I could reward such a memory with would pale in comparison." Kagome gaped, shocked by the notes of mirth in his tone and his words.

"You are such a bad son!" She finally accused, swatting his arm, but could not hold in her laughter. He gave her a one shouldered shrug and they continued walking to the shiro, Kagome reprimands interspersed with laughter.

Stretching languorously, Sesshoumaru walked into his suite of rooms, more than looking forward to sleep. Though it was not required of youkai as often as of humans, it was a pleasure he indulged to a point. However, his pleasure dissipated the moment his mother revealed her aura. Displeasure was too mild a word for what he was feeling.

"Mother," He commented, seeing the woman sitting at the low table, her expression meditative.
"Son," She greeted, as if she had every right in the world to be in his rooms.

"What do you want?" He growled, eager to have the encounter over with.

"She is powerful. And fast," His mother observed.

"I trained her before she went to Kotaeru."

"Why? Why teach her those moves?" Yuugao asked, and despite the mildness of her tone, he knew she was demanding an answer, and would not leave until satisfied.

"She is the jewel's guardian-" He began.

"Do try to tell me the truth," She interrupted, growling. "There is more to that girl than anyone is telling me, and I demand the truth. Your men are closemouthed, and the servants love her so much so that they refuse to tell me anything of who she is. Loyalty is commendable, but I am pack, however much you wish to ignore that."

Sesshoumaru sat himself across from his mother, wondering at her sudden interest in the miko. Although she was not known for her hatred of humans, Yuugao was not known for her interest in them either.

"She was kidnapped by bandits before I found her. They held her and her traveling companion for some time before escaping."

"And I take it the human men, seeing a vulnerable priestess, decided to try and taint her?" Yuugao asked, her tone bitter. Sesshoumaru did not answer, did not have to. The woman made a disgusted noise in her throat, her temper swelling.

"I suppose we should be grateful she survived the ordeal intact. Humans call us evil," She scoffed bitterly.

"Naraku also used her," Sesshoumaru sighed.

"Naraku was a human at heart to begin with, so he qualifies with them. I'm surprised the girl survived long enough to find you."

"She sent the kit to my home when she was first taken by the hanyou. I do not think she would have stopped until she saw him again," Sesshoumaru commented wryly.

"She is a mother before everything else, that much I have noticed. When I first heard tell of you adding humans to the pack, I came quickly, expecting to find that you had developed your father's inclinations. But she is nothing like the weak princess your father courted and brought in, for which I am thankful."

With that, she rose and left silently, leaving him to wonder over her words. In her own way, she had given her approval of Kagome, and that was as much cause to celebrate as the draw between the two women earlier in the day. Despite being alpha of the pack since his father's passing, his mother still had some power to exert within it, especially concerning the females. It had not been something he had given thought to before, because he had not expected his mother to interfere in his own affairs, and he still saw nothing to indicate she would do so.

But it did not stop suspicion from forming. His mother's nature refused to let her do anything but meddle, although she was usually very subtle about it. As a master manipulator, he always felt on guard around her, and he worried what her seeming approval meant, or if, for once, she was content
to leave well enough alone.

Shaking himself, he stood once more and took the swords had had balanced on his lap during his conversation with his mother and put them on their stands, contemplating them both for several moments.

How strange to have two swords, so opposite from one another, answer to him. It was still something he contemplated and lacked understanding of. Bokusenou had only smiled, as if amused by his questions when asked. That reaction had kept him from speaking to any of his friends about it. Shinzuru would most likely respond as the tree had, and Resshin would give some cryptically worded answer. Asking the twins such a thing didn't bear thinking.

Moving to the bedroom, his personal sanctum in the shiro, he pushed that problem to the back of his mind and thought of the painter's reaction when he had informed the youkai of Kagome's request. Instead of giving a price, the youkai had been to eager to deem it a gift. Still fairly radiating joy, he had almost danced from the room, leaving the daiyoukai to shake his head then as he was now at the memory of it.

Another problem came to mind, and he still had no idea how to tackle it. Soon they would be departing for Kouga's mating, and the trip would easily take a week, especially with the children in tow. He had perhaps four or five days to inform her of the nature of a wolf mating ceremony, and the task worried him. After her reaction from the incident weeks before, he remained unconvinced of the kitsune's assurance that the miko could handle the situation without turning in on herself.

Damning the more tribal customs of the wolf tribes, he lay down, determined to rest on the matter. Perhaps rest would help him find some conclusion to the dilemma.

However, his mind refused to cooperate, and when the dawn filtered through the windows, he gave up and slid the door to his balcony open and watched the world begin to wake.

"The painter wishes to see you," Sesshoumaru informed her two days later as she was dismounting Boufuu. Kagome sniffed, smelling herself, and smelled horse and sweat.

"I need a bath first," She told him, wondering how he could stand being near her. She could hardly stand the smell of herself. Surely his nose was demanding he get away.

"He was quite insistent, and given that he loses himself in his work so easily, I doubt you will bother him." The reminder of the artist's ability to completely forget to bathe, even eat if the rumors flying around the shiro were true, gave her a small measure of comfort as they walked to the shiro in silence and then moved through the halls to the painter's impromptu studio.

"Does he need me to model again?" She asked, although Sesshoumaru sensed she wasn't asking what she wanted to. Her face clearly gave the deception away, and the anticipation in her scent killed any doubt he had.

"No." Her face took on an eager, bright smile, and he hoped she would not be disappointed. The painter had refused to let him see the painting, and though his work was perhaps the best Sesshoumaru had ever seen, he felt a small niggle of worry gnawing at his gut. Suppose it wasn't what the miko had envisioned or wanted? He had not been terribly specific about the miko's request, only that it have the two of them presented within the picture.

The worry became doubt, and when they entered the studio, he forced the feeling down, determined not to give anything away in his scent or on his face as the miko so often did.
"Miko-sama, Sesshoumaru-sama, thank you for your time. I hope this is to your liking," The painter said, beckoning for them to follow. Kagome moved ahead of Sesshoumaru, who intentionally followed behind her. When Kagome gasped, he knew his worries had been unfounded, no matter how much the painting surprised him.

"It's amazing," Kagome breathed, looking at the portrait. It hung, plain white silk, between two pieces of wood, keeping it straight and flat. The colors themselves were rich and subtle. It was the content that surprised him. Did they truly look that way when they were within their cores?

The youkai had painted them in the position they had come to in while posing. Their foreheads touched, and their eyes were open sleepily, although both were smiling at one another, as if sharing a secret. Power circled around them, and Sesshoumaru saw that the painter had cleverly used shading to change the separate powers coming from them to merge the colors into one solid color that seemed to dance among the other two.

"This is beautiful," Kagome told him, taking the painter's hands in her own. "More than I hoped, thank you," She said, sincerity obvious. The youkai colored beneath her praise and tugged his hands away, stammering his thanks and what and honor it was. Sesshoumaru ignored the stammering and the blushing, but he could not ignore the sudden spike if interest he noted in the painter's scent. It was not the kind of interest the miko would appreciate.

"I will have a servant retrieve it and hang it in your room," Sesshoumaru rumbled to Kagome. His statement was punctuated by a cool look in the youkai's direction, and the painter, realizing his error, flushed even more deeply beneath the daiyoukai's gaze.

Kagome was oblivious though, and she turned to Sesshoumaru, her eyes dancing brightly. "Thank you," She told him, her tone no less sincere or amazed than when she had thanked the painter. He nodded once and left the room, satisfied that she followed.

"I didn't expect anything like that, it's perfect," Kagome told him.

"I am glad you find it satisfactory."

His words and cool tone were met with a solid punch to his shoulder and he glared down at her, unable to hold it when he saw the unfettered happiness in her smile.

"Stop being so stuffy. Or are you jealous you don't have one?" She teased. Sesshoumaru resisted rolling his eyes and sighed. Their things were already being packed for the journey east, and he was determined to get their talk over with, at least then she would have the journey to acclimate to the idea.

"There is something we must discuss." He told her, his voice tinged with his own worry. Kagome's expression shifted to worry, and he wished he hadn't said anything. She deserved her joy at her gift, and he was about to dash it. Ignoring the stab of regret he felt, he pushed on, knowing that if he put it off any longer, she would only worry.

"What's wrong?"

"It is about the wolf's mating ceremony."

"I thought you said the kids could come," She started, but stopped when he held a hand up to interrupt her.

"They may, although they will be put to bed early, and watched to make sure they don't try to sneak back." His tone was harsh, and he really did not want to have the conversation he was about to.
"What's got your tail in a knot?" Kagome asked, turning to face him squarely. "I don't think I've ever seen you like this."

"The wolves are." He paused, trying to find the best word. "Different." Not what he had been searching for, and definitely not what the miko wanted to hear if her expression was any indication.

"Just because Kouga isn't as refined as you are." She started angrily, her eyes filled with shamed disapproval.

"It is not that. Every kind of youkai has its own mating ceremonies. You remember the tree at Resshin's ceremony, yes?" He asked. Kagome nodded once. "Wolves are, more tribal, that is." He foundered, unsure of how to continue. Her amused gaze only further served to knock him off balance.

"Sesshoumaru, spit it out," Kagome commanded with a smile. "Before you hurt yourself," She added with a giggle. Words completely lost to him, he snapped his mouth shut with a decided click and narrowed his eyes.

"It might be more than you are comfortable with." Was all he said before turning smartly on his heels. Oh, he could think of a hundred ways of how what he was doing was wrong, but if she was going to make fun of him for trying to consider her own emotional balance, then she could learn the hard way.

"Sesshoumaru, I was just teasing," She called to his retreating back. He ignored her, intent on getting to the dojo to work off some of his anger. He could hear her stamping her foot angrily and huffing, then heading in the opposite direction. Good.

"So, did Sesshoumaru tell you?" Kasai asked as they all lazily lounged on clouds of both Kagome and Sesshoumaru's making. The children all chattered quietly or looked over the side, or up at the sky. Some even slept peacefully as they traversed the distance in the air.

"Tell me what?" Kagome asked, looking at him blankly.

She did not expect the sudden cursing coming from not just one twin, but both.

"Sesshoumaru!" Mizu called out angrily. The daiyoukai, on his own cloud with Shinzuru, didn't even turn to acknowledge that Mizu had spoken.

"What's wrong?" Kagome asked. Mizu and Kasai both suddenly looked distinctly uncomfortable, and she couldn't stop the panic before it rose.

"We can't talk about it in front of the little ones," Kasai mumbled, his face flushing.

"Sesshoumaru mentioned something earlier in the week, but I-" She froze, stopping herself. Kasai nudged her, eyes narrowing.

"What did you do?" He demanded.

"I kind of teased him because he was having a hard time getting his words out," She mumbled quietly. She chanced a quick glance in the daiyoukai's direction, and he was studiously ignoring her. As he had been any time they were alone since the ill fated conversation. Then she glanced to Kasai and Mizu. Both looked ready to strangle her.

"What?" She asked innocently.
"He was trying to help you," Kasai hissed below his breath. "And I can understand why he might have a hard time talking about. Damn it," he cursed, looking away from her. Kagome felt the first pang of guilt since the incident. At first she had been confused, then angry, and then amused. But guilt hadn't played into it. Until now.

Mizu seemed just as upset, and she couldn't figure out what she'd done wrong. And what was so important that they'd side with Sesshoumaru on something for once? Usually they were clamoring all over themselves to defend her side, even when she was blatantly in the wrong.

"You know, you should ask him when we land. Because no one else is going to tell you. Hear that Shinzuru!" Kasai shouted over to the other cloud. Shinzuru looked hesitant to agree, but finally nodded once. Making a satisfied noise, Kasai looked back to her, his expression serene except for the trace of rage in his eyes.

"He's trying really hard Cat, and sometimes you have to be patient," was all he said before he leaned back, cupping his head in his hands and staring at the sky, ignoring her with as much determination as Sesshoumaru had been. Mizu seemed inclined to agree with his twin, as he mimicked his brother's pose.

Guilt quickly turned to shame, and then to anger again. How was she supposed to know Sesshoumaru was trying to help her? What could be so important that they'd be that angry? Was it that she'd teased him, or that she hadn't learned whatever it was she was supposed to? And why were they refusing to tell her now? Obviously it wasn't so important that it couldn't wait, or else they would tell her. Right?

Trying not to feel the slightest bit betrayed, she sighed and ignored the kitsune ignoring her, instead positioning herself to cuddle with the children. Only a day or two remained until they reached Kouga's lands, and she wanted to be well rested.

"Kouga!" Kagome called out in greeting as they landed. Several heads turned at once. Kagome jumped from the cloud, eager to get off of it after traveling for so long, and ran to the cluster of wolves at the base of the cliff. All of them were male, and all of them looked at her as if she'd grown another head.

"Hey Kagome!" Kouga answered, his tone cheery but somewhat reserved. Kagome looked at him in askance, curious about the sudden distance. When she felt Sesshoumaru's aura swell and wash over them like a wave breaking against the shore, she knew, and turned to glare at the daiyoukai.

"Ignore him, he's been a stick in the mud for the whole trip," She sighed, rolling her eyes. Then she turned first to Ginta and hugged him tightly, then to Hakkaku, awarding him with an embrace. Both looked completely stunned by the action.

"I'm sorry about last time," She offered.

"It's, it's alright," Both answered, their mumbled words curiously out of sync for once. Burned by their shock, she subdued her own hurt and smiled brightly.

"So when does this shindig start?" She asked cheerily.

"A clearing, at dusk," Kouga replied hesitantly. Ignoring his strange behavior, Kagome smiled once and moved to hop back on her cloud.

"Where's Ayame? I have a gift for her."
"In the caves," Kouga began, but before he could finish, Kagome cloud was rising up into the air, quickly moving up the cliff face and to the cave entrances. Sesshoumaru's did as well, although the daiyoukai himself stayed behind.

"She's," Kouga paused for a moment, still in shock at Kagome's easy embrace of his seconds.

"Different," Ginta finished.

"Better," Hakkaku supplied.

"Not completely, but yes, she is healing," Sesshoumaru acknowledged.

There was an awkward silence between the males for several minutes before both Ginta and Hakkaku began speaking at once, their words stumbling and combining together into an indistinguishable mess, a sure sign of their strain.

"Sesshoumaru, we need to talk, just you and me. Now," Kouga muttered, moving away from the group of males. Sesshoumaru followed sedately, wondering what could have gone so wrong to cause the sharp bite of distress in the wolf's scent.

Kagome on the other hand, was almost bouncing with excitement when she saw Ayame. The red wolf's greeting was as reserved as Kouga's, and Kagome was beginning to wonder at the strangely aloof manner of the wolves around her.

"Ayame, can I speak to you?" She asked, refusing to let her grin falter in the face of the awkward silence. The women around Ayame looked at the miko strangely, and she could feel them judging her silently, as if she'd done some great wrong. The problem was, she wasn't sure what that wrong had been. But Ayame nodded slowly and followed Kagome several feet away.

Accepting that privacy would only be an illusion, Kagome turned to Ayame and eyed her warily.

"Did I do something wrong?" She asked, refusing to let her grin falter in the face of the awkward silence. The women around Ayame looked at the miko strangely, and she could feel them judging her silently, as if she'd done some great wrong. The problem was, she wasn't sure what that wrong had been. But Ayame nodded slowly and followed Kagome several feet away.

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Accepting that privacy would only be an illusion, Kagome turned to Ayame and eyed her warily.

"Did I do something wrong?" She asked bluntly. At Ayame's startled expression, she pushed forward. "Because you guys seem really distant. Is it because I'm a miko?"

"N-no. It's because Kouga claimed you before me," Ayame blurted, still shocked by Kagome's direct and frank tone.

"But that was some silly, I mean, you guys are mating, like you should be," She added the last with a tone of sincerity that could not be denied.

"The elders are beginning to wish he had chosen you though," Ayame whispered furiously. "You're the guardian of the shikon jewel, and you defeated Naraku. Not to mention you're part of Sesshoumaru's pack." She hissed. Kagome stepped back, startled by the worry evident in the other woman's tone.

"I was never meant for Kouga," Kagome declared, only aware of the volume of her voice until it was too late. Her words echoed off of the cave walls and could be heard clearly by all, even if they had not been in possession of such keen hearing. She blushed hotly and lowered her voice before continuing.

"He's a great guy, but I was meant for someone else."

Ayame still looked distinctly uncomfortable, regarding the miko with cautious eyes.

"The elder's are saying that if you show any sign of disapproval, they won't let Kouga and I mate,"
She sighed at last, her voice quavering. Kagome's temper swelled in response to the ookami's distress.

"And just why would I disapprove? You're perfect for each other. Are the elders blind?" Kagome demanded, no longer caring who heard her. "It's obvious you care for him, and I know he cares for you. What the hell is wrong with them?"

Just as she finished her shouting, for it had become shouting, Sesshoumaru and Kouga were both walking into the cave, both of their expressions deadly serious.

"I take it she heard?" Kouga sighed, moving immediately to Ayame's side and wrapping his arm about her waist.

"Where are your elders?" Kagome growled, surprising everyone present but the daiyoukai.

"This cave goes back a ways, the path ends in the center of a bunch of smaller paths-" he started, then made a strange noise as Kagome began to turn and march from them, her temper high enough that it was literally visible. Her aura sparked dangerously, and for a moment everyone wondered if she was going to stalk off and destroy the elders of the wolf pack.

"Kagome," Sesshoumaru rumbled, his hand shooting out to grab her arm. Ayame and Kouga both gaped as the energy accepted him, moved over his hand and wrist, and did absolutely no harm. The miko however, turned back and leveled her best glare.

"I am going to go make sure they know I fully approve of this, and what I think of their high handed-"

"Come with me first, and if you still wish to do so afterward, I will escort you myself," He quickly offered, attempting to diffuse the situation. Kouga and Ayame waited, breaths held as Kagome considered the daiyoukai through stormy blue eyes.

"Fine," She ground out, and allowed herself to be led to the entrance of the cave, noting that everyone was giving her a wide berth. A cloud awaited them, and she hopped on, grateful to be moving away from the stares and the quiet insanity contained in it.

"What the hell is wrong with everyone? Why would their mating hinge on my approval?" Kagome demanded when they had put some distance between themselves and the caves.

"Kouga's elders wish him to mate you," Sesshoumaru stated simply. "They will seek some sign that you disapprove of the match and use that to stop it and propose an alliance with the west through you."

Kagome was so stunned her mind literally blanked for a minute before she almost exploded with rage.

"Are they out of their minds?" She demanded.

"The two packs have already joined, a mating to cement the alliance is unnecessary. But an alliance with the west through you would be very beneficial to them."

"I have absolutely no desire to mate Kouga, or anyone for that matter. Can't I just go tell them that?" Kagome fairly shrieked. Sesshoumaru flinched at the piercing tone and then forced his own emotions to the side.

"They will not listen. It is politicking, and they are trying to be very clever, although they are not half
so clever as they think. We will give them the exact opposite of what they want."

"And what's that?" Kagome demanded.

"The wolf and I spoke. You will find a male to affix your attentions on this evening."

"I'm going to what?" She asked dumbly.

"Find some other male to fix your attentions on. Perhaps one of the twins?" He suggested.

"No. I won't pretend, I can't," Kagome began, suddenly feeling dizzy.

"Or me," He added, although his tone was pained. "I do not like this either, but there is little choice."

Several minutes passed in silence as the cloud hovered, still above a forest. Kagome looked over the edge, down at the beautiful green spread out below her, and briefly considered jumping.

"I know you won't like it, but you, I mean, I can't pretend that with the twins, I trust them, it's just-" She started, then shrugged helplessly. "I trust you."

"You do not trust them?" He asked, almost desperately.

"I trust them, but they don't know the boundaries, not like you do. I don't want to, I'm scared of reacting some way, or doing something stupid. I want Kouga and Ayame to be happy," She whispered, tears filling her eyes and a wail building in her chest. She struggled to keep it down, prayed she wouldn't give away her own inner turmoil. She also knew she was probably failing miserably.

"I'm sorry," She whispered.

He heaved a deep sigh, and she glanced up at him and saw the resigned slump of his shoulders. When she realized it was the first time she had ever seen him look defeated, she let herself sigh as well.

"It is the best way then, and will be the most convincing. I am sorry for this."

"It's not your fault. It's a bunch of old wolves that need to be taught better. I just don't see why I can't go and tell them. It seems so stupid to not even try."

"The wolf has already tried. And though he was loathe to do it, he told them of your attack. It made no difference then, and they will not listen to you. They want this too badly."

"Well too bad," She snarled, angry at being forced into a corner and even more irate that Kouga and Ayame's mating would be overshadowed by something so utterly insane.

"I will speak with the wolf. Perhaps you could explain to Shinzuru," Sesshoumaru replied quietly as he directed the cloud back towards the caves. The rest of the ride was silent, and Kagome was thankful that they had not gone far. The sudden tension between her and the daiyoukai was another new strain on their friendship, and she was beginning to get tired of the constant tests the kami seemed determined to heap on it.

When she touched down, she immediately went for Shinzuru and pulled him to the side. His garnet eye widened in anger and then surprise as she outlined what the pack elders were planning, and how she and Sesshoumaru were going to handle it.

"It's the easiest way, but are you sure?" He began. Kagome swallowed convulsively, feeling as if her
throat were closing. She couldn't manage any words, so she merely nodded.

"Well, the pup is your safest bet. And if it appears that you've both taken an interest to one another, I doubt the elders will even think of trying to propose a suit," The moth demon sighed, his brow furrowed. Kagome could tell he was trying to think of something, anything, that could get them through the situation that didn't involve her pretending to be interested in a male. But after several minutes of silence, he growled, a helpless, angry sound.

"We can do this. Kouga and Ayame deserve to be together after everything they've gone through, everything they've sacrificed," Kagome sighed. "It's one night of acting. I've acted before, I can do it again," She finished, steeling herself. Shinzuru could only watch her sadly.

"I'll go tell the boys. But the children-" He started.

"They probably won't notice much difference from how Sesshoumaru and I normally act around one another, and if they do, we will explain once we get back to the shiro," Kagome told him firmly. "I don't want this getting to the elders, and I love them, but children aren't that good at keeping secrets," She murmured. Shinzuru nodded emphatically, seeing her own discomfort rise again and understanding the reasoning for it. Not only would she be acting a part she had no desire to pretend to, but she would be lying to the children as well.

Shinzuru took his leave silently, and Kagome wandered back over to Ayame, who looked anxious and afraid, definitely not the sort of emotions a woman should have before being mated.

"Ayame, I have a gift, but I would like to give it to you in private," Kagome murmured demurely. Ayame nodded to the women surrounding her and led Kagome deeper into the caves, her anxiety rolling off of her in waves, desperate and painful. The energy clashed with Kagome's own, and their combined worry only served to make both the air and the silence oppressive. When Ayame finally stopped, Kagome was fit to burst.

"I'm going to pretend to be with Sesshoumaru," She stammered, eager to have the words out. The youkai's only response was to gape at her blindly for a minute before tears sprang to her eyes.

"Kagome, Kouga, I was there when he told the elders, are you sure, I mean, there are other ways-"

"None that will stop the elders in their tracks like this. They won't dare cross Sesshoumaru, not when he's responsible for Kouga being lord of the east," Kagome sighed. "It's the best way, and the easiest."

"On who?" Ayame demanded, and Kagome gave her a small smile.

"It won't be so bad. Sesshoumaru knows me well enough to keep from triggering anything, and I want you and Kouga to be happy today," Kagome said as she took Ayame's hands in her own. When the wolf still looked dubious, Kagome sighed again. "Look, if I have to pretend to be interested in frosty butt, you have make it worth it and be happy," She urged. Ayame, stricken by Kagome's term for the daiyoukai, snorted as she tried to hold in the laugh. But the noise only triggered Kagome's own fit of giggles. Soon enough both women were laughing as if they had always been friends.

"I guess the only thing I can do is be happy. Thank you so much Kagome, you don't know how much this means to me," Ayame whispered. "Ever since they found out you were coming, they've been plotting. It's been a nightmare."

"Well, the nightmare's over," Kagome huffed. "After everything you two have gone through to get
here, I'll fry anyone that tries to stop it," she vowed, smiling impishly. Ayame laughed again, the flicker of hope that had been present taking over and mingling with a joy that hadn't been present before.

"Now that that's taken care of," She said primly. "Would you like your gift?"

"I don't think anything can top what you've already done," Ayame chuckled.

"Probably not," Kagome agreed. "But who can say no to a present?" She laughed, pulling the small box from the pocket sewn into her sleeve. Despite her words, Ayame eyed it with an innocent greed that reminded Kagome of a child opening presents at Christmas. She watched eagerly as Ayame took the box and opened it, and delighted at the sudden awe in the wolf's green eyes.

"This is beautiful," Ayame breathed, eyes still locked on the kanzashi. Her fingers traced the petals of the beautifully imitated wood poppy.

"It's not much, but I remembered how much you loved your iris, and I thought maybe something new, I mean-" And suddenly she felt very silly, giving a kanzashi, no matter how beautifully formed or useful as a weapon, to the ookami.

"It's perfect," Ayame said, pulling her to her in a tight embrace.

"Oh, I'm glad. Sesshoumaru got something big or whatever as a gift to you both, but I wanted to give you something, you know, for you," Kagome stammered.

"It's wonderful. Everything, you're doing so much for me Kagome. I don't know how I'll ever be able to thank you."

"Have a good time tonight, and try not to laugh when you see me and frosty butt cuddling."

The very image sent Ayame into peals of laughter. When they had quieted down, they strolled back, arm in arm, to the outer cave. Everyone looked at them in wonder, not being privy to the plan or conversation that had occurred. Kagome glanced to Sesshoumaru, who stood with a relieved looking Kouga, and forced a smile.

"I've got to get ready. I'll see you at dusk," Ayame laughed, her eyes bright as she went to the circle of women and pulled at them. All of them were darting glances between the two women, confusion evident, and Kagome ignored the slight hurt at being left out of the group as they all moved further into the caves.

"Thank you," A voice said behind her. Kagome turned, shocked to see the pale blue eyes of Kouga looked down at her with a gratitude that made her more than a little uncomfortable.

"It's nothing. I'll tell you what I told Ayame. Make it worth it, have a grand time, don't worry about anything. Just focus on how amazing it is to be mating the person you love," She insisted. Kouga looked back to her, and she wondered why he looked so shocked by her words. Determined not to ask, she punched his shoulder affectionately.
"Now go get ready, dusk isn't far off," She giggled. "Don't want to be late to your own wedding, right?" He nodded once before walking away, and Kagome moved to join Sesshoumaru, still forcing the bright smile on her face.

"Sometimes I wish I understood politics, but I'm glad I don't," She admitted once she had reached him.

"They are simple enough to maneuver around," He answered sagely. "Despite his misgivings, he is thankful you are doing such a thing to help him."

"Did he thank you too? It's not like I'm the only one making a sacrifice here," Kagome mumbled.

"He understands. Come, we must take the children to the clearing," Sesshoumaru rumbled, his eyes cool. Kagome moved to take his hand, blushing madly as she interlaced their fingers.

"Might as well start now," She mumbled when he gave her a confused look. He nodded once, looking resigned. She swatted his arm with her free hand playfully.

"You could at least look like you're enjoying it," She giggled, seeing the impatience in his eyes. "I'm not that bad. I think."

"You are a constant trial to this Sesshoumaru's patience," He muttered as they walked towards the children, who were being watched over by the twins and Shinzuru. The twins, having been brought up to speed, eyed the miko and daiyoukai's intertwined fingers and gave them a lopsided smile, their eyes conveying their own hesitation.

"Alright everyone, we've got to get down to the clearing. Now remember, this isn't Resshin and Nanmei's wedding, so we've all got to be quiet, and you'll do as we tell you, okay?" Kagome told them. The children nodded in agreement as they took in their alpha and mother's entwined fingers in shock. Kagome shrugged, knowing she'd explain later, and hoping none of them read too much into the action.

They took their clouds to the designated clearing. A huge fire pit stood in the center, piled high with wood. One of the wolves directed them to sit in a curving line, as if the circumference of the circle had been determined. They did as asked, and as the sun began to set, more and more wolves arrived, all of them talking amongst themselves, waiting for the elders to arrive.

Kagome and Sesshoumaru sat side by side, and Kagome cuddled up to Sesshoumaru, not needing any encouragement. Every second she could feel at least one set of eyes on her, and knew from their furtive glances that most of them were speculating on her presence. Thankful that the daiyoukai wasn't pushing her away, she squeezed his hand and tried to calm her breathing.

"It will be alright," He whispered into her ear, startling her from her thoughts.

"I know," She lied. He gave her one last, unreadable glance before flicking his eyes to the new arrivals. The elders and Kouga moved into the clearing, Kouga looking more than a little disgruntled. Kagome observed his stiff walk and the gazes being cast on both herself and Sesshoumaru. She took a sort of glee in the widening of their eyes as their gazes fell on her and Sesshoumaru's clasped hands.

Pretending to ignore them, she leaned up to Sesshoumaru's ear and whispered in a tone low enough she knew no one else could hear. "They look so silly, like they'll catch flies," She giggled, knowing they would misinterpret the whisper and cast their own suspicions on it. Sesshoumaru chuckled, playing along with her and turned from them to push an errant strand of hair behind her ear.
"Indeed," He rumbled. They smiled at one another, sharing a joke only a few would get before turning their attention back to the group surrounding them. Kagome saw the children staring at them with wide, almost hopeful eyes and wanted to pinch the bridge of her nose.

Then the whispers around her ceased, and she looked to see Ayame coming into the clearing. She looked radiant and beautiful, even if the only difference in her clothing was the gold kanzashi Kagome had gifted her with.

Ayame looked to her once and smiled even more widely when she saw the lack of distance between the miko and daiyoukai, and walked to the front of the fire, emerald eyes shining with unguarded joy. Dusk turned to night as the wolves recited their vows to one another, and Kagome was surprised by the brevity of the ceremony itself.

True night fell, and the ceremony was over, or so she thought. The wolves around them sent up a howl of celebration and suddenly the wood in the fire pit caught, roaring to life as if it had been soaked with gas. The noise was almost deafening and the sudden light blinding. Kagome blinked several times before she was able to see without spots dancing in her vision.

Smoke rose to the night sky, and for a moment she thought her eyes were still playing tricks on her as the smoke took on the vague form of a woman. But the children's gasps as the form skimmed through the air towards her proved she was not.

"What are you?" She whispered, eyes locked on the shadowy outline of the female.

'I am Enenra, little guardian of the jewel. I have come to help with the wish in your heart,' It whispered, it's voice softer than the substance of it's being. It seemed to drift apart lazily, the tendrils of her wrapping around Kagome gently. From the corner of her eye she saw the smoke wrapping around Sesshoumaru as well, settling around him before vanishing. The faint smell of woodsmoke lingered as the smoke settled on her, then disappeared beneath her skin.

She would have panicked if she had not felt the spirit within her, soothing and calming her fears.

"Momma, what was that?" Shippou demanded. Sesshoumaru was watching all of them in askance, eyes wide and his hand on his sword as the wolves, oblivious to the entire thing, began to dance around the fire.

"Enenra. She's going to help me with something," Kagome told them. Sesshoumaru's hand twitched in hers, and she looked to him, confused. "Is everything alright?"

"Enenra, she only appears to the pure of heart. I saw nothing," he told her, gold eyes glittering as they reflected the towering, flickering flames.

"She's fine. She's here to help me, like Kerakera-onna did," Kagome whispered. He nodded tightly, still looking at her as if she had done something completely unexpected, and perhaps she had, and squeezed her hands once.

"Children, you will go with your guardians," Sesshoumaru ordered them gruffly, his voice harsher than Kagome had heard it in months.

"Why?" Kagome started.

"It is what I was trying to tell you weeks ago. The rest of the celebration is not for young eyes," He informed her gruffly. Kagome looked to the rest of the clearing and noted that almost all of the younger wolves were being led away, some reluctant, others smiling and whispering as they pointed back to the clearing and the fire.
"I can go with them-" Kagome started, beginning to stand.

"Leaving too soon denotes disapproval. The ceremony is not over yet," He informed her, tightening his hold on her hand and keeping her sitting. Seeing the pained look in his eyes, she nodded once, then watched the children led away by the twins and Shinzuru. They all waved happily, but the journey to the wolves had tired them, no matter how little energy they had actually used, and some of them were yawning before they even left the clearing.

"So why couldn't the children stay?" Kagome whispered.

"Watch," Sesshoumaru commanded, nodding in the direction of the wolves that danced around the fire. Leaning against him, she watched. Some dancers were more clumsy than others, and some moved lithely, reminding her of Enenra. But soon after the last of the children had vanished, the drums took on a heavier beat, and Kagome gasped when the attitude of the dancer's moves began to change. Easily half of the wolf tribe was dancing around the fire, and people were moving into pairs.

Ayame and Kouga came into view just as the circling stopped and the couples began moving against one another suggestively. Heat flooded her face as she watched Ayame, her back to Kouga, move her hips, grinding against Kouga. The clan leader looked half feral, his eyes glazed as his claws dug into the red wolf's hips.

"They aren't going to do it in front of us, are they?" Kagome whispered into Sesshoumaru's ear.

"No, but this is a dance to their gods and ancestors, ensuring fertility. It is the last step," Sesshoumaru explained.

Kouga made a snarling sound deep in his throat as the pace picked up and they began moving around the fire again. Kagome barely recognized him as he lost any semblance of civility, his long sharp teeth grinding against one another. His eyes seemed to bleed lust, and she moved closer to Sesshoumaru.

Then she looked to Ayame, who seemed just as lost in the rhythm around her. Her face was flushed and her eyes just as glazed with lust as Kouga's were.

'They are watching. Let me help you,' A voice urged from somewhere in Kagome.

"Alright," Kagome whispered aloud, eyes still fixed on the multitude of wolves that were all oblivious to the onlookers, unashamed of their movements as snarls and small moans mixed with the drumbeats.

Something hot began tightening in Kagome's stomach as she watched the tableau. She worried her bottom lip as the males seemed to become even more aggressive, their hands weaving into the women's hair and their hips jerking crudely. The heat in her stomach seemed to focus and coil, and her skin felt hot.

"Miko-" Sesshoumaru started, and Kagome turned up to see stunned, gold eyes. His nostrils flared and she could hear him inhaling deeply.

"What's wrong?" She asked.

"Your scent," he started, then stopped, blushing hotly as his teeth clicked together.

"Enenra, maybe?" Kagome whispered, moving closer to him, then turning her gaze back to the dancers. Somehow the drumming seemed even heavier, and she felt heady, almost drunk even though she knew she hadn't been drinking. The heat in her stomach felt as if it were growing, and
her muscles twitched strangely.

She was surprised when Sesshoumaru hauled her roughly into his lap and held onto her tightly. His own muscles seemed tense enough to snap, his grip tight on her waist as she leaned her back against him, her head lolling back even as she kept watching the dancers.

"Enenra is a helpful spirit," He almost growled. Ignoring the tone of his words, she tried to shift and get more comfortable when she felt his arms fall away, only to have his hands grip her sides.

"I feel warm," Kagome sighed. Sesshoumaru buried his nose in her hair and she barely caught his whisper.

"You are." His hands moved down to her hips to resume their tight hold, and she felt the tips of his claws pricking through the linen of her clothing as his face moved lower to bury itself in the crook of her neck. His breath puffed against her skin and she shivered, feeling goosebumps rise on her arms even as the heat from the fire seemed to blaze even more hotly against her skin.

The world seemed hazy as they watched the wolves dance for fertility, the sounds of the drum seeming to mix with the fire into a primitive, tribal beat as the dancer's feet pounded on the ground. Transfixed on the sight before her, she was no less aware of the hands on her hips or the solid warmth of the daiyoukai holding her to him. Shivering every time he exhaled on her skin, she couldn't even feel surprised when Sesshoumaru growled, the vibrations tickling that spot and making her twitch violently.

He pulled his mouth away from her skin, as if his lips burned, and she looked up at him, surprised by the heat in eyes that were bleeding red. Both seemed caught by the others gaze, unable to look away, and she leaned up, turning in his laps to weave her hands into his hair. He offered only a token resistance when she pulled his face down to hers, and the heat intensified as she kissed him softly on his lips. His tongue darted out to brush against hers, and unsure if she was gasping or moaning, they opened beneath the caress. His teeth caught her bottom lip gently for a moment.

Just then a loud chorus of howls erupted, and they jerked back from each other, breathing heavily, and looked to the circle of dancers. Kouga and Ayame were practically running from the clearing, and the other dancers were following suit. Everyone else was laughing and Kagome noticed that drinks were being passed around. For a moment she was ready to ask for one, her mouth suddenly felt too dry. Deciding against it, since it was probably some form of alcohol, she turned back to Sesshoumaru. Just as she was, she felt strange, and heard a light laughter.

'I'm glad I was able to help, little miko. The trial is over, your friends are safe,' The feminine voice whispered. Kagome felt more than saw the smoke rising from her skin, the sudden absence of the spirit leaving her feeling dizzy.

"She's gone," Kagome whispered, still feeling heavy and strange.

"It is also time for us to leave," Sesshoumaru rumbled as she moved his arms beneath her and stood. Several catcalls followed, and Kagome looked over his shoulders at the suggestive winks and clapping.

"What are they doing?" Kagome asked.

"We fooled them," Was all Sesshoumaru muttered as he took flight. His arms were still tight around her, and she snuggled into his warmth.

"What happened?" She finally asked.
"Enenra helped."

Sensing his own disquiet, and wondering how much the evening had cost him, she stayed quiet for
the rest of their flight, and only hugged him when they landed. Three pairs of eyes watched them, as
if searching for any signs of distress. When their eyes fell on Kagome, they almost gaped. When they
turned to Sesshoumaru, they seemed almost...Sympathetic?

"Goodnight, everyone," Kagome murmured, taking the last empty bedroll and crawling beneath the
covers. She heard the males whispering amongst themselves.

"What happened?" Shinzuru demanded in a furious whisper.

"Enenra, the smoke spirit, came to help her. I assume that is why-" But Sesshoumaru stopped, and
said nothing more. Silence reigned through the cave, and still feeling strangely heavy, Kagome
snuggled herself more deeply beneath the blanket and closed her eyes, grateful when sleep came
quickly.

Their journey back to the shiro was silent and uncomfortable. Shinzuru had traded places with the
twins, and from time to time he threw her worried glances. The twins seemed uncomfortable around
her suddenly, and Sesshoumaru refused to speak to her at all.

"Momma, is everything alright?" Rin asked.

"Yes, sweetie, why do you ask?"

"You and Sesshoumaru-sama were so happy the other night, and now you're not."

Inwardly Kagome cursed the child's perceptiveness. She did not want to explain the other night,
which was still shrouded in a sort of haze for her.

"Kouga's elders were going to try and do something to keep Ayame and Kouga apart, and it had to
do with me. Sesshoumaru and I pretended we were, umm,-" Kagome started.

"In love?" The girl asked, tears suddenly forming in her eyes. "That was pretend?"

All of the children were listening intently now, and no few of them looked as if the news were a
physical blow.

"Yes, it was sweetie. I'm sorry we lied, but if we didn't, Kouga and Ayame, who love each other
very much, wouldn't be able to mate," Kagome sighed, pulling the suddenly crying girl to her. "I'm
sorry we lied," She repeated, feeling worse as other children began moving to her and cuddling
around her, all of them looking as dejected as Rin. Soft sniffles were heard, and Kagome felt her
own tears gather. Damning herself for not trusting the children more, she let the tears fall, hoping
they would forgive her deceit soon.

A/N: Before anyone flies off the handle about Enenra, she did not magically make Kagome or
Sesshoumaru feel aroused. It -will- be explained. Eventually. Like I said before, this story has
already been finished, it is just undergoing editing.

A bit about Enenra for any who are curious. From one story I read (haha, love online) she is the spirit
of a beautiful woman that was carried as a flame in her husband's heart and raised as smoke from
bonfires. In another she is a youkai that is made of smoke and resides in wood fires. I admit I prefer
the first, because ultimately I'm a sap. But this Enenra is a combination of the two.
The rest of the trip was silent, and the children's moods ranged from depressed to sullen to angry. There were no few temper tantrums, and even Rin and Shippou refused to be calmed by either her or Sesshoumaru. By the time they reached the shiro, Kagome was almost grateful none of them could (or would) go to Sango and Miroku's wedding. Every nerve was frazzled and she felt as if she'd been put through a wringer several times.

Yuugao awaited them, her face a mask of shock when she saw the children sullenly stomping into their home silently.

"Is everything alright?" Yuugao asked, her brow raised.

"It's a long story," Kagome mumbled as she followed them in.

"I have time."

"Bath first," The miko muttered in response. "Then I'll tell you, if Sesshoumaru doesn't first."

"The pleasure is yours," He replied as he strode past them, the men following. None seemed inclined to stay with her, and she ruthlessly squashed any feelings of hurt or resentment. They'd been acting strangely around her ever since they'd left the eastern lands, and she was as tired of their behavior as she was of the children's.

"I will meet you in your rooms once you have finished," Yuugao offered, and Kagome nodded before moving into the shiro as well, intent on getting clean clothing and a long soak in the bathhouse. Muttering darkly under her breath, Kagome traversed the hallways and stairs and was surprised by a scroll on the small table in her bedroom. Ignoring aches and pains that demanded to be soothed, she fell to her knees and broke the emerald green wax that held the note closed with excitement of a child at Christmas.

'Dear Kagome,

We have the most wonderful news! Resshin sent a note to Sesshoumaru, but I wanted to tell you myself. I'm with child!'

Kagome looked up from the note for a second, tears prickling her eyes as she imagined her friend writing this. Wishing she could have heard in person, she forced her eyes back to the letter.

'Resshin is too cautious to bring me to the city, and I find I agree. But I hope you may find the time to visit soon. The people of his clan are wonderful people, but there are few females left, and feminine company would be a blessing. I hope this letter finds you well, and I can't wait to see you again.'
Kagome hugged the scroll to her chest and smiled widely, her cheeks almost hurting as she imagined Nanmei pregnant. That the child was a hanyou didn't matter to her or Resshin, and it wouldn't matter to his people. Unlike Inu Yasha, their child would grow up happy and loved.

Putting the letter away to answer later, Kagome quickly shed her clothing and changed into a light yukata, grateful to be in something besides sweat soaked linen. Grabbing a clean set of her red hakama and white kimono, she was pleased to take a towel, and pile it on top.

She was closing the outer door to her room when she turned and started, seeing the silent daiyoukai standing stiffly in front of her.

"Have you read Nanmei's note?" He asked at last, as her hand clutched the spot above her heart.

"Yes. Isn't it amazing?" Kagome sighed happily.

"Resshin asked that at some point you be allowed to visit," He stated, completely ignoring her question.

"I'd love to. Maybe after I get back from Sango and Miroku's wedding?"

"A break between travels, or else the children will miss you," He rebutted. Kagome nodded her agreement. He had already begun walking away when Kagome stopped him.

"Did I do something wrong?" She asked at last. It had been bothering her the whole week it had taken to get back, and now that they were alone she was more than eager to have whatever had caused a wall between them done with. When he turned, his eyes were blank and his expression apathetic.

"You did nothing. The spirit, Enenra, did."

"What did she do?" Kagome demanded, moving closer to him. "Everyone's been acting strangely around me. I know you didn't enjoy having to pretend to like me that way, but, I mean, the twins are acting weird, and even Shinzuru is acting like I did something wrong."

"It was nothing you did."

"Then why are you guys acting so strange!" She shouted, finally allowing her anger and fear free reign. "If it's nothing I did then why is everyone acting like I did it! What did Enenra do?" She demanded, breathing heavy.

"I doubt you wish to know," He responded flatly.

"I don't care anymore! I'm tired of this! The kids are angry that I lied, and you guys are angry because of what someone else did, and frankly I'm tired of everyone being angry at me. At least the children being angry makes sense to me. This doesn't! Tell me," She demanded.

He watched her for several minutes before allowing a sigh to escape, surprising her.

"Enenra did something, your scent-" He started, then stopped, seemingly at a loss.

"You mentioned my scent that night. What was wrong with it?"

"Not wrong, just- Unexpected."
"Well?" She demanded after a minute of silence.

"Perhaps this should wait," He started. She stamped her foot and crossed her arms, crushing her clothing against her chest.

"I'm not going to wait any longer," She snapped, angry that he was trying to stall the confession. He gave a one shouldered shrug and she could see that he was struggling to keep his face it's normal, cool mask of indifference. Her foot was tapping against the floor, beating out a staccato rhythm that echoed in the tense quiet.

"The spirit did something to make you smell aroused," He stated, so quickly for him that she could have sworn that it was his version of blurting.

Her mind blanked.

"She did what?" Kagome asked dumbly.

"She did something to make you-"

"I got that," Kagome growled. "And that's why you guys are acting like I'm a leper? What the hell is wrong with all of you?"

"Considering that not too long ago you emotionally withdrew when told you engaged in an intimate act, you can see how we were surprised," Sesshoumaru fairly snarled.

"But it wasn't me," Kagome shot out. "It was the spirit."

"Everything that night was the spirit?" He asked. Kagome nodded angrily. He nodded once, and she could see him steeling himself, his shoulders straightening and the heat of his anger cooling. Once more he was the cold daiyoukai.

"Can things go back to normal now?" She sighed. "I miss my friend. Please," She begged in a whisper. "I don't want this to mess with us. Kami knows we've endured worse than cuddling and some strange smells."

"Do you remember everything from that night?" He finally asked.

"Kind of, I think. It almost feels like I was drunk. Everything is sort of a haze, like it was a dream."

"Then she did you a favor," He replied shortly, his voice gruff. "I will speak to the others. Go bathe," He commanded, walking away from her. As he was moving down the stairs, his words finally sunk in.

Aroused.

Instead of feeling shocked or scared, she allowed her anger to come back full force. They should have known it wasn't her!

Shaking her head, Kagome moved down the stairs, oblivious to the startled stares of the two silent guards that always seemed to be hovering on either side of the hall. Muttering darkly under her breath, she was still angry when she slipped into the hot waters of the bath.

"So she doesn't remember everything?" Kasai asked, brow raised.

"I don't believe so. She's angry that we've grown distant."
"I don't blame her," Shinzuru sighed. "The spirit may have done her a favor, but she hardly did you any. So she doesn't even remember the kiss?"

"No, which is best. I don't want her remembering something like that every time she sees me."

The room was silent, all of the youkai lost in thought.

"So we just pretend nothing ever happened?" Mizu finally asked.

"That is best."

"So she's alright. Are you?" Shinzuru demanded in a soft voice.

"There is no reason for me not to be. The ruse worked, and there will be no need to fend off would be suitors," The daiyoukai rumbled.

Yuugao sat across from the girl, considering the explanation for the sudden strangeness of everyone's behavior.

"Enenra helped you?" She finally asked.

"Yes," The miko replied flatly. "I'm not entirely sure I appreciate it though," She muttered darkly.

"Enenra, she only appears to those who are pure of heart. A rarity in most adults. And you say my son claimed you smelled - aroused?" She watched the miko flush when she said the word aloud.

"Yeah, but I mean, Enenra did it. It's not like I was hitting on Sesshoumaru or anything," She said defensively. "The guys should have known it wasn't me doing it."

"Enenra is a spirit, child. She could not have forced your body to react that way," Yuugao argued in a matter of fact voice. "It is most likely she suppressed the unnatural connection you make between anything sexual and fear."

"It's not unnatural," Kagome defended, struck by the older woman's words.

"It is, and don't dare argue the fact. It is understandable, but not natural. Or do you think your friends endure that same pain every time they lay with their mates or lovers? Do you think I endured such when I conceived Sesshoumaru?"

Kagome was bright red and trying with everything in her to not picture that particular scenario.

"No," She admitted. "It's just different for me, okay?"

"No, it is not alright. One of the few things I have never understood about humans is their repression of everything sensual. While youkai may not parade it for all to see, we do not believe it is a bad thing. And I have never held with the view that when a woman is raped, she should bear the shame for it." Yuugao snorted as if the very idea was ridiculous.

"It doesn't matter," Kagome started again.

"It does," Yuugao snapped impatiently. "You let your past hobble you and let them keep you as nothing more than half a woman."

"What business is it of yours anyway?" Kagome finally shouted. "I'm perfectly fine like I am. I don't need to be anything more than 'half a woman'."
"Oh, you are?" Yuugao countered loftily. "You're alright with forever being denied a child of your own body, or-"

"Whether I gave birth to them or not, I love my children, and I'm perfectly happy-" She cut in, but Yuugao refused to let her finish, continuing on as if Kagome hadn't said a word.

"So you're alright with living without love or expressing that love? It is not in your nature to shut it out forever" She almost snarled when Kagome's scent was washed through with shock. "What if, some day, your own children, your daughters, need your guidance? They will be unable to ask their alpha, and even if you can manage to shove your own feelings aside, what can you give them? A distorted view that is only half correct, if that much? And what about your own pleasures? Youkai are not so demanding of purity, and generally encourage seeking both pleasure and education in such matters before mating."

"I'm not going to get married. I'm not going to fall in love, and I'm sure as hell not going to 'seek education'," Kagome bit out, her teeth grinding together and her jaw clenched painfully. "There is absolutely no reason-"

"You're still letting them control you from beyond the grave. That should be reason enough."

"Did it ever occur to you it's not just them?" Kagome demanded sharply. "I was supposed to mate Inu Yasha. Has it occurred to anyone that I miss him, that I'm grieving the man I loved?" She demanded, her voice rising shrilly with each word. Yuugao looked taken aback, as if the thought hadn't occurred to her, and then chagrined when she realized it should have.

"I do not pretend to understand love," Yuugao sighed at last, breaking through the red haze clouding Kagome's thoughts.

The sad words and the sight of the woman, suddenly looking very lost, forced whatever anger she had felt to evaporate. Instead she inhaled deeply and let it out in a gusty sigh.

"You've never been in love?" Kagome asked, feeling for the youkai despite her heavy handed machinations. She had to have lived centuries, and she'd never been in love? That alone was enough to sober her anger. She'd only lived two decades and she'd known love.

"Sesshoumaru's father was a political match, we shared no love for one another. We encouraged each other to seek out their own pleasures after the duty of an heir was fulfilled. He found love, such as it was, with Izayoi. I have never sought it out."

"That's so sad," Kagome sighed, her hand going to cover the inu's. "You should try and at least be open to the idea, you know?" Yuugao's eyes were thoughtful as she looked back up to the miko.

"I will try, if you do."

Kagome pulled her hand back as if it had been burned, and she tried to control her temper, which flared back to life at the blatant manipulation.

"I'm not ready."

"The span of a human life is a short one. Just because you are surrounded by immortals does not mean you are."

"I know that," Kagome retorted hotly.

Yuugao was silent in response, and when she finally stood, she gave Kagome one last considering
"I have heard that you come from another time, and perhaps that is why I cannot begin to fathom your actions."

With that statement, she left Kagome alone, gone in a split second, as if she had vanished magically, forgetting her poof of smoke. Kagome groaned and let her head fall against the table, wincing when it connected solidly and sent shock waves of pain lancing from her forehead back. Despite the pain, she didn't move, instead taking in measured breaths, and releasing them in the same fashion. Counts of three. When he temper had calmed, she was surprised to find that the anger remained.

"You know, I've been his stress toy often enough that he owes me," She said several minutes later, moving back from the table and stretching. Her back popped and she winced again, wondering if she was getting old.

"I'm nineteen, I'm not old," She snapped to herself. Stomping out of her room, she wished more than anything that she could manage to slam one of the doors, but try as she might, she couldn't manage it. It was late enough, she hoped, that Sesshoumaru would be in his quarters. Ignoring propriety, thinking he had done it often enough, she slid the door to his room open and was surprised to see him staring at his swords.

"You should knock," He rumbled.

"You never do," She retorted.

"What do you want?"

"To go to the field. I need to practice."

"Not tonight."

"I'll end up murdering your mother if we don't," She threatened dourly. He finally turned to look at her, his serious gaze giving way to light amusement.

"Do not say such things to tempt me, miko. What has she done this time? Tried to force another kimono on you?"

"More like trying to force a man on me," She snarled impatiently. He jerked back, eyes widening in shock, and her personal gratification far outweighed her surprise at his reaction.

"Any particular male?" He asked at last.

"No, any male. I don't know where she gets o-never mind. I just need to fight. Please?" She added, although her tone implied anything but a request.

"Perhaps it would be best. I am sorry her behavior has been so intrusive," Sesshoumaru sighed as he stood, grabbing both swords and tucking them into his sash. Kagome said nothing, only looked confused as he moved towards a door leading deeper into his rooms.

"I have a balcony," Was all he said when she hesitated. Kagome nodded and walked through two more rooms, both much larger than her own, before they stepped into his bedroom. Steadfastly refusing to look anywhere but ahead, she was surprised when she let out a breath she hadn't been aware of holding.

Her cloud formed with it's trademark popping sound and she was surprised when Sesshoumaru
"Dare I ask what started the conversation?" Sesshoumaru finally asked.

"I was explaining what happened at Kouga and Ayame's mating ceremony. When I finished, she latched onto the whole Enenra incident and then started telling me I needed to get over the attack," she growled, raking a hand through her already frizzy hair.

"Surprising, considering the source. My mother tends to be very subtle in her machinations. It is why I detest her presence."

"It's not just the attack. It's Inu Yasha too. Everyone seems to forget that," she sighed. "And I told her that, and her only response was that humans have short lifespans. She's just so frustrating, acting like she understands everything. She even told me she'd never been in love."

Sesshoumaru was silent for several minutes, formulating an answer that would not incite the miko's temper further. When he answered, he hoped he was saying the right thing.

"My mother cares for pack, though she has a skewed way of showing it. Love is something beyond her. I have never seen her show tenderness to anyone, or even hint at love. But youkai are different than humans in many respects. Sexuality is one of them. We do not put a price on virginity, as humans do. Perhaps my mother thinks since one door has been closed to you, another might be opened."

"Well it can't," Kagome stated flatly, his explanation doing nothing to cool her anger. They touched down at the field in silence, and she ruthlessly drew her ki to the surface, more than ready to fight the daiyoukai. The cloud dissipated beneath him, and his feet had barely touched the ground when her aura shot out, a perfect, albeit pink, imitation of his whip.

The ground at his feet exploded as he jumped back. She gave him no time to feel pride, or anything for that matter, as the whip struck again, this time aiming higher, for his knee. His eyes narrowed and his darted forward, too quickly for her to see. When he was at her back, his own whip snaked out, aiming for her ankle, the normal ploy to trip her, but she wasn't there.

Instead, she was on her cloud, which seemed to wink in and out of existence as she darted several feet away. Sapphire eyes glinting with rage, her aura seemed to pulse, then burst, crashing against him like waves against rocks, pouring over him and trying to wear him down. A snarl built in his throat as another wave reached out, pushing him backwards.

His ki flared as brilliantly as her own, determined to find a chink in it's seeming perfection. Finding an opening, he wove his own power into hers and pulled roughly, brow furrowed in concentration as he forced both energies to his will.

"That's cheating!" She shrieked angrily. Refusing to rise to her insult, he whipped the energy around, determined to either tangle her within it or make her stop. Surprisingly, she allowed herself to get tangled in the braids of their ki, each movement only tightening them around her further.

"Stop it!" She snarled at him.

"Not until you stop trying to actually harm me," he snarled back, losing patience. Kagome looked at him for several minutes before a small sigh of defeat escaped. The flavor of her energy suddenly vanished, and he pulled his own back in, the air tasting of burned ozone.

She lunged at him, and he allowed her the physical fight. It was absurdly easy to avoid her fists and
her legs, although he would always move only at the last second. Her breathing grew labored, and he watched her for growing signs of weariness. When she began to stumble more than lunge, and her fists sailed too wildly to even be aimed, he grabbed her wrist and held it tightly. Her body grew limp, and he let her hang there as she drug in deep breaths, each one sounding closer and closer to a sobbing sound.

"Are you alright?" He finally asked.

"Honestly?"

"I would not ask if I did not want the truth," He rumbled.

"No. No, I am not alright." Even as she said it a shudder wracked her body violently, and the salt of her tears seemed to mist the air. He sat, dragging her down to the cracked and broken earth, pulling her close.

"I am so tired of people needing to help me. I'm tired of needing it. I'm sick of crying all the time. I am so tired of this life," She whimpered, burrowing her face into his shoulder to hide her tears. Electing to stay silent, he listened to the sobs wrenching themselves from deep in her chest, surprised they didn't make her throat bleed as they escaped.

"I'm tired of missing him," She confessed. "And I hate myself for that. I feel bad that it doesn't hurt like it did, I feel like I should keep holding onto it, but there's so many people now, I keep going and going and it all fades behind me. Kami, I'm horrible," She gasped and choked, all of her sounds muffled by his clothing. "I'm terrible friend and an awful person."

He was surprised to notice that at some point during her tirade, his hand had moved from her neck to her hair, and he was stroking the silken ebony mass gently, his fingers brushing through it from time to time.

"I want to be the old me again," She rasped over and hour later, her tears finally drying and the sobs and wails quieting. "Sometimes it's like I know myself, and my heart feels so full of love for everyone around me that it feels like I could burst. And sometimes I feel like I don't even recognize who I am anymore, this selfish person that's so happy despite the fact that he's gone. I just want to be the old me."

"How does being the old you help?" Sesshoumaru rumbled, still looking into the distance.

"Because I always smiled, even when everything hurt, and I could find the goodness in everything and everyone. Because it wasn't hard to be happy, it didn't feel wrong."

They were both quiet for several minutes, but Kagome was surprised to feel her limp form brought even closer as he squeezed her gently.

"He would not deny your happiness. It has been three seasons since he passed."

"It'll be a year close to the end of summer," She corrected quietly.

"-And much has changed. You have changed. Even if the change pains you, it is how this world moves. Everything changes."

"Even you?" She asked dourly.

"Do you think I would have taken in the orphans just so they would not be separated?" He snorted. Kagome made a small noise. "And this? A female friend, a human, that I have taken into my pack?"
"Because the jewel-

"In part," He interrupted. "But, as much as it humbles me to say it, you are worthy. And welcome. Although some days I still find myself unable to believe it."

Kagome was silent for several minutes, and he took a sort of delight in her shock, especially in light of the fact that all of the recent shocks she suffered seemed to be unpleasant.

"I still want to strangle your mother," She finally growled, although the anger had faded and there was a hint of laughter in her voice. He allowed himself a chuckle.

"You are not the only one that imagines such. She schemes and manipulates, although she truly believes what she does is for the best."

"Is that why you haven't banished her before this?" Kagome asked, expression amused.

"No. I do not banish her because she would still find some way to make me miserable," He confided. His efforts were rewarded, and Kagome finally threw her head back and laughed. The sound carried over the ripped and torn earth of the field, and he felt an irrational sense of pride for being the one to evoke it.

"Are you ready to return?"

"As I'll ever be. It won't be so bad. Sango and Miroku's wedding is coming up, and I can escape her then." "You can," He muttered almost accusingly as he shifted her in his arms and then launched himself into the sky.

"Poor Sesshoumaru," She mocked, although there was no bitterness to the tone, only sympathetic laughter flavored with a decidedly unsympathetic amusement. "All the world trembles at your name and your mother is the one to bring you to your knees."

Kagome opened her eyes and blinked against the sudden bright light of the fire, a strobe in her vision making her look away into the shadows before she was able to look back. The sound of drums began to permeate the air, mixing with the smoke and smell of sweat. The beat thudded into the night, heavy and mesmerizing.

A ring of dancers moved around the bonfire, shadow like figures that straddled the line between intangible and physical existence. Their outlines stamped and writhed in a circle, the light behind them so bright to cast their features in darkness, although she wondered if she were to look closely whether they had features at all.

A sort of drunken thrumming pulsed beneath her skin, her heart beginning to beat in time with the cadence of the drums. Heat suffused her as her skin seemed to grow too tight for her flesh as she watched the dancers, forms the perfect outline of men and women. Warmth pooled in her belly, and the feeling of being hypnotized only increased as the dancers moved in a pattern, reminding her of a kaleidoscope.

Silver hair swirled into her vision, and her eyes were caught by the muscular form of Sesshoumaru as he spun and stretched his arms into the air, revealing a bare chest. He was clad only in his hair and a carelessly draped loincloth, sweat glistening in the strobe like flickers of the roaring fire. Entranced, she couldn't look away as he threw his head back, exposing his throat, and howled into the night. Even though she didn't understand what it meant, she shivered. The heat in her belly seemed to coil
and tighten, eliciting a gasp that brought molten gold eyes down on her.

His hand reached out, a silent command. Silent and stuck, she shook her head, rejecting the offer. His eyes narrowed, and although she knew it wasn't anger that was reflected, she couldn't name the emotion. Coming to some silent decision, he swooped down to her, suddenly on all fours, arms on either side of her own, his face level with hers.

The molten gold was bleeding into red, and she stifled a gasp as he brought his lips closer to his face, then she relaxed when he stopped short of her lips. An exhalation fanned out over her lips, hot and moist and feeling so very much like a kiss that she almost believed their skin had made contact. But his eyes never closed, intent and focused on her own. Barely comprehending, she leaned forward and touched her lips to his gently.

The growl that rose from his throat didn't frighten her in the least as he jerked back, his hand around her wrist and pulling her with him. The invisible drummers seemed determined to entrance, and the thudding was drowned out only by the roar of the blood in her head as she allowed herself to be moved around the fire. Her form was pulled closer to the naked skin of the daiyoukai, and her fingers trailed over it, up the tense muscles and grabbing his shoulders when his hands gripped her hips roughly.

Her hips moved of their own volition, and oblivious to anything around her, she allowed herself to move against him, mimicking the memory of the fertility dance. Arms stretched to the sky, allowing his hands free reign to roam up and down the skin, inducing shivers and goosebumps in the wake of rough, callused palms and claws. She writhed in his hold, gasping when he ground himself against her, a groan of want escaping as his lips went to hers and his hips thrust against her, his hands clasping her waist and leaving her no choice but to give in to the friction.

The heat that was coiling in her pooled, tightened into a tiny point of light. The pure physical sensation, the heady breathlessness, almost hurt as she felt herself getting nearer to something, that pinpoint retracting in on itself until there was barely anything left, spiraling higher and higher into the night.

The heat exploded, sharp and vivid and jagged as she fell down, down, down, deep into the blinding light. In the distance she heard moaning, heard herself cry out, and found she didn't care. It felt almost as if she were underwater, if light could be water. Suspended in warmth, she blinked back the light several times, groaning as sensation came back.

The world felt like static, small noises intruded and began to bring her to the surface. Cloth moved against her skin, the smooth silk suddenly too harsh on her sensitive flesh. Determined to be free and let her sweaty skin breathe, she sat up and was removing the shift when she stopped, horror hitting her like a train.

"It was a dream," She stuttered, even though there was no one to hear her. "I dreamed-Oh Kami!" She groaned, burying her face in her hands, fear and shame warring in her gut as hot tears scalded her cheeks.

Suspicion flared and self righteous anger replaced shame. Moving from the tangle of covers, she poured water into the basin and stripped, throwing the sweat soaked shift and began scrubbing herself roughly. Pale flesh turned pink under her harsh ministrations and she discarded the first bowl of water only to fill it again, soaping down with her favorite soap, crisp and clean smelling, and scrubbed herself more. By the time she finished, her skin was protesting and even red in areas where she had been too absorbed in her fury to feel.

She quickly dressed, grateful for the familiarity of the white kimono and red hakama, feeling only
slightly more like herself. Forgoing her sandals, she didn't feel the smooth wood of the floors beneath her feet as she stomped from her rooms, intent on her quarry.

For once, the woman wasn't hiding her aura, and she cornered Yuugao in a hallway, displeasure evident in the angry, erratic spikes of her aura.

"What did you do?" Kagome hissed at the woman. Yuugao looked at the miko, shocked, confused, and with a little fear. Kagome's powers pulsed dangerously beneath her skin, sometimes swelling enough to encompass her, an angry red tinged pink.

"I don't know what you're asking," Yuugao started.

"The dream," Kagome shouted at her. "Is that your idea of helping?" She didn't notice the males coming from different directions, drawn not by the ire rolling off of her in waves, but the distress that hid itself beneath it.

"I did nothing to your dreams, I don't have the ability-" Yuugao started.

"You sure as hell did something!" Kagome snarled. When a hand came down on her shoulder, she jumped and turned, only to see the object of that dream, gold eyes hard and cold, directing their gaze over her shoulder.

"Mother, have you meddled with Kagome's dreams?" He demanded.

"I have not," The woman defended, obviously shaken. "I possess nothing that would give me ability to meddle in dreams."

Kagome was looking back at the woman, too horrified by the daiyoukai's presence to look at him. The shame began braiding into her distress, the rage that had fueled her confrontation receding to leave her feeling alone in the center of the argument.

"She does not lie, Kagome," Sesshoumaru rumbled, although he didn't stop glaring at his mother. Kagome nodded once, shrugging his hand off her shoulder and bolting, determined to get some space between herself and the daiyoukai. In her haste, she didn't apologize to her alpha's mother, didn't even think to.

However, the people left behind were still too shocked to even care about her lack of etiquette.

"What was that?" Shinzuru demanded.

"I do not know. Obviously she had a dream of some sort, and blames my mother."

"I did nothing," She said again. "I don't know why she would connect me with meddling in her dreams. Perhaps she had a nightmare of some sort."

"She's angry about your conversation last night, but I don't think she'd lay a nightmare at your feet. She would consider it something of her own mind," Sesshoumaru replied, his voice cool. "But see what your scheming brings you? When you are innocent, the blame falls on your shoulders."

"I haven't been scheming, I was just telling her the truth," Yuugao started, her eyes flashing coldly at her son.

"Unwarranted advice," Sesshoumaru snapped.

Strangely, it was Shinzuru to come between them, his hands held before him in a gesture of peace.
"This is not the time, both of you. Cat's not in any shape to deal with two pissed off inu daiyoukai. Frankly, neither am I. You'll frighten the children," He tried, hoping to calm the two. Both were staring the other down, fury as apparent as their bodies strained from their true forms demanding to be let loose.

"You will refrain from interfering in her life in the future," Sesshoumaru snarled. "I will not always be there to pick up the pieces of what you break!"

With that, he turned and was stalking in the direction of his study, the air around him seemingly on fire as his youki flared and he gave it room enough to make his rage known to the youkai left behind.

"What did you do?" Shinzuru demanded, turning back to the inu, garnet eye narrowed with hate. He moved in closer, ignoring the breach of protocol and uncaring if the woman let loose all her rage on him.

"Nothing-" Yuugao started, unwilling to engage her dead mate's best friend in any sort of battle. "I did nothing," She insisted again.

"What about last night?" He snapped. "What was Sesshoumaru talking about?"

"I told her she needed to move on, find someone, even if it was just a lover-"

"Have you lost your mind?" He roared. "Do you have any idea what she went through?"

"I know, I have heard from Bokusenou and from my son," Yuugao hissed at him, moving closer to him her anger, no longer caring who was in who's personal space. "And I know that humans need love. I know her kind well, too much like Touga by half," She almost spat. "They require love to sustain themselves, to see reason for the world."

"The pack-" Shinzuru started, angered by the woman's accusation.

"Will not be enough. I did not act on a whim, when have I ever?" She snapped hotly. "Enenra could not have forced her to feel aroused, could not have suppressed her instincts, the spirit merely nurtured the fire already there, nothing more."

"And how can you know how spirits work?" He snarled.

"Do not forget who and what I am, and what I represent. I know what Enenra is. She is more than some silly smoke spirit. If she was able to draw those emotions from the girl, then they were there to draw out. She could create nothing."

"Why the sudden interest in Cat?" Shinzuru demanded suspiciously. "You've never professed any sort of liking for humans, and certainly no sympathy for them. Even when Touga brought in Izayoi, you stayed away."

"The girl could have killed me, could have beaten me soundly. I have no illusions on that score. I fought Midoriko centuries ago, and that girl is more than her heir. She is far stronger than any give her credit for. That human is worthy of being in my son's pack."

Shinzuru moved back, and then allowed himself to lean against the wall across from the angry inu. A sigh escaped, and he pinched the bridge of his nose and made a small snarling noise.

"Cat is too fragile-" He began again, more calmly this time.

"Only because the pack has allowed it. She's ready to begin moving on and get over her fear."
Whatever dream she had probably did her a good turn by informing her."

Shinzuru's red eye regarded her silently for several minutes before he sighed again.

"Do you have any inkling what the dream was about?" He finally inquired.

"It's easy enough to deduce. I spoke to her of taking a lover, and she automatically assumed I sent the dream. And though she had bathed herself quite thoroughly, she missed her hair."

"Meaning?"

"She dreamed of a man."

Shinzuru's eye widened in surprise, then he began to sag, visibly slumping against the wall he leaned on.

"Do you think it's possible?" He finally asked, a glimmer of hope beginning to flicker in his heart.

"That she might learn to love a man again?"

"If she allows herself." Shinzuru let out a choked sound, something like a laugh and a snort. Yuugao smiled softly. "I know she calls you father. She will need you in coming months, more than the others."

"And why's that?" He snorted.

"Because no matter what the world has done, no matter how badly males have hurt them, girls always see their fathers as more than just another male. Fathers are the safe harbors for their daughters. Be ready for anything."

Shinzuru had a feeling Yuugao was speaking from her own experience, and he wondered what could send the strong willed inu into the arms of her own sire seeking safety. Understanding the unspoken question, she allowed a small, sad smile to play on her lips.

"I once loved someone that did not pass the trial, did not even attempt it. My father was the one to console me."

After her confession, she turned on her heel and left, suppressing her aura. Shinzuru had a feeling she did not wish for anyone to feel the sorrow tinging her aura, and her demeanor gave nothing away. Feeling as if the whole world was turning upside down, he walked away in a daze, unsure of what to do, or what would happen, next.

When Sesshoumaru tried finding her later, he found, to his immense displeasure, that the miko had left for the taijiya's wedding days early, taking Shinzuru as her guard. The moth demon was adept at illusions, and could easily disguise himself as a human. After listening to both Mizu and Kasai try to explain the speed with which Kagome had left the shiro, he had gone to his rooms and placed the his swords upon their stands and stared at them as if they could provide answers.

They were silent, of course.

Over and over he told himself he did not feel betrayed by her absence, that the lack of any information, even a note, didn't put him on edge. Again and again he told himself she was merely fleeing his mother and giving herself time to calm down. Repeatedly he forced himself to look at the situation logically.
He was still angry at her sudden disappearance. He worried because the distress in her scent and aura had ground against him. Again he cursed himself for his foolishness. The miko would have fled, and he should have seen it, should have gone to her after and demanded an explanation. She always caved to him, told him what was wrong. She let him help her. He was her alpha. And damn it all, she wasn't letting him help her now.

He barely noticed the knock at the door, and the footsteps as his mother stepped in barely registered.

"Go away," He commanded coldly, not even turning to look in her direction.

"I did not think my talk with her last night would have such results," His mother replied, and try as he might, he could find nothing dishonest in her scent. When he said nothing, she continued on, speaking softly. "You care for her very much."

"I am her alpha."

"And her friend," His mother added, and if he had turned, he would have seen the small, sympathetic smile on her face.

"Is that a problem?" He snapped, beyond niceties.

"No, not at all. She is a powerful miko, and a kind person, blind to the differences that would set most apart. It is a rare combination."

"And yet you still meddle? What is your plan mother? You would not have spoken to her of such things if you did not have one," He stated, knowing she was up to something, but unable to fathom what it could be.

"She deserves to be happy."

"She is happy."

"Perhaps. But I do not think she is at peace."

"It has been less than a year since the hanyou died."

"I had heard they loved one another very much."

"She grieves the loss."

"As is her right," His mother agreed softly. Sesshoumaru finally turned, his temper flaring at the admission.

"Then why do you interfere?" He demanded.

"Because she is ready to move on," The older inu replied softly, her face a neutral mask. Gold eyes rested on him, and not for the first time he felt as if someone was looking through him. It was not a feeling he enjoyed. But her words struck a chord in him. Only the night before the miko had admitted that she felt badly for not missing the hanyou as much, that she was going forward.

"Perhaps you are correct. But she is not like us," Sesshoumaru sighed, giving in to his mother's observation. "She will find her own way, in her own time. Allow her that much, she has earned it."

Yuugao was quiet for several minutes before standing and moving to leave. When she turned back to her son, he was staring at the swords on their stands once more.
"You are correct, she is not like us. She does not have the luxury of time that we do. If not forced to at least accept their existence, she might not live long enough to see the roads before her."

Sesshoumaru contemplated what his mother had said and what the miko had divulged the night before. Perhaps she might be ready to move on, but shouldn't be allowed to do so at her own pace? Even with their incredibly short lives, humans managed to muddle through well enough, he supposed. And she had the pack, a support system most humans, most youkai in fact, couldn't even dream of having.

But what if she did try to take a lover, or even a mate? Humans would have nothing to do with her, not while she lived in a demon's shiro and claimed any youkai as pack. Few youkai would be willing to see beyond her race, and those few would at least be hesitant because of her power. And there would be those that cared nothing for her, but would woo her to get closer to the jewel itself.

That cursed thing. He wished he knew what the right wish was. Despite the imminent danger having passed, it still proved to be a problem, and one that could easily spiral out of control. The whole situation was enough to make him growl, and in the privacy of his rooms, the sound echoed freely.

The idea of her taking a lover bothered him, although he should feel some sort of satisfaction, knowing his charge had healed enough to do so. But the idea of her with a human scraped against already raw nerves and the image of her with a youkai was utterly absurd. Raking a clawed hand through his hair, he gave up on thinking about any of it. The woman would do as she willed, and there was little he would do to stop her. If she had found the ability to seek other forms of happiness, it was her right. And his duty as her alpha and her friend to ensure that she could do so.

Author's Note: Every story has it's explanations. I promise no less.
"Kagome!" A voice crowed, and Kagome felt herself knocked into Shinsuru when a figure barreled into her at full force. Arms squeezed her tightly as she breathlessly greeted her friend. Sango pulled back, happiness giving her a glow that had been missing the last time Kagome had seen her.

"We didn't expect you for a few more days! It's so good to see you! And who is this?" Sango asked, eying the older man behind Kagome.

"My father, Shinsuru," Kagome said, chuckling when Sango's eyes widened and her face paled a little.

"Wasn't about to let my daughter travel by herself. It's a wicked world," Shinsuru rumbled, smiling down at the taijiya. Sango shook herself, then smiled brightly.

"I'm glad you could make it as well," She answered, and Kagome couldn't hear a single note of insincerity in the words. "I'm sure Miroku will be pleased to see you both. And I'm sorry that the disguise-" She didn't finish, instead choosing to blush beneath the miko and youkai's stare. Shinsuru chuckled and put a warm hand on her shoulder.

"It's alright. Things are what they are, and there's no use worrying about what we can't change. Now, where can I find your esteemed husband?" He asked, quirking a brow and earning a laugh from both women.

"He's with Kohaku, they're doing an inventory of the forge, seeing what we need most to make new weaponry."

"I think I might be able to help with that," He said with a wink before heading off in the direction Sango had pointed in. Sango giggled as he strode off, and Kagome was shocked to realize her friend was blushing as she stared at her father.

"Sango!" She hissed, although she couldn't contain a giggle.

"What? He's just different as a human."
"Miroku must have rubbed off on you," Kagome accused, unable to contain her mirth. "Remind me to warn dad to watch out for your cursed hand," She chortled. Sango gasped and swatted at her friend playfully, her face beet red at the accusation.

"Don't you dare, if Miroku ever heard he'd-"

"Get amazingly jealous and justice will have been served at last?" Kagome snorted. Sango sobered suddenly, and she opened her mouth to say something, only to close it again.

"What's wrong?" Kagome asked, panic welling up in her chest.

"Can we talk somewhere, privately?" Sango murmured, looking around her. They were still in the center of the village, having landed there with the use of Kagome's cloud. People bustled about, taking the time to watch the taijiya and the miko with unashamed curiosity. Kagome nodded and Sango pulled her through the village to a decently built house that had undergone recent repairs.

"Wow, this is your place?" Kagome asked. It wasn't the shiro, but it was noticeably nicer than the other homes in the village. Sango nodded once, opening the door and welcoming her in. After Kagome stepped through, Sango tugged at her hand again and led her to a small room off to the side. Once they were seated, Kagome against a wall and Sango in front of her, Sango began to sniff ominously.

"I'm worried about, about-" Sango started, fat tears working their way down her cheeks.

"About what?" Kagome demanded, leaning forward to take her friend's hands. "What's wrong, you can tell me," She urged.

"The wedding night!" Sango blurted, looking horrified for even saying such a thing. Kagome blushed hotly, but didn't let go of the hands clasped in her own.

"So you guys haven't-?" Kagome asked, leaving the question open ended. Briefly she remembered having this conversation before, and prayed to heaven, hoping she wouldn't butcher this talk as she had the other.

"No, but, I mean, I know he wants to. I just don't know how-" Sango started.

"It won't be like it was with the bandits," Kagome assured her, her cheeks flushing as she remembered the dream. "Miroku will be good to you, and help you through it."

"But how do I even?" Sango asked.

"Just relax, let him take care of you," Kagome soothed. "He knows what happened, he'll be gentle. Just remember that he's the man you love more than anything in the world, and that he loves you, and what you two are doing is nothing like what happened to you before," She assured her. "It will be all about love."

"But what if he realizes I'm-"

"What? Not a virgin? I think he knows that by now," Kagome snorted pragmatically, and Sango choked on a surprised laugh. "I know it's going to be hard, but just go slowly and remember he loves you, okay?"

Sango looked deep into her friend's eyes, and for a moment Kagome felt as if the slayer knew about the dream, which was absurd, but a blush still rose to her face, and she dropped her gaze to the floor.
"Have you, you know?" Sango asked, prodding her friend, disturbed by the sudden embarrassed silence surrounding the miko.

"No, nothing like that."

"Then what?" Kagome cursed the slayer's perceptiveness, and despite the distance they had suffered the past few seasons, that Sango could still read her all too well.

"I had a dream."

"Oh Kagome, I thought the nightmares would stop," Sango sighed, her own fears abating in the face of her friend's.

"Not, not a nightmare," Kagome admitted in a small voice, tears suddenly rushing to her eyes. Sango leaned back for a moment, her hands leaving the miko's, too stunned to notice the flinch at her sudden perceived retreat.

"You mean, one of those dreams?" Sango whispered. Kagome nodded, ashamed. "Isn't that good though?" Sango demanded at last. "I mean, I remember last fall, and even the winter. Doesn't this mean you're getting better?" She asked, bewildered by the other woman's sudden tears. Small sobs started in Kagome's throat, and they had turned into strange keening noises by the time they left her lips.

"What's wrong?" Sango demanded, going forward to embrace her friend. Kagome trembled in her arms, shaking as the noises grew louder in volume.

"I don't want to, I don't, I can't," Kagome started, unable to finish anything as the sobs grew in intensity and made her jerk violently in the taijiya's arms. Sango hugged her more closely to herself, eyes wide and feeling more than just panic.

"Kagome, whatever it was, it's normal, even natural to be afraid. But if you don't talk about it, it's going to eat you up inside. I know, trust me. Ever since I started talking to Miroku, things have gotten easier, more bearable."

Sango's calm, gentle voice soothed the fear. Sango was someone that could understand, she knew the fear and the nightmare that lurked in the shadows of the day. She just hoped her friend wouldn't hate her for it.

"I'm not supposed to want it," She admitted.

"It's human to want it Kagome. Just because our experiences gave us a distorted view doesn't mean that we don't hope for the things we dreamed of before it happened."

And because it was Sango to say that, she relaxed. Hopes and dreams that had been wiped clear from her mind returned, reminding her that before she had been attacked, she had dreamed, had hoped for something. And even though those dreams were beyond her reach, maybe it was natural to hope for something, anything resembling a normal life. Pulling away from her friend, she ran a hand over her face, feeling strangely lightheaded.

"It was a dance. And a Kiss, I think," She finally admitted.

"So a dance. And a kiss?" She asked. "Kagome, maybe I'm off base, but aren't those sort of, ahmm, mild?"

"Umm, really, just, umm," Kagome started, unsure of how to continue. "Have you ever, you know,
seen a wolf fertility dance?" She mumbled at last. Sango shook her head, then turned pensive.

"I know they're supposed to be barbaric though, my father said he saw one once, when they went hunting a clan that had attacked a local village. He said he was glad I wasn't there to see it," She offered. "Must be pretty awful."

Kagome stared blankly, and could feel herself blinking, but Sango's words and the memory of dancing around the fire were at odds in her mind, and she tried to find some correlation.

"Umm, barbaric? Uh, maybe?" Kagome squeaked. Sango's eyes sharpened in interest.

"Explain," The taijiya demanded simply.

"Umm, really...Close? No, that's not it. Bump and grind. No, that's too raunchy. Argh!" Kagome finally shouted, giving up. "It was kind of like they were having sex with their clothes on," She finally admitted. "Really, just, wild," She finished lamely.

"I think I can understand why the 'dance' had you worried," Sango admitted. "Was it really like that? My father, well, never mind. I can see why he didn't tell me about it."

"It wasn't, you know, bawdy or funny. Just, really sensual, I guess. It should have been scary, but it wasn't."

"And your dream, it was about one of the wolves you saw?" Sango asked gently.

Kagome was caught between telling Sango the truth and lying. Sango probably still harbored some doubts about Sesshoumaru, and the admission of who she had dreamed of could send her friend tail spinning back into her fears. However, lying wasn't what friends did, especially not over something so important.

"There was this youkai there, he was, strong-" She hedged.

"Not Kouga, right?" Sango pleaded. "Please, I know he cares for you-"

"Not him, definitely not Kouga," Kagome muttered, thinking back to the dream. "I feel really badly for thinking about this stuff," Kagome admitted. "Like I'm betraying him somehow, you know?"

Sango couldn't find words that would comfort her friend. On the one hand, it was good that Kagome was beginning to feel some sort of interest in men, but on the other, she didn't want to think about Kagome with anyone but Inu Yasha, and certainly not another youkai. Several minutes passed in awkward silence until Kagome piped up.

"So, about your wedding night. I don't think you should worry. Miroku is going to be patient and awesome and he'll make sure you feel good. Just relax with him and learn each other," Kagome told her brightly. "You still owe me a dozen nieces and nephews."

"I could just steal some of yours," Sango joked.

And the awkwardness passed, and they settled into talking about the children at the shiro, Sango's wedding plans, and Kagome's place among them.

That night Kagome was more than pleased to finally crawl beneath the covers. The whole of the afternoon had been spent with Sango, and the evening had been filled with stories shared by Kohaku and Miroku both as they had eaten dinner and lingered over the table, everyone talking about
everything they'd seen. The only taboo subject was Kagome's dream, although they'd been so caught up in catching up that it hadn't even crossed her mind.

Politely declining any offers for a bed, Shinzuru insisted he would be sleeping across the threshold to Kagome's room. The warm air drifted in through an open window, and she turned in her bedroll to look into the night sky. The barest sliver of the moon was visible, and with a start she realized that had he been alive, Inu Yasha would have been human the next night. The realization came with a stab of pain as she thought about how Naraku had been able to capture them precisely because of the new moon. And that Inu Yasha had died because of his sealed blood.

Turning from the window, she worried the blanket in her fingers and tried to force back the tears.

"I'm so tired of crying," she whispered.

"Then best to get them all out at once," A voice said from the other side of the door. Kagome sighed, cursing herself for forgetting the presence of the moth demon. The door slid open and he stepped in and closed it gently, then sat against the wall, his naginata placed on the floor.

"Come here Cat," He commanded gently. Kagome, still bundled in her covers, shuffled over to where Shinzuru sat and settled herself in his lap. Once she was finished, he wrapped his arms around her and she was surprised by the weariness in his sigh.

"Are you okay?" She finally asked.

"Oh I'm fine," He assured. "I just worry about you. The last couple of days have been rough."

"Betcha never thought this would pop up under the whole guard thing."

"You're right about that. Didn't expect something like this as a father either. But I don't mind so much. I just want you to be happy, however you come to it," He told her gently. "Although I hope you find it soon."

"Inu Yasha turned into a human on the night of the new moon," She sighed. "And Naraku found out about it. It's why he attacked when he did. Inu Yasha couldn't fight back, and he was our strongest fighter. Ever since he died, it's like I've been getting stronger. What if I had tried harder before he died?" Kagome whispered, self loathing making the words sharp, broken syllables. "What if I had trained harder before he died? Would he still be alive?"

Shinzuru squeezed her to him, as much a comfort for himself as it was for her.

"I can't answer that. But I can say his death wasn't your fault. You've been very brave Cat, and I like to think he sees that. And perhaps I'm wrong for saying this, but I don't believe he'd want you to mourn him forever." She sent him a dirty look and he squeezed her again. "I'm not saying forget him. But do you think he'd want you this torn up over a dream? Or that he'd want you to swear off finding someone to love? Would you want that for him, should the situation have been reversed?"

"You know about that?" She asked dumbly.

"I made an educated guess," He hedged. "But that's beside the point. This hanyou loved you. I doubt he'd want you to mourn eternally, shutting yourself away from any chance at love again. If anything, seems to me he'd be a bit disappointed about it."

Kagome thought about what he said for several minutes. Then she dropped the bomb, so to speak.

"It was who I dreamed about that probably has him cursing down the pillars of heaven," Kagome
"Can't be that bad," Shinzuru chuckled.

"It is."

He hadn't wanted to know who she was dreaming about, and he had not wanted to ask before this, but the dread in her voice piqued his curiosity while leaving him with a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"Wouldn't be anyone I know, would it?"

"Do I know any males outside of the people you know?" She retorted.

"Ah. Well, I think I can guess."

"Stupid, huh?"

"No, no I don't think it is. Tell me Cat, do you remember the night of Kouga's mating?"

"Yeah, mostly. The memories are kind of fuzzy."

"The pup said you two kissed," He stated baldly. Kagome flinched and he wondered for a moment if he shouldn't have said anything at all. "Maybe it's just your own mind waking up, and it transferred the image of him over to your dream."

"I know. I've been trying not to think about it."

They both sat in silence, watching the sky through the window. As night began to lighten, he felt her breathing deepen and her heartbeat slow. Holding her closer to him, he allowed himself the comfort of her closeness.

'Stupid? No, not stupid. Foolish? Ah, very much so.' Memories of his own courtship and the ensuing madness he had suffered in his grief came unbidden, crowding his mind. As a moth demon, he possessed a vivid imagination, and it was damnably easy for it to disobey his own wishes and replace himself with Kagome, and his lover with Sesshoumaru. He knew the boy wouldn't be intentionally cruel, but that didn't mean the damage would be any less extensive.

'Fate is a cruel bitch,' He inwardly groaned, his head thumping back against the wall. He didn't believe for a moment that there wasn't some form of attraction forming, although he wasn't sure if it was real attraction or not. It could easily be the miko, finding him a safe male - laughable, that was- had unconsciously allowed him to become her first attraction since the loss of the hanyou and her attacks. It went without saying that Sesshoumaru was not safe to have any sort of attraction to, and probably never would be.

'She'd pass the trial well enough though,' He chuckled inwardly. Then Yuugao's words returned to him, crisp and clear and suddenly taking on a new weight.

'The girl could have killed me, could have beaten me soundly.'

A groan built in his chest, a purely physical release for the sudden understanding he had attained. Wishing he could have a talk with the human's Buddha so that he could explain that enlightenment is not always the key to heaven, he settled for cursing inwardly. Once finished with his inner tirade against alpha bitches, he tried to find some consolation. What he found wasn't much.
At least I'm not there right now, dealing with her madness.

Kagome shuddered when she met another cold stare. It wasn't as if everyone was giving her a harsh, penetrating look, but there were more than enough to make her feel nervous.

"Sango?" Kagome finally asked, intent on finding out what was going on. But when Sango turned to her, eyes bright and cheeks flushed in pleasure as they went over last minute preparations for the wedding, she found she didn't have the heart to dampen her friend's happiness.

"Yes?"

"I was wondering if you needed flowers or anything," Kagome mumbled.

"Oh no, we've got everything we need," Sango assured her. Kagome forced a bright smile. When she turned back, the man was still there, glaring daggers at her. Determined to do her best impersonation of the daiyoukai at his worst, she cast a cold, imperious look in his direction and just barely managed to keep from sniffing disdainfully. Turning her attention back to the details, she forced the cold looks out of her mind and focused on what the taijiya was telling her.

"I'd really like it if you could make a speech, and bless the union," Sango demurred.

"I'm not sure-" Kagome stuttered, but stopped when she saw the crestfallen expression on Sango's face. Waving her hand she started over. "I'd love to, you know that," She chuckled, although there was no hiding the nervousness in her tone. "I just have issues speaking in front of crowds. But I'm sure I can muddle through."

The day continued on like that, and everyone gave Sango warm greetings, and everyone had a friendly hello for Kagome. It was just that some eyes did not reflect the brightness of their tone. Each hour that passed made her feel more and more trapped, and by late afternoon Kagome felt tense enough to snap if prodded too heavily.

"Sango?" Kagome asked again.

"What is it?" The taijiya asked distractedly, her eyes on the seating arrangements for the head table. Bringing Shinzuru had thrown a kink in her plans, and she was still trying to figure out how to seat everyone without offending them.

"I'm going to go take a nap, is that alright? I'm still tired from the journey here." Sango nodded, not really looking at her, and Kagome walked through the small village towards Sango's home.

"I hear you've accepted a demon as your master," A harsh voice snapped. Kagome almost jumped out of her skin when a hand came down on her shoulder, but when she turned, she was pleased to find Shinzuru standing there, his naginata over his shoulder. Only the whitening of his knuckles as he gripped the staff belied his rage.

"If you seek a quarrel with my daughter, perhaps you ought to show yourself. At least there would be some honor in that," He rumbled. He was answered by a man walking around the corner, his dark eyes filled with hatred. Not even realizing it, her fingers were working over the wrist sheath nervously, ready to pull the blade at any moment. It was the man that had been glaring at her earlier. With Sango's absence, he lost any control over his expression and Kagome had to stop herself from taking a step back as his rage stabbed at her, a palpable feeling.

"Holy women shouldn't have anything to do with demons, but especially not one guarding the shikon jewel. It belongs among humans."
Apparently Sango had convinced them not to attack, but she hadn't been able to assuage their fears. Or their hatred.

"I've seen humans tainted by it as easily as youkai," Kagome told him, once again impersonating the icy daiyoukai she called her alpha. "Lord Sesshoumaru does not believe in using the jewel for anything, much less adding to his already considerable power. Our alliance has allowed for better protection of the jewel. You should be thankful. If it were here, youkai would be sweeping through this village every day, intent on taking it."

"Stupid bitch. Betcha spread your legs for him-" The man started, but he was stopped, any words lost in the gurgling choking noises as Shinzuru pinned him against the wall, his hand heavy on the man's throat.

"I tolerated your foolishness a moment too long you spoiled brat. If I catch you speaking to my daughter again, I will gut you," He snarled, and for a moment Kagome saw the beast beneath the illusion, and prayed the pinned man hadn't.

"Father, come on. There's no point to this, and I don't want anything interfering with Sango's wedding," She urged, laying her hand on Shinzuru's arm. He looked to her once, and she saw the blood lust in his eye, could see the dark brown bleeding to it's natural garnet. "Father," She urged again, her voice slightly sharper. "He's not worth it."

Shinzuru jerked his arm, making sure the man's head slammed against the outer wall of the home, the skull connecting with a solid thud. She was thankful she hadn't heard a cracking sound, and tugged Shinzuru's arm, determined to get back into the safety of Sango's home.

The strange quiet that had surrounded them suddenly came to life, and she prayed Sango wouldn't hear of the confrontation, or Miroku. Both were wrapped in a cocoon of their own happiness, oblivious to anything. She wanted it to stay that way. The whispers were soon behind them as Kagome and Shinzuru stalked over the paths, and once they were inside the headman's house, Sango's house, the breath she'd been holding escaped.

"I don't like it here," Shinzuru muttered. "We'd be better off leaving and coming back the day of the wedding. I've heard some of 'em whispering, and none of it's good."

"No!" Kagome gasped, taking his arm again. "Sango can't know. It's just some of the villagers right, not all?" When he nodded reluctantly, she continued. "Sango deserves a happy wedding. I can't let anything ruin that. They won't do anything but talk, and we can deal with that. Kami knows we've dealt with it from people with more practice." He nodded reluctantly once again, and Kagome hugged him tightly.

"She's lost so much and endured hell. She needs this. Hell, I need her to have this," Kagome whispered. "I want to see her completely happy."

"I've been close to you this whole time, but now," He sighed. "I'm not leaving your side. If anything happened to you, I'd never forgive myself, and the pup wouldn't be too happy either."

"Sesshoumaru does not need to know about this," Kagome commanded. "If he found out, he'd either be annoyed, which we don't need to deal with, or furious, and frankly I don't want to deal with him like that. So we keep this between us, deal?" Kagome demanded.

Another nod, this time more hesitant than the others.

"Okay. So, since going out isn't an option-"
"Perhaps we might tell her brother, Kohaku."

"No!" Kagome hissed. "He has as much right, and need, to be happy as they do. Damn it, we're strong enough to deal with this. It's just some people throwing mud. It's not-"

Shinzuru interrupted and held up a hand, refusing to give in to his temper.

"Fine. But you will be ready at all times for an attack. And I will be sleeping in your room from now on. I'm not going to chance taking a second to get through a door."

She sighed and nodded once.

"Now, you said that the great outdoors was out of the question, how about you tell me more about this hanyou? I haven't heard much from the pup, and I don't put stock in gossip," Shinzuru invited, moving to the low lying table in the far corner of the room. Kagome followed and sat.

"Did Sesshoumaru ever mention the subjugation necklace?" Kagome asked. When she received a blank look, she started explaining how she met the hanyou, and what the beads were. Quickly warming to the subject, she delighted in making the tension seep from the youkai's body and watching him laugh uproariously.

She had barely made it to sleep before something tugged at her attention. Blinking sleepy eyes in the darkness, she tried to make out the shapes around her, the bleariness fading when a sense of urgency overtook her. She began to sit up when she heard a noise from Shinzuru. Looking to him, she could barely make out his face as he shook his head in the negative.

Somewhere in the house, a board creaked.

Her heart in her throat, she waited, wondering what was going on.

The door exploded into the room, and several men, all dressed in black and their faces covered, pushed through the flying debris, their swords at the ready. Pandemonium took over, and Shinzuru was on his feet, his naginata whistling as he moved with a deadly grace that was second only to Sesshoumaru's.

But the hunters were too many in too small a space for his weapon to be effective. His disguise shuddered and fell away, and a triumphant cry rang through the room as several of them recognized him for what he truly was.

"Bitch brought a youkai into our village," One snarled. Kagome was already on her feet, and scrambling for her wrist sheathes. Just as she had one in her hands, a hand came around her waist, feeling around her body.

"Where is it?" It demanded, and Kagome was shocked to hear a woman's muffled voice coming from behind the cloth.

"Get off!" Kagome demanded. The woman persisted, and with a heavy, sinking feeling of regret, Kagome stabbed at her blindly with the dagger, feeling it sink into flesh. The woman grunted, but ignored the stab even as Kagome twisted and pulled the knife out. Once again she shifted and stabbed her attacker's shoulder, hoping to push hard enough and shatter bone. Instead, the woman just went limp and silently fell to the ground.

"Dad!" Kagome screamed, seeing the warriors trying to overtake the moth youkai. But the noise had long ago woken the Sango and Kohaku, who came flying for the crowd and were working at them
from the back. Determined to protect the youkai that she had unintentionally put in danger with her demands, she rushed forward, daggers ready in both hands and began slashing and stabbing wildly. A fist came sailing at her face and she reeled for a moment after it made contact, shook her head, and rage taking over the pain, thrust herself back into the melee with a scream of fury.

Bodies began to drop, the poison on her daggers finally taking effect, and it wasn't until she saw Sango holding her short sword that she realized they had gotten them all.

"What was that?" Sango asked, eyes wide and breath coming in short pants. Kagome looked to Shinzuru to see him still tensed, ready for anyone else to try and come at him.

"Dad," Kagome started, bringing her hand to his arm. He flinched when she touched him, and relaxed slightly. "It's okay, it's over."

"It is not okay," He snapped, then turned a burning eye to the taijiya. "Tell me the truth, did you know about this?" He demanded, his voice harsh.

"What? No, I would never-" And then she stopped, eyes widening as she realized her words. "I thought I put an end to the plans. I guess they continued on without me," She murmured. Kohaku was busy on the floor, moving from body to body, unmasking them.

"We're leaving," Shinzuru snapped.

"No, the wedding-" Kagome started.

"It is the price she pays for beginning this," He snarled, losing patience with the girl. "They wanted to kill you. They would have succeeded if I had truly been a human. Think on that. They were ready to kill you, and if they had any brains at all, that is not the last of them. I'm not chancing your safety here."

"But-" Kagome started.

"No buts," He ground out in a low, quiet growl. "We leave now. Even if they were all gone, what of their families, hmm?" He demanded sharply. "Do you want to tell their families why this happened, that you brought me into the village? Do you want Sango to explain why a youkai was brought in her village, and she said nothing?"

"This isn't fair-" Kagome began, tears welling up in her eyes.

"Life isn't fair. Get your things together. We leave in ten minutes, and I don't care if I have to throw you over my shoulders and take you back kicking and screaming the whole way." With that, he turned and stalked from the room. Kagome looked around the wreckage of the room and moved over to the corner, the one area the assailants hadn't been able to reach, for which she was eternally grateful. A travel bag still slouched against the wall, but the box beneath it was the treasure she pulled gently from the ground. Walking over to Sango, she tried not to choke as she handed it to her.

"We thought you would like something special to wear when you were married. I was going to give it to you tomorrow. I'm so sorry," Kagome whispered. Sango handed the box to her brother and moved forward to hug Kagome, crushing her in her strong arms.

"It's my fault. He's right, I started this, and you got hurt because of it. I'm so sorry," The taijiya whispered into her ear. They broke apart and Kagome offered a lopsided smile in the dark.

"You can always come visit us," Kagome offered.
"We will, very soon," Sango promised.

"Tell Miroku I'm sorry, that I didn't want anything like this to happen. Please, please be happy when you two get married. And remember what I said about that night. It'll all be okay," She sniffed as tears burned trails down her cheeks. Sango nodded silently, her own tears making it too difficult to talk. Kohaku merely looked uncomfortable, and Kagome gave him a quick hug before hurrying to the main room and nodding at a once more human looking Shinzuru.

"Think you can summon your cloud?" He asked in a cool voice. Kagome nodded and they walked into the night. Flinching when she heard the sudden cursing of the female taijiya explode from behind her, she resisted the urge to run back inside. Instead, she pulled her ki into a shape, and climbed on. Shinzuru stepped on behind her and knelt next to her, his eyes still scanning the darkness surrounding them.

They lifted into the darkness, and it was only when they were easily a hundred feet in the air did he relax and move to sit, crossing his legs and exhaling loudly.

"You'll probably bruise by tomorrow," He observed.

"I know," She sighed.

"We won't be able to keep it from him."

"I'll take care of it."

Nothing more was said as they made their way to the shiro, the forests and plains becoming a blue beneath them. Even as the sun began to rise and the world was filled with light, the blue shifted to green, and Kagome felt herself growing more and more tired. When they touched down at the shiro that afternoon, in the gardens where the children were playing under the twin's watchful eyes, she almost groaned aloud when she felt Sesshoumaru's angry, oppressive aura approaching her.

"What happened?" He demanded.

But her energy was sapped, and exhausted from pouring so much of herself into the cloud and getting it to fly as quickly as possible, she listed dizzily. Shinzuru was putting a hand on her elbow to support her when Sesshoumaru growled warningly. Strange dots danced in her vision and the ground seemed to turn to water beneath her. When she fell forward her vision was filled with white and then concerned gold eyes.

Sesshoumaru carried the miko carefully up to her rooms, anger and concern warring within him as he glided silently over the floor to keep from jostling her limp form.

"How did this happen?" He demanded in tightly controlled voice.

"She used up her energy getting us back here."

"Why did you come back?" Sesshoumaru snapped, not asking the question he wanted to.

"Why did you leave?"

"She told me to leave that to her to explain." Sesshoumaru leveled a glare at the moth youkai and the older male shrugged helplessly. "You were the one that made me swear loyalty to her."

Sesshoumaru didn't know whether to be happy the youkai was going above and beyond that oath or
furious. Ignoring the demon, he toed the door to her room open and turned, stopping Shinzuru at the door. The youkai looked ready to protest, but he slid it shut with his foot, cutting him off with a final, decidedly quiet, click.

Two more doors and he was in her room, and propriety be damned. Determined to get to the bottom of the mess the woman had engaged herself in, he prodded her with his power and growled in satisfaction when it answered readily. Delving into the fissure and into her soul, he held in an angry growl when he saw her resting beneath the tree.

"Miko," He ground out calmly. Her posture stiffened and for a moment he felt taken aback. Her emotions, always so easy to read and feel and taste in this place, washed over him. Panic and worry and a tinge of shame.

"What happened?" He demanded. "I will not wait for answers."

"Someone attacked me at the village. We took care of it and decided coming back was the best option."

He could tell she wasn't being completely honest, and rage bubbled up, hot and searing.


"They were after the jewel."

"They?" He prompted.

"A dozen, maybe more."

He took a deep breath. Exhaled. Repeated the process. And again.

"Sango didn't have anything to do with it. I think it was my fault," Kagome whispered. She didn't have to explain, the image of her encounter with the man in the village hours before the attack came unbidden to his mind, mixed with her own fury and worry for her father.

"You will not go back there. Ever."

"You can't-" She started.

"I can, and I am," He growled. "You were in danger. If you go back, you will be in danger."

"I will always be in danger," She cried out, frustration pitching her voice to a higher key. "As long as I have this stupid jewel, I will always be a walking target. Am I supposed to just stay in the shiro until I figure out the right wish, if I ever do?" She demanded. "It's a prison!"

"You may come and go as you see fit," He snapped back. "But not there."

"Screw you!" She shouted.

"If you had not fled and gone days before your friends wedding, this would not have happened!" He shot out angrily instantly regretting it when the color drained from her face. Suddenly her back was to him and she was stomping away, muttering angrily under her breath.

"Miko-" He started.

"Oh my god," She half shouted, half screeched as she turned back to him. "It's Kagome. Are all inu youkai deaf? How many times do I have to do this?" By the time she was finished, she was glaring
up at the sky. "I must be out of my mind to even-argh!"

He was at her side in a second and grabbing her shoulder roughly.

"You will not speak to me in such a manner," He commanded darkly.

"Or what?" She demanded. "What can you do to me Sesshoumaru?" The words were filled with venom and her blue eyes had deepened to stormy pools of sapphire, so dark that his own image was reflected back at him.

"Kagome," He started, feeling nonplussed when she didn't relax her glare. "What happened?" He asked more softly.

"I don't want to talk about it."

And he found himself, for the first time, being forced from the core, pushed back out and suddenly he was in his own body, disoriented and dizzy from the abrupt change in his surroundings. He growled once, then noticed that she was still asleep, her breathing rapid and dark circles still prominent under her eyes. Taking notice of the bruise forming on the side of her face, he clenched his fists and took several deep breaths.

Ignoring the urge to shake her into wakefulness and reprimand her for her behavior, he tucked a blanket around her and stalked out of her rooms. Shinzuru and Mizu both waited outside, their scents stinking of anxiety.

"How is she?" Mizu asked.

"Fine," he growled, taking care to keep from moving at anything but a slow glide, determined not to give away the depths of his rage. For once glad to have the duties of his lands to use as an excuse, he shut himself up in his study and began going through letters, missives, and invites.

A/N: There has been mention of Kagome's character recently, and I would like to take a moment to explain. Kagome went through a horrible experience. That's pretty much in universal agreement. Because people are different, and their lives different, people react differently. Whereas Sango turned to hatred, Kagome withdrew emotionally. Because she wasn't allowed to withdraw, because she had the pack, she was distracted from it. But from time to time the fear returns, and sometimes those periods of fear last longer than others, are expressed differently than others. I'm not saying Kagome is pleasant, but I am trying to explain that terror and hurt can make people act in ways that would otherwise be foreign to the nature. This story is about the healing process. It's not fun, it's not happy, and it can bring out the worst (and best) in people. That being said, we're past the half way point, and things are going to start rolling fairly quickly from here.
The children knew something was wrong. Everyone knew something was wrong. But the only adult that seemed to understand was Shinzuru, and he was hiding behind his oath, determined not to break trust with his new daughter.

Of course, there was no distance between the miko and the children, or even the miko and the twins. Or Tenka. Just he and his mother. She was even friendlier with Jaken than she was with him. To say he was displeased with this turn of events was an understatement. His mother however, seemed to be taking it all in stride.

For two weeks, since the day she had thrust him out of her head, there had been no late night training sessions. No conversations. No interruptions of his day. And no touching. Which shouldn't have bothered him, except that she allowed everyone else to touch her. Even the twins were allowed to lounge on her, using her stomach as a pillow while they all watched the children. And more often than not, someone was there, blocking him from touching her. Not that he would have initiated contact of any sort after he had been rudely expelled from the core without explanation.

Biting back a growl as she lay back and let her head rest in Shinzuru's lap, he stood swiftly and stalked away, determined to get away from the silence that had suddenly sprung up between them. He promised himself that her sudden sigh of relief did nothing to him, and the strange feeling in his chest was a result of something, anything else.

The next day, his temper was riding high. He had received news that an envoy from the panther tribe was on its way, which was strange enough. But added to that, an envoy from the Anyano clan, and he was feeling more than antsy about the seeming coincidence. Shoving the missives aside, he left his study and was heading for the gardens, intent on getting some air and perhaps a run when he saw the miko.

She noticed him at the same moment and paused, only to try and flee a second later.

"Wait," He commanded, and tried not to be hurt by the sudden fear in her eyes. When he finally closed the distance between them, she was looking up at him again.

She was staring at him strangely. It was an almost uncomfortable stare, and for once he found the urge the shift, but resisted. Her normal, almost careless regard had been replaced by something else. Not quite scrutiny, nothing so intent. Her gaze fluttered to him, then away. Confusion and fear warred in her scent, jagged little spikes that ground against his temper.
"Miko, you are agitated." It wasn't a question.

"I'm fine," She whispered, looking down at the floor, feeling more than free to fidget. He almost envied her.

"Why does this Sesshoumaru sense so much fear?" And when had he fallen back into their old speech patterns?

It spiked again, stabbing into her control.

"I'm not afraid."

A blatant lie.

The truth dawned.

"You fear me?" He asked, his eyes widening. Though it would have been gratifying in the past, now it confused him. The woman hadn't been afraid of him since he had promised to protect her. And while her dismissal of his strength had initially been an insult, he had come to terms with it, and accepted it for the compliment it was. For a female to trust any male after her experiences was surprising, and some might even say foolish. But from the moment he had accepted that she trusted him as her alpha, her lack of fear had been strange, but not pressing, not worrying.

But the sudden appearance of fear did not sit well with him. And his question had been more out of shock than anything else. The skittering of anxiety rolled over him, drenching his own senses and only confirming his assumption.

"Why?" He ground out, keeping the leash on his temper. Damn it, her fear was doing nothing to stay his already fraying control on his instincts.

"I'm not afraid of you."

"Your scent."

"It's not you, okay. You can tell if I'm lying. I'm not afraid of you," She repeated, her eyes doe wide and star bright. The pulse in her throat hammered wildly and for a moment he had a hard time ripping his gaze away from it. Even with his hearing he had a hard time understanding her inflections, but he understood that there was a distinction. She was afraid, and it had to do with him, but she was not afraid of him. At least he thought.

"Explain."

"I can't."

"As your alpha-" True distress hit him in the face, an angry slap in response to his prying.

"Please, don't make me Sesshoumaru. I just can't. It's not a problem, just, please let me handle it on my own," She begged, tears beginning to form and pool in her eyes. Every muscle was tensed beneath her skin, ready for flight. What surprised him was that he was just a poised, ready to chase. Something was wrong with the woman, and she was one of his, his pack, and he should be demanding the truth from her.

But every sign pointed to the fact that if he pressed for the truth, it would only make her worse, and he wasn't sure he could deal with that level of distress without some committing form of brutality, and there was nothing, no source of the problem, that he could release that violence upon.
"This Sesshoumaru will not harm you," He spoke through clenched teeth, though he'd be damned if he let her know that. Suppressing the growl in his chest, he accepted her nod, seeing the sincere acceptance in the gesture. "If someone has brought this distress upon you-"

"No, it's not anyone else. It's just something I have to deal with, okay? I know you're alpha and you got stuck with me, and I'm really sorry. I don't know how it works most of the time, but I do know that this is something I'd have to deal with regardless. Just- I need time."

He nodded, still tense and fighting the urge to demand the truth anyway.

'She keeps her own council, regardless of having an alpha or not. She has always done so, and she includes others when she is comfortable. She is human. It is their way.'

He repeated the reminder of her humanity like a mantra as she bowed once -a new formality, when had she picked that up?- and fled down the corridor. More tension for him to fight, his instincts almost snapping as she rushed away. It would be so easy to give in, chase her down and demand his answers.

Any thoughts of fresh air and a run eluded him now, and he went back to his study, determined to figure out why the envoys were coming from the north and south.

The next afternoon, Kagome was surprised to see Mizu rushing to her, eyes wild and aura flaring erratically. She urged Boufuu into a gallop and met the kitsune at the fence bordering the field. He was breathing deeply as if he had run the whole way.

"What's wrong?" Kagome asked, dismounting fluidly as panic stabbed at her. "Is it the children, are they alright?" She demanded. Mizu nodded, his hands still braced on his knees as he took deep breaths.

"Envoys. It's not good," Mizu sputtered. "Sesshoumaru is furious." Kagome walked beside him, almost running to keep up with the kitsune's long strides.

"What's going on? It's not another war or something, is it?" She demanded breathlessly.

"Worse. The panther tribe and the aosagibi have each sent a woman for their clan and and offer of alliance."

Kagome stopped cold, her stomach suddenly clenching tight as the words sunk in.

"Marriage?" She whispered.

"Yes. And Sesshoumaru's fit to be tied. The situation stinks of something, what with both of them here at once, but he can't figure out what. Hey-" He said, noticing her expression. "Are you alright? I'm sure everything will be fine, he won't stand for this-"

"It's fine. I just never thought about him taking a mate. Silly, I guess. But he wouldn't pick one that didn't like the kids, right?" Kagome asked.

"He won't take one at all until he's good and ready," Mizu snorted. "And it bothers all of us that not one but two clans have decided to presume otherwise and make the offer."

They strode silently into the shiro, Kagome's heart thudding painfully in her chest. Every night since her return she'd been subject to dreams that grew more and more vivid, each one making it harder to face the daiyoukai. Despite Shinzuru's opinion, that she was merely using the face of a male that
made her safe- the thought of him mating someone else pricked her heart painfully, clenching it and digging in sharp claws.

When they were outside of his study, Kagome could feel the pure rage roiling inside, barely controlled.

"You go, I'll take care of this," She murmured. Mizu nodded once before bolting, more than eager to escape the ire that threatened to overwhelm him. Kagome slid the door open and shut it silently behind her. Sesshoumaru stood, fists clenched and shoulders tense, his gaze resting squarely on her.

"Mizu told me what was going on," She murmured, going to him. Her arms wrapped around his body, trapping his arms at his sides, not that he was moving them, and her face leaned against his chest.

"You haven't touched me in weeks," He snapped. "Why start now?"

"You need it. Friends help each other out," She answered quietly. After a moment of tense contemplation, his arms were around her, hugging her loosely despite her own grip tightening around him.

"I do not know what to do," He sighed. "Sending them away out of hand is an insult, one that neither I nor they can afford. But I have no wish to take a mate," He admitted at last. "And their timing is too convenient to be a coincidence."

"So you have to choose between the two?" She asked, heart tripping over it's beat, stumbling and leaving her gasping lightly for air.

"I would have neither," He snarled.

"We'll figure something out," She promised. "It's just another one of those unique problems we'll find a creative solution to," She chuckled. Her words seemed to calm something in him, and the tension seeped out of his body as they stood like that for several minutes.

When the door flew open, they both started violently, only to see Yuugao looking at them with something akin to fury, but much, much deeper. Her gold eye's flashed dangerously as she stalked into the room. Mistaking her ire for their embrace, Kagome tried to pull away, only to have Sesshoumaru's arms tighten around her.

"Tell me that the pathetic creatures sent here are not offers for mating," She snapped, teeth clicking together and grinding against one another.

"They are," Sesshoumaru rumbled.

"That crane is an enemy of our clan, and the cat no better. Send them off," She demanded hotly.

"I cannot, as well you know."

"Then subject them to the trial, trounce them soundly, and get them out of this house!" She barked.

"Trial?" Kagome asked, confused. "What trial?" She asked, looking up to Sesshoumaru, who looked slightly bewildered by the older inu's suggestion.

"Our house has always subjected potential mates to a trial. We accept nothing less than the strongest into the house of the moon. Dear son," She added with venom. "Tell me you were not oblivious when told of these things."
"I never paid any heed," He snapped out, just as harshly. "I did not intend to take a mate for some time."

"Well, this will keep you from having to do so. I will see to it the scroll for the ritual process is found, and I will see to it all is done as it should be. I expect you to be ready on the morrow."

"Tomorrow?" He demanded.

"I don't want those travesties here that long either, but we must abide since you won't throw them out," The inu snarled before leaving the room and slamming the door behind her. Kagome blinked blankly at the door, and then up at Sesshoumaru.

"Well, how's that for a creative solution?" She asked.

"It seems I must engage them in a fight," He muttered.

"At least you'll be able to work off some of your anger," She chuckled. "And it should be over fairly quickly."

He refused to admit that her faith in him warmed his toes.

"So who did they send as potential brides?" She finally asked.

"Harukaze sent one of her sisters. Touran sent her younger sister as well, Shunran." Kagome giggled at the venom in his voice and squeezed him again.

"You know, we could always let them around the kids. I'm sure they'd run screaming into the hills, never to be seen or heard from again," She teased.

"Or you could purify them," He growled. Kagome punched him lightly in the chest.

"They probably don't want to be here anymore than you want them to be. Let's invite them to dinner in the garden."

"Why would you offer such?" He demanded, eyes suddenly blazing with fury.

"Because," She admitted, "I think it would be funny to watch them when they're forced to face one another."

She didn't add that she hoped the combination of competitive behavior and a probable dislike of humans would make them more than unfit in Sesshoumaru's eyes. The easy out provided by his mother felt too easy, and the idea of him mating someone irked her. Chalking it up to her own strange, stupid, dreams, she pulled back and swatted his arm.

"Stop glowering, your face might stick that way."

He smiled brightly, and she shuddered.

"That either. Kami, that's creepy."

"My smile is creepy?" He snorted. "I distinctly remember you asking me to smile before."

"A real smile. That just looks like you're going to kill something, if you haven't already."

"I wonder," He mused aloud. "If I smiled this way at them, perhaps they might reconsider their decision?"
"I wonder," She snapped, "If you were to smile at them like that and demand to know why the sudden urgency to get you mated, if you'd get your answer."

He unbent enough to laugh, startling himself as well as her.

"We shall dine in the gardens tonight then, and see what comes of it."

The children were not behaving. They glared, stomped their feet, and refused to have anything to do with the two newcomers. Which was just as well, because the both females seemed determined to draw him into conversation, vying for his attentions in subtle ways, but still coming off as desperate.

"Sesshoumaru-sama!" Rin called out. "Come play with us!"

"Thank the gods,' He thought mentally, not even bothering to excuse himself as he stood and walked calmly over to the children, who were embroiled in another game of monsters and heroes.

"We need a better monster than Kasai and Mizu, they won't stop laughing. Mama won't stop laughing either," The girl pouted. The laughter had not been lost on Sesshoumaru, and more than chagrined by the antics of the adults, he smiled coldly.

"I think perhaps, it is time the heroes take down the monsters," He told the girl slyly. Rin's face lit up and he darted over to Kasai and snarling loudly. The kitsune jumped in the air and took off, quickly understanding that the game had changed. The children picked up quickly enough, and soon Kagome and the twins were running roughshod through the garden, screaming as the daiyoukai chased, appearing in front of them and letting loose one of his strange, echoing barks when he did.

It did not escape his notice that the two females hoping to gain his attentions joined the game, although Shuuki, the candidate from the south, lagged behind, her heart not truly in the attempt. Shunran however, seemed determined to join, even though the children ignored her completely.

After rounding the three up to one another, the children began to circle them, trying to trip them. Feeling strangely mischievous, Sesshoumaru darted in front of the miko and barked before lunging at her, more of a pounce than anything else, and knocked her back, rolling off of her as the children took their chance to swarm over her fallen form and proclaiming her vanquished. Her laughter rang out in the gardens, clear in the warm summer air.

"Hey, how about we play a game from my tribe?" Shunran asked.

"We don't want to play with you!" Zurui groused sullenly. Shunran's face grew hot with anger.

"You little brat." She snarled, hands clenched into fists at her side. "If I were your mother I'd-"

"But you're not," Kagome cut in, standing up. "I am. Zurui, you know better than to be unkind to others." The snake youkai muttered something that might have been an apology before disappearing behind the miko, getting lost in the sea of children now crowded behind her.

"You should teach her better manners," Shunran snipped testily. "Although as a human I don't see what business you have in raising youkai at all."

"I understand you've your own knowledge of how pack treats one another has been hindered by certain, events," Kagome suggested delicately, her tone belying the rage shimmering in her blue eyes and the insult implied. "But here pack is pack, no matter their breeding. I would thank you not to call any of my children brats. Understand that they don't trust outsiders."
"I won't be an outsider for long," The red haired cat huffed.

"Rather presumptuous," Sesshoumaru growled.

"I've heard that for the house of the moon, we only have to display our strengths in battle. The strongest is elected as the mate. I'm not in any danger from her," Shunran said with a disdainful glare over her shoulder at Shuuki. "And the honor of your clan won't let you back down once it's done."

Kagome stared in shock at the female. That was it? That was the trial? The strongest won? Fear spiraled out of control and only the small hands suddenly clasping her own stopped her from falling to her knees.

"I'm afraid that is not quite how it works," A new voice cut in, sounding anything but apologetic.

"What?" Shunran asked, looking around for the owner of the voice. Appearing from behind a tree, Yuugao stepped out, her gold eyes filled with malicious triumph.

"It does not work that way. You must either beat him, or engage him in a draw."

"That's crazy!" Shunran stuttered, quickly losing what composure she had. "I was told all we had to do was prove our abilities!"

"You do. The house of the moon accepts nothing but the strongest and smartest. It is how we have held the title for so long. Accept the terms, or begone."

Shunran looked ready to spit acid and leave then and there, but steeled herself and straightened, her eyes flashing angrily.

"Fine, I accept."

"And you, aosagibi? Do you accept?"

"I knew the terms before I was sent here. I accept," The quiet youkai sighed.

"Then both of you, leave this place, and be ready for tomorrow. Now!" She barked when neither female began to move. Shunran, still glaring angrily at the female daiyoukai, stalked off, and Kagome released a sigh of relief.

"Twins, collect the children and come with me. Shinzuru, you as well," She commanded imperiously.

"I can-" Kagome started.

"You will stay here and discuss what you shall do if one of them wins tomorrow," The woman snapped. Kagome started, feeling bereft when the hands holding her own released their hold and followed the twins inside. Soon Kagome and Sesshoumaru were left outside in the gardens, alone.

"So," Kagome started, then shrugged helplessly and walked over to the blanket. "They're not going to win," She murmured.

"Only if I let them," Sesshoumaru answered as he sat down beside her. He did not expect the sudden tang of fear flavored by sorrow to emanate from her, clouding her aura and scent.

"Would you let them?" She whispered.

"No. They are not suitable. The cat is too abrasive, and the children already despise her."
"The children despise both of them," Kagome sighed. "Although for the life of me, I don't know why. I know they're leery of strangers, but this went beyond that. Even Rin was acting coldly towards them."

"It does not matter," Sesshoumaru shrugged indifferently. "Neither will win against me, or even engage me in a draw. The cat is weak, and even though the crane is strong, she is not strong enough to subdue me." He was quiet for several minutes, staring into the quickly darkening sky before he asked the question that had been bothering him.

"Why were you afraid?"

"Afraid of what?" Kagome asked, eyes locked on the stars.

"The cat, when she spoke of the trial. You reeked of fear."

"I'm just worried about how someone like that around would affect the kids," She muttered hastily.

"Even if I could not smell the lie, it would be obvious," He rebutted. Kagome sighed and dropped her gaze to her lap.

"I guess the idea of another female coming in scares me," She admitted. Though he could tell she was holding back, he didn't press her. She was essentially acting as alpha female, despite his mother's presence. Any female coming in would demand those rights instinctively, and she would lose them. The miko had plenty to be afraid of. If he weren't strong and determined to stay unwed at least.

He threw an arm over her shoulder and was surprised when she leaned into him. Allowing himself to be content with the first relaxed, freely given contact in weeks, he turned his gaze back to the stars.

"I've missed this," Kagome sighed to herself quietly.

Sesshoumaru found he agreed, although he did so only in his thoughts.

"Hnn."

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A/N: Creepy Sess smile FTW! I hope you all enjoyed, and see you next week!
It was late afternoon, and Kagome was doing her best to concentrate on her targets. Kotaeru was drilling her once more, this time throwing wooden targets at her, telling her to stop them before they could strike. Riding on Boufuu while shooting was still difficult, and the targets suddenly flying at her at top speed only made it worse. Six out of ten targets either struck her or narrowly missed because she was able to move in the nick of time.

Part of it was because of her own nervous tension. Sesshoumaru had already left for some predetermined battlefield with his mother and Shunran. Despite her faith in Sesshoumaru's abilities, the waves of power that tingled on the edge of her senses still pulled at her, demanding she go help even though she knew, logically, that it was pointless.

Another target flying drew her from her thoughts and she aimed her arrow and let it fly. It missed by inches and the target connected solidly with her chest.

"Pay attention!" Kotaeru barked.

"I can't," Kagome whined. "I know he's doing, whatever it is, but the energy is making me antsy," She growled, ducking as another target flew her way. Ignoring the youkai's angry growls, she galloped toward him, stopping short and letting Boufuu rear angrily, holding tightly to his mane.

"I can't concentrate today. Can't you feel it?" Kagome demanded. Kotaeru sighed and nodded knowingly.

"I can feel it. Like a storm in the distance. Mostly his power too. Silly girl probably won't give in and he's trying to force her to without killing her."

Kagome was just about to respond when a wall of blue fire circled the both of them, it's heat pummeling her senses.

"What the hell!" Kotaeru growled, his ever present staff at the ready. The fire slammed into him, knocking him clear of the ring as Kagome was summoning her ki, intent on blasting whoever was trapping them. Her power swelled and destroyed the fire as it touched it, banishing the heat and flickering light. A youkai shouted angrily, but another wall of fire went up, blinding her. Boufuu whickered angrily, and she felt herself being dragged down from his back. Sending out another pulse of her own power, she was surprised when the grip on her didn't loosen.

"Your little tricks don't work on me girl," A voice rasped angrily as he pulled her off of Boufuu's bucking form.

It was the last thing she heard before something struck her head, coming down hard and sending her
Sesshoumaru was tiring of the game the panther demon was intent on playing. They had started at
dawn, and as of yet she had only actively engaged him in battle for three minutes, using her illusions
to trap him and get away. Which, even for a female, made no sense in the context of her purpose. He
released another frustrated blast of his youki, determined to flush her out, even if it took leveling the
forest she had taken refuge in.

"I tire of this," He muttered, finding the end of yet another false trail. Her scent clung everywhere,
making it difficult to track her, and with the sun reaching it's zenith, it was beyond time for the farce
to end.

"Come out!" He commanded with more force than he cared to admit.

"Alright, I suppose I can, since you're getting bored. And here I had always heard alphas liked the
chase," A coy voice said. He couldn't decide whether it was her voice or her tone that grated on him
more. When she appeared, seeming to suddenly blink into existence, he wanted to run her through,
political disaster or not.

"I see no purpose in your nudity," He commented in a bored tone.

"No?" She giggled sweetly, making his stomach roll in disgust. "You don't like what you see?"

"No."

Her green eyes narrowed mischievously, and her form shimmered into her older sister's.

"I can become anyone you want. Just think of the possibilities."

He wondered if she really thought so little of herself, that she would take on another's form for
rutting. That she had taken her sister's face surprised him.

"And here I thought you appreciated Touran the most. I guess the rumors were true," She purred as
she moved closer to him, pressing her body against his. Her form shimmered again, and it was
suddenly Kagome's blue eyes staring up at him, her pale skin soft against his chest. For a second he
was stunned not just by the illusion itself, but that the cat would have the nerve to turn into the miko
of all people, only to jerk back when he realized that the scars that were integral to who she was
were missing.

"Disgusting," He spat venomously. His quiet declaration was only met with laughter. The illusion
faded and she was herself once again, and thankfully clothed.

"So the rumors are true. The great Sesshoumaru, brought low by a human woman. Touran said you
had no interest, but she was wrong! Oh this is too much," She crowed, unable to contain her stunned
laughter.

"You assume much," He snapped. "Either attack me, or withdraw from the trial. You will not win."

"You're right, I suppose," She sighed. "Well, Touran wanted me to try, and I did. There's not a
chance in the seven hells that I'm going to risk my pretty hide just to end up losing. I withdraw my
suit, Sesshoumaru-sama," She mocked. "Perhaps the bird will fare better."

"Doubtful." He turned away and launched himself into the air, determined to find his mother and get
the next battle out of the way. She lounged, almost catlike, on a cloud above him, her eyes filled with
"I wondered if she was going to try and get you to lose. Wouldn't be the first time someone's tried that particular tactic. That she took on another's form was unique though," She chortled. Sesshoumaru was formulating a response, still too angry at the memory of the fake Kagome pressing against him, fingers trailing over his chest to come up with much of anything, when he felt something brushing against his senses.

Yuugao stopped her laughter as well, and her gaze turned to their left, proving she had felt it as well. It pulsed against his senses again, and he had no trouble recognizing it.

They were both transformed within seconds, flying towards the shiro at breakneck speed. When the power did not pulse again, Sesshoumaru grew worried instead of relaxed. Thankful for the added speed his natural form gave him, he quickly outstripped his mother and forced the beast within him to curl back on itself, landing in the tangle of confusion once more in his humanoid form.

"What happened?" He demanded angrily, seeing the worried glances exchanged by Shinzuru and the twins.

"Kotaeru's got hit hard, and Cat's missing. We can't get a hold on her anywhere. The energy though, and the scents, it was humans and the aosagibi both," Kasai growled.

"The southern envoy?" He demanded.

"Gone," Shinzuru confirmed.

It took him several minutes to realize that the growling noise echoing through the training field was coming from him.

"You two, go back to the children. No one is to come near them," He snarled, the beast within clamoring, scratching, howling at it's confines and demanding release. The kitsune opened their mouths only to be cut off with another deep snarl. "Mizu, get word to Resshin."

"But his mate's with child, he won't leave her," Mizu started.

"Do as I say," Sesshoumaru snapped impatiently. "He is to wait here. And send word to the wolf, the bitch's lands are his now, she violated the treaty." They were all still staring at him, stupefied. "Well, go!" He barked.

"What about me, pup?" Shinzuru demanded as he pulled Tenseiga free of it's sheathe. Angry pallbearers screamed their protest as he slashed through them without a second thought. Kotaeru coughed and blinked blindly.

"Mother, help him," He said, gesturing to Kotaeru, who seemed to be falling into shock. "Shinzuru, you're coming with me," He shot out, not taking the time to hear any reply before vaulting into the sky and concentrating on the miko's scent. Her own grass and summer wind scent blended easily with the afternoon air, but it lacked the tinge of her power, which had always flavored the smell.

"Got anything?" Shinzuru asked quietly. Sesshoumaru ignored him, still determined to find any clue, a trace, of her energy. Exhaling slowly, he gave in to the beast throwing itself against the walls of his restraint, letting it slip through enough to heighten his senses. The brightness of the sun seared his retinas, and everything looked sharper, coming into clearer focus. The most subtle of movements were caught by his stare, and he turned inward, raging silently.
There!" The beast howled triumphantly when it found a wisp of the lightning that was always present in the woman's scent, vague and muffled. Someone had put a barrier around her. She should have been able to break it. Why hadn't she broken it? Every sign pointed to a fight.

He growled again. They had to have done something to incapacitate her.

"Follow," He snarled, blood lust echoing in his tone. He flew, clinging to the whisper thin thread of her scent, imagining the flesh of her kidnappers rending in his jaws.

Kagome blinked several times, groaning as she tried to move, only to find herself trussed up so thoroughly she was surprised she could breathe.

"Oi, the bitch is awake," A voice called out. Kagome looked up, noticing the men sitting around the fire at last. Strangely, there were no youkai. What had happened to the youkai?

A man began walking over to her, his stride long and purposeful. Kagome expected him to start yelling, gloating, something. Instead he was silent when his foot came out and kicked her in her stomach, knocking the breath from her. Bile rose to her throat and she choked while trying to drag in air.

"Stupid bitch, that was for my brother," He snapped before going back to the fire. Coughing, Kagome finally managed to get some air into her lungs even as the pain in her stomach radiated through her body, pulsing and echoing painfully.

"I say we take her, then kill her and leave her for the beast to find," One laughed, the sound stilling Kagome even as other men jeered and laughed with him.

"I'm not putting my cock in something that's been catering to a demon. It's probably grown fangs by now," Another taunted. With sinking dread, Kagome saw the leers being cast in her direction.

"I've never seen a demon whore's cunt. It might have, youkai have some peculiar pleasures."

"I say we check," Another slurred drunkenly. With rising panic, Kagome tried to wiggle away as three began moving towards her. Tied too tightly to do anything but watch with wide eyes, she screamed when they pulled her up roughly from the ground. A knife flashed in the flickering firelight and she screamed again, lashing out with her legs. A hard fist connected with her jaw and her head snapped back. Temporarily dazed, the knife went to work, cutting the ropes holding her legs. Then she heard the sound of her linen hakama rending beneath the blade and began her struggles anew.

Too scared to feel victory when her foot connected solidly with the man's face, she kept thrashing violently, determined to fight them. Hands tangled into her hair and jerked violently, bringing tears to her eyes and a white hot flash of pain through her skull.

"No!" She snarled, ignoring the pain and pulling against her hair. A hand slapped her heavily, once, twice, and a third time, bringing the taste of blood to her mouth. At some point others had joined the fray and were restraining her legs, bawdy, repulsive slurs and chants blending into one another until they became nothing but white noise beneath the sounds of her shrieks.

The knife continued it's work, exposing the white skin of her muscled calf, and then her knee. Determined not to give into hystericis, to think and to fight like he'd told her too, she inhaled deeply and went limp in their arms. Several chuckled and she could swear one of them said 'good girl', which only served to further ignite her rage as she tried to figure a way out.

"Stop," A voice suddenly commanded, carrying over the din and reaching her assailants. The men...
stopped and she was able to get a look at the speaker. Obviously the leader, as the men began to back off, only two staying to retie her bonds, he wasn't drunk, and his gaze was locked on her form.

"You should have come to the village for protection. This never would have happened if you had," He accused quietly.

"I had children to take care of," She snarled. "And the jewel doesn't belong near people like you!"

She felt the strike as much as she heard it, and her head reeled from the blow.

"Bitch, it doesn't belong with some demon's whore," The man behind her growled, tightening the rope on her legs even more.

"You've stolen it, and you're going to use it," She whispered angrily. "That proves I was right to refuse your protection!"

"I will make the correct wish on it," The man said. "We will become powerful enough to destroy the youkai. Those beasts even fight one another. They came to us, offering us the jewel so they could remove you from the fight. It will be karma, when we destroy all of them with the tool they carelessly threw away."

"Wouldn't that put you out of a job?" Kagome asked dryly, licking the split in her lip.

"The world would be safe," He reasoned, the hated gem still in the palm of his hand, rolling back and forth carelessly.

"As long as people live, the world will never be safe, trust me, that much I know," She spat. The man shrugged indifferently, then turned and walked to the mouth of the cave.

"No doubt your master is on his way. I think perhaps I'll use this and test out my new strength on him."

The surge of impure, unholy energy that washed through the cave battered at her senses, the almost real sickly smell ghosting around her was enough to make her stomach roll. Winds buffeted everyone inside the cave and beat against her mercilessly.

Light flashed, and suddenly she felt the surge of youki.

The light dimmed, and a youkai stood in their wake, holding the jewel.

"Henetsu, you're, you're one of them-" A voice said shakily.

Henetsu, as she'd heard him called, looked down at his hands and arms, turning them every which way, still holding the jewel. He snarled once, an inhuman sound the he cut off before it had finished, eyes widening in shock.

"What did you do?" He demanded, glaring at Kagome.

"Not a damn thing," She replied, but couldn't hold in the mocking laughter that was bubbling up inside of her. One of the men moved closer to the newly made youkai and tried to touch him, but the youkai, still thinking as a man, shoved the man away, only to send the slayer flying into the cave wall, his skull hitting the stone with a sickening thud.

Whispers started, and Kagome watched the men begin eying their leader warily. A circle formed around him, and the whispers grew into heated mutters, then accusations. The circle of men attacked.
And died.

Soon only the youkai was left, surrounded by a circle of corpses. Eyes crazed with blood lust, he stalked over to Kagome and picked her up with one hand.

"What did you do to me?" He roared, shaking her angrily.

"Nothing. You wished for power, that's what the jewel gave you. It takes every wish made and perverts it."

His fist, still closed around the jewel, knocked against her face, and she saw stars dancing in her vision. The power within her welled up in natural response to her pain and flashed angrily.

She dropped to the ground, and the jewel clinked as it made contact with the stone floor of the cave.

It was as she was drifting from consciousness that she felt herself being pulled roughly from her body, a rude approximation of what she did to slip into Sesshoumaru's core. Only now, the jewel was sucking her into it. Before she could release her scream, she vanished into the darkness of the tainted orb.

Sesshoumaru looked at the scene before him with eyes for nothing except the miko lying still, barely breathing, on the cave floor. Ignoring the corpses and the pile of ash of what had once been a youkai, he strode over to her silently and picked her up, eyes scanning her bruised and battered face.

"Is she alright?" Shinzuru murmured.

"Take the jewel," Sesshoumaru snapped, ignoring the youkai's question. Because she would not wake up, no matter how he shook her, and her breathing was light and slow, her heartbeat sluggish. He could smell no blood on her person, but that didn't mean they hadn't done something to injure her internally. Growling when he saw the torn leg of her hakama, he suppressed a curse. He was almost tempted to bring the humans back and kill them all over again, slowly.

Instead, he left the cave and launched himself into the air, his breathing heavy as he tried to control his rage. Shinzuru only just managed to keep up as they soared through the sky, cutting through the air like the human's new bullets. Night began to give way to dawn, though the daiyoukai was completely oblivious to it, and when they finally landed at the shiro, Sesshoumaru's rage had not yet abated, and Shinzuru looked haggard, as if he had been facing the daiyoukai head on.

"Send for Tenka," He commanded coldly, then snarled angrily when Shinzuru's hand dropped the tainted jewel on the miko's stomach.

"I can't deal with that thing anymore," He snapped. "You can. Get her to her room, I'll send the healer up."

Sesshoumaru ignored everyone around him, the whispers and frightened auras reacting his own own fury. He strode past the children's room, ignoring Kasai and Mizu's startled glances and the questions that died in their throats. Instead, Kasai rushed forward to open the door to Kagome's room, and the next, and finally the last. The kitsune's presence ground against his temper, sending it spiraling even deeper into the blackness threatening to take over him.

"Get out," He snarled, eyes red and wild.

"But-"
"GET OUT!" Sesshoumaru roared, his own youki slipping free and pushing against the kitsune with little care as to whether or not it harmed him. Emerald eyes wide with fear, the kitsune bolted, not even closing the doors behind him when he fled.

Sesshoumaru forced his energy to calm, and he drew in several deep breaths before he allowed a slender thread to escape once more, prodding the miko, determined to follow her into her core and bring her back out.

When her aura didn't react, he tried again, quelling the panic that was scrambling in his chest, it's dark claws trying to hook into his heart. Another prod, less gentle than the others.

No response. She couldn't be forcibly keeping him out, could she? She wouldn't. Not now. He tried once more, this time putting as much force into the jab as he could without bringing her harm.

Her ki lay dormant, refusing to swell up in defense.

"No!" He snarled angrily. Where was she? Why wasn't she answering? She couldn't keep her powers from reacting in her defense, it wasn't possible. Even unconscious her body would respond to the inimical nature of his powers and try to force him away.

"Sesshoumaru," His mother's quiet voice broke through the red haze of rage. "Sesshoumaru, she's not there."

"Get out!" He snarled angrily, bringing his body protectively over the miko, shielding her from the other inu, seeing only a threat. The savage beast within was gratified when the woman stepped back, eyes widening in shock. "Get out," He commanded again, tasting blood in his mouth, the instincts that he had always battled coming to the surface, his beast throwing itself against the bars he held it in and breaking through them with an angry howl.

"You cannot save her like this," Yuugao started again, refusing to flee in the face of her son's anger. The veneer of civility he had always held was slipping, and the his own true nature was pushing through, teeth growing longer, sharper, his jaw popping and growing to accommodate them. The voice he was using was hardly his own anymore.

"Where is she?" He demanded angrily, the voice booming through the rooms, echoing angrily throughout the whole wing.

"The jewel has taken her in. If you are to save her, you must follow." "The way you always found access to her. Follow. We will keep guard," She murmured, heart rending at the sight of her son's sudden confusion.

"Let nothing harm her," He growled.

His aura swelled, and battered against the jewel, all of his hatred and fury spilling out against the tiny, black gem that lay on the miko's stomach. It's own strange aura flared in response, more than welcoming the daiyoukai into it's depths.

One minute he was roaring angrily, and the next, he was slumped on the miko's chest, his face trapped in a macabre parody of it's former beauty, all the more disturbing for it's sudden blankness.

"What happened?" Shinzuru demanded as he and Tenka made their way into the rooms, eyes stuck on the two still figures lying on the futon.
"There are whispers through the world of spirits. Midoriko's heir has been pulled into the jewel."

"Why?" Shinzuru snarled. "How could it do it? It's a jewel, not a demon, not some."

"Wrong!" Yuugao snapped. "It is a living thing, and like all living things, it seeks to continue it's existence."

"What does that have to do with Kagome?" Tenka asked, unable to pry his gaze from the half transformed face of his lord.

"She is Midoriko's heir."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Mizu snapped, finally making his way into the room.

"The jewel wanted a new soul, to replace the tired one inside of it. Kagome is to take Midoriko's place," She replied calmly, even as she trembled.

"What?" Shinzuru demanded, brows raising in shock before coming together in anger. His rough hands grabbed her shoulders and shook her roughly, his red eye flashing in anger. "You just let him go in there-"

"He is the only one strong enough to find her! Her fate and his are in their own hands, there is nothing we can do."

"What if he loses, what if she loses?" Shinzuru snarled, claws digging into the woman's flesh without thought. Only when the scent of blood reached his nose did he pull back, as if burned.

"Sesshoumaru will be the new demon of the jewel. They will be trapped within it, until the cycle repeats itself and someone takes their place," She whispered, eyes going back to her son.

"What do we do now?" Tenka asked.

"Bring the children, we will stay in the outer room, and we will pray for their safe return," Shinzuru snapped hotly, throwing another glare at the now oblivious inu female that had sent her own son into danger with no warning.
The shrill cry of her alarm clock sent her flying over the side of her bed. Grumbling, she blinked blearily as she untangled herself from her sheets and pulled herself back up onto her mattress. Feeling strangely desperate she looked around, taking stock of her room. When nothing seemed amiss she took a deep breath and relaxed.

"What a screwy dream," she muttered.

"Kagome, hurry up, you don't want to miss your own graduation do you?" Her mother's voice called from downstairs. Looking at the clock again, she screeched indignantly when she realized she should have been up half an hour before.

"Kami, I need to get going!" She shouted, rushing for the bathroom, tripping over Buyo as he tried to twine around her legs, leaving him in an angry meowing heap as she slammed the bathroom door behind her.

"Toothpaste is so amazing." She sighed happily as she brushed her teeth. Pausing at such a strange thought, she giggled and continued, ignoring how strange the toothbrush felt in her mouth. Deciding against a shower, as there was no time, she brushed her hair and quickly braided it, winding a piece of turquoise ribbon around the bottom and tying it.

The color caught her eye, and she stopped again, remembering...something. No, someone. Turquoise eyes. Laughing uneasily, she forced the thought from her mind.

"Kagome!" Her mother called again.

"I just need to get dressed!" Kagome shouted, rushing to her room and throwing on her uniform, grateful she had taken the time to lay it out the night before, something she never did. She was still pulling on her socks as she hopped down the stairs, almost killing herself when she stumbled down a few and grasped the banister for balance.

"Do we have time for breakfast?" Kagome asked breathlessly. Her mother presented her with a bowl and she began gobbling the rice down as she headed for the door.

"Forgetting something?" Nodoka asked.
"What?" Kagome asked around a mouthful of rice. Her mother was holding up the hanger that held her graduation robe. She laughed, then sputtered as some of the rice found it's way down the wrong pipe. A small hand thumped her back rigorously and she turned to see Souta laughing at her, eyes bright.

"Come on sis, you can't die before you graduate!" He teased, making Kagome flick some of the rice left in her bowl at him.

"Mo-oom!" He whined petulantly.

"Come on everyone, let's get in the car," Nodoka laughed. "Grandpa's waiting."

"You're letting grandpa drive?" Kagome demanded shrilly, wondering if she was going to choke again. It would be preferable to dying in a car crash at least.

"Come on Kagome, it's not that bad," Her mother chided sternly, walking out, graduation robe and cap in hand. Kagome sat the bowl down carelessly on the table by the door, swearing she'd put it in the sink when she got back. Rushing outside, the door slammed behind her and she practically flew into the car that sat idling.

As it turned out, they did survive the drive, although just barely. Kagome tried to relax her grip on the handle above the door, breathing in deeply.

"It's almost as bad as-" She thought, but the thought slipped just beyond her fingers, like a half remembered dream. The ground rushing up to meet her as...someone held her? But that didn't make any sense. Surely she'd remember if something like that happened in real life, and a dream of that sort would be just a memorable, right?

Shaking the strange feeling off, she bolted out of the car, this time her robe and cap in hand as she ran into the school building and searched for her homeroom. Ayumi, Eri and Yuka all greeted her with wide smiles and were chattering as she pulled the robe off of the hanger and shrugged into it.

"You're so late, Kagome! It's not like you!" Ayumi gasped as Kagome turned and presented the back of her robe to be zipped up.

"My alarm clock went off late and mom didn't wake me up. Argh, I can't believe I was almost late to this!" She groused as she tugged the cap onto her head.

"Well, at least you're here. We're still going out for karaoke later, right?" Eri asked as she pulled on her own cap. Kagome nodded with a small smile.

"I heard Hojo is going to be there too, and he's been dying for a date since we were in middle school," Yuka laughed. "After all that studying you did, it's time for a break. Maybe a summer romance, huh Kags?"

Kagome was about to say something catty, but stopped, the very idea of a romance with the boy more than just unappealing. It felt downright wrong. Her skin crawled at the very thought of going on a date with the nice boy that had been holding out hope for years.

"I don't think I could date someone like him," Kagome murmured. "He's nice and everything, but too boring."

Her three friends gasped in shock, as if she'd said something blasphemous.

"But Hojo is amazing!" Ayumi breathed. "And so dedicated."
"Okay, if you wouldn't date him, who would you date?" Eri demanded.

Gold eyes flashing, reflecting firelight as a pale body writhed around a giant bonfire.

Kagome's cheeks flushed as the image burned itself into her retinas. The guy couldn't be real. Long white hair? Was she some sort of otaku? And facial tattoos?

"No one," She murmured, blue eyes on the ground.

"That doesn't look like-" Eri started, but was cut off by the teacher calling for them to get into line and get ready for the graduation procession.

The youkai surrounding Sesshoumaru snarled and drooled like mad beasts as they surrounded him, a multitude of repulsive, disgusting youkai that he normally wouldn't give the time of day.

Except that he had destroyed them all several times over. And each time they had come back together, taunting him mercilessly.

"You will let me pass!" He snarled at them, moving to lunge again.

"Not until the miko makes her wish!" One taunted.

Even if the youkai was already pulling itself back together, he took a visceral pleasure in rending it beneath his claws, completely ignoring the sword at his side. The mocking laughter did not stop, and it only further served to enrage him.

"No one will keep me from her!" He shouted.

The apparition that appeared and began her dance moved quickly, almost effortlessly through the sea of youkai, her sword cutting through them cleanly and turning them to ash. Sesshoumaru growled at the newcomer, and she eyed him distastefully.

"You are the one that guards my heir?" She sniffed, as if unimpressed. "I would not have chosen such a-"

"Where is she?" He snapped, his hand around her neck and squeezing gently before he finished asking his question.

"Deeper within the jewel. I can take you. We must hurry, it will not be long before they regenerate," She said with a nod to the piles of ash. He dropped her and she landed on her feet, reminding him of a cat. When she began to lead the way, he cautiously followed, unable to smell anything of her in the darkness.

"If you do not lead me to her, I will destroy you," He threatened quietly.

"I am leading you to her so that I might finally be destroyed," The woman bit out.

"If you had not created the infernal bit of glass, this would not have happened."

She surprised him with a deep, heartfelt sigh.

"I know. I did not intentionally create such a thing. But there is nothing to do now but hope."

"For what?" He demanded, thrown off guard by her sudden weariness. She seemed a different woman than the one he had watched slay the youkai.
"That she doesn't give in to the jewel's promise."

"She will not," He replied, expression stony.

"I'm glad you have such faith in her. She will need it." The woman, he assumed Midoriko, paused and gave him a thoughtful glance. "Perhaps I was wrong."

Even though he itched for an answer, he didn't, wouldn't, give her the satisfaction of asking what she meant.

"Kagome!" A voice called out over the din. She turned, blushing slightly when she saw Hojo trying to make his way through the press of bodies. Almost two dozen of her classmates had planned the karaoke party, and it was amazing that they could even hear anyone singing over the crush of bodies and voices.

"Hey Hojo," She smiled when he had finally made his way over to her.

"Kagome, I know you said that you couldn't date while still in school, that your studies were more important. I've been waiting for you," He offered shyly, a bouquet of flowers in his hand. "Would you like to go to a movie with me tomorrow night?"

She knew she should say yes, was about to even as her hands reached out to accept the flowers. But something was niggling in the back of her mind. A soft rumbling rose from somewhere in her memory, and even though she knew she'd never heard the sound before, it was familiar. And...Comforting.

"I'm sorry Hojo, but I can't," She replied, her hands dropping back down to her sides. And suddenly, she couldn't bear to be around the boy, and that was what he was, a boy. Making some excuse even she couldn't hear, she began walking away, pressing through the crowd of people.

"Wait," A voice called out. Kagome turned to see a man trying to reach her.

He looked sort of like the dancer, the one she refused to think about. Even his long white hair was the same. He stood out from the crowd, vivid and defined with pale skin and hair like silver.

"Hi," She offered shyly. "I don't remember you from our class."

"I'm here with a friend. I couldn't help but notice you earlier. What's your name?"

"Kagome."

Something was off, he was familiar, but he wasn't at the same time, as if something was missing.

"I'm Tennouharu," He replied. "Would you like to dance?"

The image of the dancer flashed in her mind, and she felt her face heat with mortification.

"S-sure."

He pulled her into a crush of other dancers that had claimed the area in front of the stage for their own and held her hips to his and moved against her. His light brown, almost golden eyes were intent on her, as if studying her for something.

She felt herself begin to sweat and allowed herself to move against him, although not as suggestively as he was. Draping her arms over his shoulders, the music changed and someone began singing -
very well in fact- a slow song.

"You're beautiful," He whispered as he leaned down.

"So are you," She whispered back, his face inches from hers. Readyng herself for her first kiss, she paused and brought her hands to his face, pulling away slightly. Her thumbs traced the sides, and she could have sworn something was missing.

"What is it?" He asked, eyes narrowing.

"You're not him. You're supposed to be him."

"Who?" He demanded, beginning to pull away.

"Sesshoumaru," She breathed.

The world around her shattered, and even the face in her hands faded until she found herself floating in the darkness once more, the jewel flashing brilliantly, momentarily blinding her.

"What do you wish for?" A voice seemed to hiss in a whisper, wrapping around her. "To go home? To be with the daiyoukai? I can make it happen," It sighed. "I can give you everything."

Kagome was about to open her mouth, then stopped. The jewel could make it so that her rape never happened. Or it could send her home.

"Without me he will have no reason to protect you," The voice, neither male nor female, and it was gentle, coaxing.

"KAGOME!" A voice called from the darkness. Jerking violently, the spell of the disembodied voice breaking, she turned, looking for the source of the voice.

"Sesshoumaru!" She screamed. Was it another trick of the jewel? Was her mind trying to give her hope? How could he have followed her? Where was he?

"Don't do anything until I get there! Don't let it trick you!" The voice called out, an almost desperate edge to it.

"Make your wish," The voice started again. "I can make him love you."

"No," Kagome shouted, suddenly angry at the voice's suggestion. "You can't make him love anyone, and I don't want someone's fake love anyway!"

"The jewel's illusions are breaking, I can feel it. She managed to escape those. Now she just has to resist the urge to give in and let the jewel make those illusions real."

"She won't give in," Sesshoumaru snarled, getting tired of the miko's cynical remarks. "She is stronger than that, stronger than you," He spat.

"You're correct, she is stronger than me. But it doesn't mean she is wiser. I know how she has suffered. Do you think she would not wish it all undone? To live with the hanyou she loved without the memory of her rape?"

"The jewel cannot grant such," He ground out.

"She doesn't know that," The miko argued.
"She will not give in to her own selfish desires, she's not like that." Even as he said the words, he wondered. Would she give in, would she seek to escape all of the horror done unto her and find peace with the half breed?

The very idea of her giving up the pack they had built in the last year, the children and the family that he had never asked for, had never considered having, hurt something in his chest. That she would give up him caused a stab of pain.

"She will not give us up, not for anything," He growled into the darkness, ignoring the miko's thoughtful gaze. He prayed to every god that would listen that he was right.

"I can give you it all back, make it so that Naraku never even existed. Never killed your love, never harmed you. All of the pain, I can wash it away," It urged, ignoring her angry shouts. It wove around her, silken and coaxing and she hated it.

"I'm not going to make a selfish wish like that," She yelled into the blackness, her voice hoarse from screaming. Angry, frustrated tears rolled down her cheeks. Where was Sesshoumaru, what was taking him so long? Why was she facing this alone?

"Anything you desire. Everything you could want," It's hissed in her ear, sending a tremor down her spine.

"Why are you doing this?" She finally whispered.

"Because I was created to grant wishes and make dreams come true. Haven't you earned the right to make a wish? Don't you deserve to have all of your dreams come true?"

She fell to her knees, unable to take it anymore. Her hands came over her ears as she tried to block out the sound of the whispering.

"I can make it all better," The voice urged. "Just make a wish, and I can make all the pain."

"Kagome!" A voice shouted into the darkness. She didn't turn, didn't try to find the source this time. It was just her imagination, had to be. The jewel was taunting her, trying to force her into doing the wrong thing.

"Kagome," The voice said again as she was pulled up roughly from her knees. She blinked at the image presented to her.

"You're not real," She whispered. "I won't wish for it. You can't make me," She shouted, pushing herself away.

"He's as real as it gets in here," A woman's voice commented dryly, and Kagome's gaze was torn from the daiyoukai to the miko in armor next to him. "It is your alpha."

"Who are you?" Kagome demanded, wondering if the woman was the source of those insidious whispers still brushing against her consciousness.

"Do not let the jewel tempt you with illusions and promises. It can keep none of them, you know that to be true," She said, her eyes hardening as they came to rest on the orb still shimmering between pink and black. "It will pervert your wish to it's own ends unless you make the right one."

"She lies," The voice whispered against her mind. "She only wants to be free of the jewel. She no longer cares if the others within are released with her, out into the world to cause chaos."
"No," Kagome whispered angrily. "I won't be tricked, not anymore!" She snapped angrily. "I won't let you do this!"

"Kagome," Sesshoumaru started, his hand raised. She looked to him, searched his eyes.

"The jewel won't know what you told me in your core," She whispered desperately. "Prove that you're you."

He stared at her blankly for several minutes, then glared the miko standing apart from them. The woman's only response was to shrug indifferently. Gold eyes turned back to met her own, and she saw the internal struggle as he fought to find the right words.

"The soul is the lotus."

Kagome threw herself into his arms, a cry of relief escaping as she clung to him, uncaring if he was angry or not.

"Make the right wish," Was all Midoriko said before moving again into the darkness.

"Sesshoumaru," She whispered. "I don't know what to wish for. I can't think of anything it wouldn't twist."

Instead of saying anything, he sat down, settling her into his lap, their gazes still on the jewel. The voice was curiously silent, and she regarded the flashing orb warily.

"Could it be so simple?" He murmured finally.

"What?" She asked, looking up to him. His expression was one of chagrin, and his eyes flashed angrily.

"What if there was no jewel?" He asked, eyes meeting hers. Shock coursed through her as the meaning of his words settled in.

"I can't believe we've been so stupid," She sighed. "Really makes me rethink the whole wisdom thing."

"You once said you did not believe yourself wise," He retorted. Kagome rolled her eyes and suddenly felt the expectation, oppressive in it's silence, press down on them.

"Shikon no tama," She called out. The orb flashed pink, and though she saw the darkness within it, swirling just behind the light, it stayed that way.

"What is your wish?" The voice asked.

"I wish you would no longer exist," She spoke in a loud clear voice.

The orb splintered even as a hundred angry voices wailed and screamed in denial as the darkness surrounding them was banished in a burst of light.

"It was the right wish, heir," A gentle voice whispered against her mind. Sesshoumaru's hold on her tightened as the energy being released buffeted against them, pushing and tearing, determined to find purchase in them. She could feel it's anger, it's intent to destroy both her and Sesshoumaru in it's death throes.

Her power rose in natural defense, as did his own, keeping the dark shadows of the jewel's spirits at bay. With a sense of child like wonder, she watched their powers combine and merge into a single
shield surrounding them.

"It's beautiful," She whispered.

"Hnn," Sesshoumaru said as their power, an iridescent silver that shimmered with pinks, blues and purples, even greens swelled and pulsed gently with their own force. But it was more than the colors, more than the sight. It was the feeling surrounding her, as if they were not only in her core, but his, everything around her a mix of what she felt in both.

The light grew in intensity, and they blinked against it before Sesshoumaru turned her face into his chest and bent over her, shielding both of their eyes from the searing brightness.

And suddenly the winds and the howling and the light were all gone.

"Ugh," Kagome whimpered, something heavy pressing against her chest and making it difficult to breath.

"Mama!" A dozen voices shouted. Kagome flinched at the loud noise and shifted, trying to move the weight on her chest. An angry rumble was all that met her efforts before it shifted and moved. Finally seeing past the blinding light in the room, her blue eyes met Sesshoumaru's gold ones.

"Is it over?" She rasped through a dry throat.

"It is," He answered lifting himself with a small groan.

Suddenly children were crawling over them, and Resshin and Nanmei, Yuugao and Shinzuru and the twins were laughing and offering their own thanks and praises. Even Jaken and Tenka were present, the pair looking strangely misty eyed.

"You did it," Yuugao whispered, moving to kneel by her son. Her hands went to his face, cupping it between them. Still dazed by the abrupt arrival in the real world and his mother's sudden closeness, he allowed her to throw her arms around him and squeeze him. "I knew you could do it," She whispered in his ear, her voice wobbling strangely.

"So the jewel's really gone?" Shippou asked, voice bright and eager and twenty decibels too loud for the miko or the daiyoukai.

"It's gone. Forever," Kagome assured them.

A cheer went up, starting with Rin and Shippou, and then the other children joined in. The adults finally gave up, and began cheering their alpha and miko's names, not even noticing the exhausted smile the two gave one another.
"It's hard to believe it's over," Kagome sighed as she watched the children play. Sesshoumaru, with seemingly boundless energy, was playing with them. Her face and body still ached from the abuse of her captors, but the bruises were fading. After finding out she and Sesshoumaru were in the jewel for four days, she supposed she was just surprised that the bruise on her stomach wasn't worse.

"It's not over," Nanmei sighed, caressing her stomach. "That part is, but there are still other things, and there will be other battles."

"Ugh, don't make me think of other battles. The whole thing with Harukaze has apparently gotten out of hand, and the last thing I want to think about is that escalating into a war."

"It won't," Nanmei assured. "Resshin has it on good authority that she didn't know of her sister's plans. Sesshoumaru is considering being lenient, but only after Resshin goes through and weeds out any others that would support war. The council is, as Resshin said, chomping at the bit. They want him to pick a new house seat. I think he'll let her stay just to make them angry."

"I still want to know why she showed up at all. If had just been her, I could have believed it, but Shunran too?" Kagome whined. She looked over to her friend and noticed that the human woman had suddenly found a cloud of great interest in the sky.

"What?" Kagome asked flatly.

"There were rumors," Nanmei stutted hesitantly, eyes darting everywhere to avoid meeting Kagome's.

"What rumors?"

"Mizu explained the situation though, so it doesn't mean anything!" Nanmei laughed nervously. "I mean, it's just some silly rumors."

"Nanmei, please," Kagome begged, widening her eyes in her best attempt to imitate Rin and Shippou, both of whom had perfected crocodile tears much more easily than the other children.

"Oh, Kagome, I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said anything."

"Please?" She keened. "I need to know."

"They were about you and Sesshoumaru. It was said that you two seemed, umm, close, at the wolf's mating ceremony."

"That's it?" Kagome snorted, the sighing, weepy facade fading in the heat of her temper. "Who
cares? Yuugao said that youkai aren't like humans, that they seek their own pleasures. Why go crazy and send potential mates?"

"I don't know. Maybe it's because you're pack, or that you were guarding the jewel. A position as alpha female with you as a subordinate would be a desired one, politically. Anything is possible," Nanmei offered. "So, how was it?" She asked suddenly, her eyes slanting slyly towards her friend.

"How was what?" Kagome asked dumbly.

"Oh come on, it couldn't all have been an act. Resshin's the god of beauty and love to me, and even I can see how attractive Sesshoumaru is," She whispered.

"Nanmei!" Kagome gasped. "They're right over there!"

Nanmei pulled back and stared at the men blankly. They in turn, were watching the two women on the blanket, some with amused expressions, and two with clouded ones. Sesshoumaru was no surprise, Shinzuru doing it was.

"Well boys," Nanmei called out. "I'm sure you'll understand if Kagome and I go have a little girl time in the bathhouse since you're all as nosy as children!" She chirruped happily and without a note of menace. Pulling at a protesting Kagome, she ushered the miko away, ignoring complaints and blushes.

Once they were in the bathhouse and settled into one of the larger baths, Nanmei pounced.

"I want to know everything," She demanded.

"It's not important-" Kagome started, sinking even more deeply into the water.

"My foot. Did you two actually kiss?" She demanded. "I heard you did, but I couldn't tell if Mizu was just joking or not. You know him."

"We did, but it wasn't all just me-" Kagome started again.

"Did you enjoy kissing him?" Nanmei demanded slyly, smiling much too much like one of the kitsune twins. Remembering the kiss in her dreams, Kagome felt her blush start at the tops of her breasts and rise to heat her face.

"You did! I knew it!" Nanmei crowed.

"It's not that!" Kagome snapped, then tried to relax when she saw Nanmei's startled, hurt expression. "It's just- Do you promise you won't tell. Anyone? Even Resshin?"

"I can't keep anything from Resshin, you know that," Nanmei sighed. "But I do know he won't reveal anything. What's wrong?"

"I've been dreaming about him. Sesshoumaru, I mean," Kagome sighed as she leaned back against the wall of the bath. "It's weird."

"Why should it be weird? I mean, I know you have a bad past with intimacy, but choosing to be with someone is different than being forced," Nanmei offered thoughtfully. "And if your dreams are anything to go by, you're healing. Maybe enough to act on them, if not now, then someday soon."

"I was in love with Sesshoumaru's brother, Inu Yasha. They hated each other. I'm pretty sure if Inu Yasha's watching, his head has exploded. Multiple times." Or his mouth, she added mentally. The
idea of reincarnation was looking better and better every day, if for no other reason than her deceased loved ones couldn't (hopefully) see her and her current predicament.

Nanmei considered her carefully before continuing.

"Resshin said you are not of this land, is that true?" She finally asked. Kagome nodded. "Here, it is not uncommon for a man to take his brother's widow, at least among some human clans. And I'm just guessing, but if he loved you, wouldn't he want you to be happy?"

"Everyone keeps saying that," Kagome sighed.

"Well, maybe you should listen. If it's not fear holding you back, then it's guilt. And you've more than lived through your fair share of pain. I think it's time you allow yourself to be happy, and no one, especially not someone who loved you, would begrudge you that."

"You make it sound like it matters. Sesshoumaru would never look at me that way. He barely tolerates me as a friend."

Nanmei rolled her eyes and was glad that the steam in the baths hid the gesture.

"Won't know until you try, will you?"

"In the jewel-" Kagome started, changing to topic so abruptly Nanmei flinched. "The jewel, in my dreams, it tried to imitate Sesshoumaru, to put him in my world. When that didn't work, it offered to make Sesshoumaru love me."

The confession was a whisper, almost lost in the sluicing of water and the hiss of steam. Nanmei sighed gently and moved over to sit next to her friend, putting an arm around her shoulder and squeezing gently.

"Do you want him to love you?" She asked.

"I don't think so. Shinzuru says I'm having these dreams because I trust Sesshoumaru, and it's my subconscious putting his face into that context, letting me know I'm ready for something."

"Is that what you think?"

"I don't know," Kagome whispered. Ever since she had been offered Sesshoumaru's love, the question had nagged at the back of her mind. Did she want him to love her? They were friends, good friends, even if it was a strange relationship. She liked to think he did care about her. But did she want him to care about her that way?

"It's okay," Nanmei soothed.

"I feel so childish. Worrying over something like this when I've lived through the jewel. It's so silly," Kagome sighed.

"It's not silly. I promise it's not silly," The other woman sighed, squeezing her again.

Yuugao was watching her son pace the length of his study.

"If you keep doing that, you're going to wear a hole into the floor," She advised.

He ignored her, as he had for the past twenty minutes.
"Why are you here?" He finally snapped.

"Because your aura is erratic to say the least, and because we still have not spoken about the night the girl was kidnapped."

"There is nothing to talk about," He replied in a frigid voice. Yuugao rolled her eyes, but the effect was lost on the younger inu, who had turned his back on yet another lap across the floor.

"You were giving in to your instincts. I'd say it's something to talk about."


Turn.

"It is not strange for a youkai to let their instincts come to the surface."


"I did not say it was strange for a youkai to do so. I am saying it is strange for you," She pointed out, eyes narrowing with triumph when he stopped long enough to glare at her.

"If you have a point, make it," He snapped.

"Not a point, a question."

"Then ask." His teeth were grinding together, an altogether unseemly, unhealthy habit, one his father had been fond of. Almost as fond as he had been of the sound 'keh'.

"Why?"

"Why what?"


"You above all others pride yourself on the control you exert over your instincts. Why let that control slip?"

"One of my pack was threatened."

If he didn't cease his infernal pacing, she was going to throw something at him. Wondering, not for the first time, how one she gave birth to someone who could be so obtuse, she settled for a long winded sigh.

"Leave," He commanded.

"Why don't you go to bed?" She asked, smiling sweetly.


"Wouldn't have anything to do with the scent permeating the family wing, would it?"


The door behind her slammed shut, and she heard the groaning of broken wood. Turning to assess the damage, she couldn't help but feel like gloating, just a little, at the admission her son had given her with his display of temper.
He strode swiftly through the family wing, intent on making it past the miko's door without doing harm to anyone, or anything. It had been weeks since they had come back from the jewel, and it was as if everything had gone back to normal. Games, laughter. Smiles.

They had designated a day for Inu Yasha's death, the last new moon of the summer, and she had allowed him to hold her that night as they had stared at the sky, listening to her memories as she and the kit both grieved the loss.

Everything was fine. So why did it feel different?

He passed her door, and the scent wafting from her rooms tangled in his senses and made him snarl. That was what was different.

Somehow, some way, the miko was dreaming of things that laced her natural scent with arousal, and the scent made him angry. Angry at his mother for interfering in her life, angry at Nanmei for seeming to encourage it. Angry at her for dreaming about...whatever it was she dreamed about!

"Sesshoumaru," A calm voice intoned from a doorway down the hall. He turned, biting back the urge to slam his body into the kitsune's and rip him apart.

"What?" He ground out.

"Leash it. You've woken some of the children," Kasai accused before slipping back into the children's bedroom.

The kitsune's words ringing in his ears, he took a deep, steadying breath and continued to his rooms, opening the door and sliding it shut quietly. Pulling the two swords from his sash, he placed them on their stands and sat in front of them, unable to sleep.

"Why does this situation make me so angry?" He finally sighed, feeling marginally better now that the question had been said aloud.

The miko's sudden, apparent comfort with intimacy, even if it was only in the safety of her own mind, bothered him, and it made no sense. Why? As her alpha and her friend, he should be glad she was healing. Searching his own tumultuous emotions, he realized he was happy she was healing. So why the anger? Why the frustration?

'Because it has been a constant onslaught, almost every night, and it is only getting worse.'

That did make sense. Almost every night for the past two weeks she had been dreaming, and the smell had practically embedded itself in the walls of the corridor. It had been a miracle that she had not needed him in her room for anything, because if the corridor was any indication, there was no way he could stand to be in her rooms. He was just thankful the children seemed oblivious to what the scent was, because those were questions he refused to answer any time soon.

But that still seemed to fall short. He was not someone easily given to his emotions, and it didn't make sense that a female musk was making him so irate. He should be able to shrug it off.

He asked himself the painful question.

'Do I desire her?'

Evaluating his feelings, he listed them in his head as he stared blankly at the swords before him. She had earned his respect, and though he would have once found shame in that, he did not find it so
now. Admiration? Yes, she had even earned that, if for nothing else than her will to keep going. Friendship? Grudgingly he admitted to himself that he did count her among his friends, although it was a different sort of friendship than he had with the men. Was that the problem?

He had never counted a female among his friends before, and it had been a problem between them in the past. Perhaps he was confusing how a male and female friend interacted with something else because he had never experienced it before. Surely even friends would be put off by such a situation? Shinzuru didn't act terribly affected by it, although he was glowering more as of late. Resshin was too wrapped up in his mate's pregnancy to care about anything but the size of her stomach. But the twins? Both kitsune had been acting oddly, and the more he thought about it, the more he felt relieved.

It was merely a situation he had not expected to encounter, not after the wolf's mating ceremony, and he should have known better. He would find some way to ignore the scent, as the others were doing. Releasing a relieved sigh, he stood and stretched, determined to put the whole thing out of his mind.

Kagome danced merrily in a circle with the other children around a laughing Nanmei. All were intent on absorbing the warmth of the sun's rays, desperate to get as much time outside before the weather grew too cold to play out of doors.

"Miko!" A voice boomed, and suddenly the garden was awash with a cold, pulsing energy that sent Kagome's hackles up. She knew the flavor of it, but she had never expected it to be so filled with frustration and anger regarding her.

"Yuuugao?" She asked, dread filling her heart as the beautiful inu youkai glided towards her, the pale face a cool mask of indifference. The children crowded behind her, and Kagome throttled down the urge to let her aura pulse threateningly in return.

"I have decided to exert my right as alpha female," Yuugao stated coldly, her eyes fixed on some sight in the distance. Her confusion must have been evident, because the older inu growled threateningly.

"I banish you from the pack." She turned, dampening her aura until there was nothing, and moved away just as regally as she had approached.

"What do you mean?" Kagome demanded. "You can't just-"

"I can, as it my right. Ask my son if you doubt me," She heard from the retreating figure. Yuugao hadn't even bothered to turn and look at her, as if she had said nothing of consequence.

"What, can she do that?" Kagome asked, turning to Nanmei. The other woman shrugged helplessly, tears already forming in her suddenly stormy blue gray eyes.

"Watch the children. Kids, Yuugao's just playing a joke," Kagome tried to assure them, although with each passing moment more and more of them looked ready to burst into tears. Quelling the pain at their expressions, she bolted from the group inside, ignoring that startled looks and myriad of servants that she pushed past on her way to Sesshoumaru's study.

When she opened the door, Sesshoumaru looked up from his paperwork and frowned at her thoughtfully.

"What's wrong?" Shinzuru asked.

"Yuuugao, can she kick me out?" Kagome demanded shrilly.
"Why would you ask such a thing?" Shinzuru started, ignoring the sudden growl erupting from the other side of the room.

"She just said she banished me, can she do that?" Tears were pooling in her blue eyes and when she looked to Sesshoumaru and saw the fury dancing in his eyes, she let out a breathless gasp that in no way conveyed the depths of her feelings.

"She did what? Why? Did you know about this?" Shinzuru snarled angrily as he caught her as her legs were folding beneath her.

"I did not. But I will find out what that woman is thinking," Sesshoumaru growled as he stalked from the room. The keening noises turned into wails as Shinzuru whispered into her hair, nonsense words that couldn't pierce her own heartbreak.

"You," Sesshoumaru snarled as he cornered his mother. She watched him with a lazy, indifferent expression, but her aura was hidden so thoroughly that she could have been feeling anything.

"Yes, I am me," She offered blithely.

"Why?"

"Why what?" She asked, as if genuinely ignorant of his meaning.

"Why would you try to banish her from the pack? What is her offense?" He demanded. Yuugao shrugged carelessly, only to feel her neck trapped in her son's hand.

"I have already fought you for the title and won," He snapped. "I can destroy you."

"You could," She choked, surprised by the force he was using against her. She had expected rage, but not this. "But pack law stands."

"Damn the laws!"

"Flout those at your peril, you will lose everything, including those precious children, if you go against my will."

This was not the answer he had wanted, and his grip tightened considerably.

"Why?" He demanded again, shaking her. "Why do this to her?"

She gurgled and gasped for air, and he loosened his grip a fraction, allowing her enough room to breath. And speak.

"I assert my will as alpha female of the House of the Moon," She started, coughing around the words.

"You-" He snarled.

"To nominate a candidate," She finished.

His hand jerked away, as if burned. She slumped to the ground, hands moving to gingerly massage her abused neck. When her gold eyes traveled upward, she watched as horror dawned in her son's eyes.

"No," He snarled. "You would not, you cannot-"
"I would, and I have. I will inform her father of the challenge," She rasped slightly, grateful that her words were already becoming clearer.

"You cannot do this!" He roared, his aura flaring impressively.

"I have. Will you accept the suit?"

"She will not accept," He snapped. "Why would-"

"She will, if she values her children and her pack."

Sesshoumaru visibly slumped, and it tore at her to see her son looking so defeated. She had watched him through the centuries and never had she seen him brought low. That she was the one to do it brought no comfort, only shame.

"Go, tell Shinzuru."

She fled, flinching when her son allowed another ear splitting, deafening roar rip through the halls of the shiro. Tracing the scent of the miko, it was not difficult to find her. She was still in Sesshoumaru's study, bawling into Shinzuru's chest.

"What do you want?" He growled at her, expression one of utter hatred. Another sacrifice she had to make that cut at her. She had thought they had at least become friends since her arrival.

"I have exerted my power as alpha female-"

"I know you have, you spiteful bitch!" He growled in a low, threatening voice.

"To nominate the miko as a suitor for my son. Does she accept the suit?" Her voice was wooden, hollow. Mewling cries muffled by the older male's chest did not cease, in fact, continued as if the miko had heard nothing.

Shinzuru blinked, dazed for a moment as he stared dumbly at her.

"Is this what you planned? Do you have any idea-" He started, voice gaining volume with each syllable.

"Does she accept?" She interrupted again, determined to push on ahead and flee the room before the miko's tears proved to be her undoing.

"Kagome," Shinzuru muttered, shaking her gently. "Kagome, there's something you need to know."

"What? And what's she doing here?" The miko snapped hatefully. "Haven't you done enough?"

"Apparently not."

"There is a way for you to come back into the pack. The only way," She stressed as she met the miko's angry blue eyes.

"What? What do I have to do?"

"Pass the trial, and become my son's mate. Do you accept the suit?" Yuugao demanded.

"What? Are you out of your mind? Sesshoumaru would never-" Kagome screeched. Yuugao held up a hand to silence her.
"He is aware of the nomination. He allowed me to proceed with it once informed."

"You crazy, manipulative, conniving bitch!" Kagome screamed, her temper flaring full force along with her aura. The power pulsing out of the girl knocked her back, and her eyes widened when she realized just what she had woken. But Kagome paid no mind to the daiyoukai's sudden fear, stomping up to her and waving a finger in her face. Normally, such a move would have made Yuugao laugh. Not so when that finger, indeed, hand and wrist and arm and every other inch of the woman's body was flaring, head to toe, with purification energy that could, she assumed, make her life very uncomfortable, if not end it all together.

"You have the temerity to kick me out of my own pack and then force not only me but your own son into a mating?" She demanded angrily. "What is wrong with you?"

"Do you accept?" Yuugao demanded, forcing every bit of ice she could into her tone.

"I want to see Sesshoumaru."

"He left the grounds minutes ago, he is likely hunting or with the tree," Yuugao answered woodenly. Kagome didn't even wait for Shinzuru, instead running from the room, her power still flaring too wildly for him to get close enough to grab her.

"Are you happy now?" The moth youkai demanded. "Is this what you wanted? Is this why you've hung around so long?"

"It is the right path," She sighed, leaning against the wall behind her, feeling as if, now that her goal had been accomplished, all of her energy, all of her strength and will, left her.

"How do you know?" He demanded. "It could as easily be a prison for them both."

"Because I know. I know my son and I know he's lying to himself because he's determined to protect her from himself, even though he is the last person she wants protection from!"

"Those dreams?" He snorted in disbelief. "You're basing all of this on her dreams? You have lost your mind!"

"Not, I'm not basing it on a few silly dreams," She snarled, losing her temper at last, tired of the accusations and the anger. She would handle it from the pup and the miko. She would not deal with it from anyone else. "Can you honestly say they don't act like more than just pack mates?"

Shinzuru seemed ready to say something, then stopped and sat across from her, bracing himself against the doorway, shaking his head in resignation.

"This was not the way," He told her. "If it exists, they should have been allowed to come to that realization on their own."

"They're both more stubborn than you and his father put together," She snapped mulishly. "If given the chance, they might have realized it when she was too old to do anything about it."

"It would still be their choice. You have robbed them of that. Why?"

"Because I would not see my son make a political alliance as I did. It is a miserable existence to care for someone and never be allowed to act on it."

Sesshoumaru was sitting in front of Bokusenou, waiting for the tree youkai to give him anything, say
anything. Kagome's presence barreled towards them, and the distress rolling off of her in waves set his teeth on edge.

"I don't see a way out of this, pup. Your mother crafted a fine trap," The tree sighed at last. "Although one wonders why."

Kagome practically stumbled off of her cloud before it had even reached the ground, tears streaming down her face as she took great heaving, shuddering breaths. She moved to him, but stopped short, as if suddenly unsure of her welcome.

He opened his arms to her, and she threw herself into his embrace, a long, piercing wail erupting as her legs finally gave out beneath her. He held her up, knowing that whatever he was feeling, she was feeling it a hundred times over. Having been denied her place with her own children, was more than enough reason for her to be in her present state.

"Why would she do this?" Kagome finally asked, looking up at him with bloodshot eyes.

"I do not know," He admitted.

"Yuugao spoke to me the other day," Bokusenou finally broke in. Sesshoumaru settled himself down, Kagome in his lap, and regarded the tree youkai evenly.

"And what did she say?"

"That Kagome engaged her in a draw. Her tone then was strange, but I thought little of it. In her mind, that coupled with Kagome's already strong place as the alpha female in your pack could have driven her decision."

"That's a far cry from kicking me out and trying to mate Sesshoumaru and I though," The miko snapped. "It's like forcing me to be a prostitute just so I can be around my kids and my friends."

She did not notice Sesshoumaru's subtle flinch at her tone and words, but she did turn to him.

"And for you to okay it? What were you thinking?"

His silence unnerved her, and she poked him in his chest, adding just enough of her power to make the gesture hurt.

"Even if she has officially ousted you, you are still pack, and I would see you stay that way, even if it is under these circumstances."

"These circumstances?" She shrieked in his face, making his ears ring. "I'd be your mate, doesn't that bother you at least a little?"

"I would not have had a choice in the end, the trial destroys any chance of that. But for you, yes, it bothers me. I know that you expected to have a choice."

"You're working under the assumption I can even beat you," She sighed tiredly.

"I will hold back, for your benefit," He offered at last. Kagome swatted his arm playfully, although her smile was weak.

"I'd call you chivalrous if that wasn't so insulting."

"The pack needs you."
She sighed and slumped fully in his arms.

"There's no other way?"

"I know of none, and Bokusenou can think of nothing."

"We can't just make her undo it, can we?"

"Pack law stands, and I would lose everything if I ignored her decree."

"Everything?"

"The title, my lands, and the pack. She would take her place as head once again. I would become anathema."

"Are you sure you want to do this?" It was a sigh, one that held fear, resignation, and even a note of hope. For him, that note of hope made the sacrifice worth it.

"Friends help each other out," He parroted at her. "You have given much, I would not see what little happiness you have found taken away." The sincerity of the admission surprised him, even as he knew it to be nothing less than the truth. She had given much, and had even more taken from her over the course of the year he had known her. In his eyes, she had more than earned her small measure of happiness.

"Perhaps you had better inform the Lady then," Bokusenou told them, watching them both with a sort of muted smile. "And get this over with. The children are probably worried, and the sooner this matter is settled, the better."

AN: Copout? Nah. Remember, we have a long ways to go before this story is over. Hold tight though, and see ya Friday!
Kagome hated that Yuugao was invading their training field, hated that she was standing feet away from Sesshoumaru, preparing herself to fight him, to win him. The barbarism of the trial was only another reminder that she would probably never fully understand youkai.

"Let it begin," Yuugao stated woodenly, ignoring the look of cool indifference her son leveled in her direction as she took to the sky. Kagome didn't even look in her direction. Instead, she summoned her ki, imagining a bubble surrounding her and swelling outward from her skin.

"I'm sorry," She murmured.

"As am I," He sighed, his youki swelling in response.

Their power flashed, exploded, the first declaration of their strengths. Kagome knew it was nothing more than grandstanding. But they had both decided to put on a good show, just so there could be no doubt in Yuugao's mind.

Both were too focused on the show to realize that when their powers brushed against one another, they shifted, transmuted to that strange iridescent silver they had seen when they were holding out against the angry backlash of power as the jewel had exploded.

Instead, Sesshoumaru lunged for her, and she threw up a barrier, knocking him back. Panic welled up in her throat, robbed her of breath. What if she actually hurt him? What if they did something unforgivable, trying to impress his mother?

His youki flared and slammed against her barrier, only to suddenly surprise them both.

It did not pass through, or even beat against it. It merged. Both staring in wonder and awe, his hand reached out to touch it, and passed through as if there was nothing there at all. He passed through into the bubble completely, shock written on his features.

"How are we supposed to battle if this happens?" Kagome asked. "How is this happening?"

Several howls filled the sky, and Sesshoumaru started violently, looking up to the sky. She let her gaze follow, and saw that the sky had been filled with inu youkai, all of them howling and staring down at the field, at them.

"What is it? Did I already fail?" Kagome whispered, fear lacing her words and almost strangling them before they came from her throat.

"No," He replied in a whisper just as strained as her own had been. "They are welcoming you."
"I didn't know you had so many relatives," Kagome muttered as they strode down the hall of the shiro towards the main hall.

"They are my mother's clan. My father's people were mostly destroyed in the wars," He confided. "My father was an anomaly for his clan. None were so powerful."

"So they probably didn't feel at home around your mother's?" Kagome guessed shrewdly.

"It is as you say."

She stopped and he paused, looking back at her, eyes blank and expression cool.

"Are you sure about this?" She asked again.

"There is no going back any longer."

"That's not what I asked," She told him, laying a hand on his arm. Blue eyes shone with concern, and not for the first time he wished she could have made her own choice in the matter, a real choice. That she was still concerned for him in the face of losing her children only strengthened his resolve.

"In the end, I would not have had a choice on my mate, as you would have. That we are friends is more than I had a right to expect," He admitted slowly. "My own parents were not."

"Sometimes I forget that this time is so different from my own," She sighed, her hand dropping from his arm to rest at her side. "But you're right, at least we're friends."

He took note of the strange inflection she put on the word friends, as if the word was suddenly distasteful to her. Chalking it up to her new situation, one that she had not asked for, indeed, had not wanted, he gave her a one shouldered shrug.

"Are you ready to face my mother's people?" He asked at last.

"Only if they aren't like her." He was taken aback by the sullen quality to her tone.

"I do not know. It has been centuries since I last saw any of them."

"Not helping," She muttered as they began walking toward the main hall again. He bit back the urge to smile, knowing instinctively she would mistake it's meaning.

When the doors loomed ahead of them, they both paused again.

"Ready?" He asked.

"Now or never," She responded with a small smile. Her hand reached out and took his, squeezing it tightly. He allowed her the contact, understanding she needed the support, and the doors opened from within, exposing them to the inu clan that waited within. Immediately her hand tightened, and he spared a glance in her direction, feeling more than a little proud that her chin was held high, and her expression cool.

"It's about time!" A voice called out, just before a young inu slammed into him, her brown hair in disarray. "I thought you'd never settle down!" The young female tittered, gold eyes dancing with merriment.

"Kagome, this is Sozou, a cousin," Sesshoumaru rumbled as the pup pulled herself from his side and came in front of them, her golden eyes filled with delight as she took in the miko at his side.
"It's amazing, we've never had a human in our family! And a miko! Your eyes are so pretty!" The girl said, speaking so quickly Kagome was having a hard time keeping up.

"It's very nice to meet you, Sozou," Kagome replied when the girl took a breath. Brown hair shook as the girl giggled.

"And it is very nice to meet you. Ignore all of the old dogs if they're grumpy. Some of them are just sticks in the mud," She offered. Kagome couldn't help but smile and nod genially. The girl bounced off with a wave, obviously intent on something, although Kagome wasn't sure what.

"She's sweet," Kagome said with a smile up at him. He made a noncommittal noise.

"She and my mother get along well. It is said my mother was much like her in her youth."

Kagome made a face that he almost laughed at.

"I can't imagine your mother being that exuberant. Or nice."

"So this is the miko. We've heard quite a bit about you," A new voice rumbled. Kagome turned, seeing a rather swarthy looking youkai that was eying her disdainfully. She forced a bright smile to her face and cocked her head slightly, as if his tone and gaze hadn't bothered her in the least.

"My name is Kagome," She offered.

"Sesshoumaru, you've been brought down by a miko, a human?" Another voice tittered from somewhere behind the inu leading the group. "How the mighty have fallen."

"I beg to differ," Kagome said pleasantly through a too bright smile. "It is rare for any youkai to withstand the powers of my kind. And yet he's able to combine his with my own. It seems to me that takes a considerable amount of strength and will."

Someone made a rude noise.

"If you would like, we can always go to the training field and see if any of you are capable. Perhaps it is a genetic trait, one I am unaware of?" She offered, voice still modulated and polite. Suddenly the small group was silent, glaring daggers at her. She gave a small, satisfied hum and let him guide her away.

"It seems you understand more about being alpha than I thought," He murmured. When she looked up at him, surprised by the admission, he allowed a small smile. "Part of it is keeping the others in their place."

Suddenly the doors burst open and the herd of children spilled into the room, making a beeline for the two adults. The whispers around them grew as eyes widened in shock when the group surrounded them.

"Are you and Sesshoumaru-sama really going to be mates?" Rin asked with wide eyes. Kagome nodded and the cheer that went up was almost ear shattering.

"Does that make Sesshoumaru papa?" Another asked innocently. Kagome looked to Sesshoumaru for help, and with a calm, solemn expression, he nodded once. The next cheer was louder than the first, causing even Kagome to wince.

"We're going to be a real family," Shippou said through a bright smile that made Kagome's heart clench painfully inside of her chest. She nodded again and was surprised by two harried looking
kitsune that stumbled in.

"Sorry, we tried to keep them in the family wing, but once they found out," Mizu shrugged helplessly.

"We taught them too well," Kasai grumbled, earning a laugh from Kagome.

"Okay guys," She said, trying to force some sternness into her voice even though she was having trouble smothering her laughter. "Follow Kasai and Mizu and be good. We'll be up to tell you story before bedtime," She promised. The children nodded and began to file out, although all of them darted glances over their shoulders until the doors closed behind them, as if unsure that they were seeing an illusion or not.

"Well," Kagome chuckled. "Not what I expected, but it's nice that they're accepting the change so easily."

"Quite an assortment you have there," A smooth voice broke in. "How does a miko come to collect so many?" Kagome turned to take in the beautiful female, an inu with striking green eyes and auburn hair. She was surprised by the sudden agitated pulse in Sesshoumaru's aura.

"They're all orphans from the war," Kagome offered, hesitant. "They all found each other when traveling to the west for safety."

"There were plenty of refugee camps they could have found a place within."

"But none that would have accepted both youkai and human, not to mention the hanyou. They didn't need to be separated, so we brought them here."

"We?"

Something was strange about how the emerald eyes watching her flashed, and she erred on the side of caution.

"Both of us felt responsible for the loss of their families, since Naraku was the cause."

"And why should you feel responsible for anything that pathetic hanyou did?"

"Because we were the only ones powerful enough to stop him," Kagome bit out, quickly losing patience with the cajoling tone.

"Oh, I doubt that," The inu tittered.

"Then why didn't you do anything to stop it? As pack, shouldn't it have been your responsibility to aid your alpha?" Kagome snapped.

"You-" The inu snarled, realizing her own verbal trap had been turned on her. Youki pulsed dangerously in the room.

"Yes, me," Kagome growled, letting her aura flare and brush against the other female. Vivid green eyes clashed with blue ones and the youkai pushed against her.

"Is this a formal challenge?" A new voice broke in, and both women turned to glare at the owner of the voice. Yuugao watched both with cold, impassive eyes.

"Yes," The inu snarled.
"Kagome, you must answer the challenge, or forfeit your right as Sesshoumaru's mate," Yuugao intoned.

"What? I thought-"

"Until he has bestowed the mating mark on you, any female may challenge you."

Kagome made an angry sound in the back of her throat and turned back to the smirking inu.

"Fine," She snapped, letting her ki slip and pushing the inu back angrily. "I've had enough with these stupid trials and challenges," She growled. The crowd had become a wide circle around them, and taking the hint, Kagome ignored everything else and focused on the inu in front of her.

Without warning the demon lunged and Kagome smirked as a shield came up to block her.

"Coward," The female spat angrily. Kagome's smirk grew as the shield morphed, became a bubble around the youkai.

"I'll make you a deal. Since I don't want to destroy my home, you'll stay in there until you break it or accept that I'm stronger and leave us alone. If you break it, we'll fight it out. If you can't, that means you're not strong enough to win anyway," Kagome snapped as the inu looked around her, snarling angrily.

"Without the jewel's power, how do you expect to keep her locked within the barrier?" A voice asked, and Kagome turned to see Sozou watching her with wide eyes.

"I never used the jewel's power," Kagome answered, trying to keep the anger out of her voice, knowing the teenaged looking girl had done nothing to earn her ire. "It was the reason I was able to guard it."

"You mean-" The young youkai asked, then stopped, as if her question had been rude.

"The jewel's power was too seductive for most, and she recognized that," Sesshoumaru cut in. "She has no desire for strength that was not earned."

The strange whispers ceased almost instantly, though Kagome, eyes still focused on the bubble, didn't notice. Her cheeks were flushed from the unexpected compliment she had been given, and she strengthened her resolve to hold out long enough for the inu to quit her antics and back down.

The youkai however, seemed content to keep hitting the shield with blasts of youki.

"This is so stupid," Kagome grumbled at last. "Once this is over, you're giving me the mating mark so I don't have to keep putting up with this."

There was a quiet chuckle throughout the crowd and Kagome turned up to look at Sesshoumaru, who was once more back to looking cold and reserved.

"It should not be much longer. She tires," He observed quietly.

Sure enough, the blasts were getting weaker and coming more infrequently.

"I concede defeat!" She finally snapped, glaring at Kagome as she did so.

The shield dropped, and she stood still, green eyes filled with rage.

"Anyone else?" Kagome asked quietly.
No answers were forthcoming, and she looked up to Sesshoumaru.

"I'm ready when you are."

He nodded once and they began moving from the room, ignoring the tense silence behind them. Once the doors were closed, Kagome let out a relieved sigh.

"Most of them hate me," She mumbled as they began walking for the stairs that led to the upper levels.

"You are human."

"Then why the welcoming howl?" She demanded. "Didn't you say there were welcoming me?"

"It is customary. Mother was sure of the outcome, or else they would not have been present."

They took the steps up in silence, and the corridor was strangely absent of sound.

"Where are the kids?" She asked.

"They have been moved from the family wing for now."

"Why?" She asked, startled by the revelation.

"It is tradition."

"Why?"

He made a strange noise in the back of his throat.

"To give us privacy."

Kagome made a small 'o' with her mouth, although no sound escaped. She stopped, the door to his rooms at the end of the hall suddenly looming, dark and frightening and reminding her entirely too much of the doors to Naraku's fortress.

"Sesshoumaru, I can't," She whispered. "I didn't even think about it, but-"

"We will not. But I must mark you, as you asked. It will circumvent further challenges. For that, privacy is better," He intoned as he opened the door, waiting for her to step in.

"Why? It isn't, I mean, what is it?" She finally asked, stepping hesitantly into the area that he had turned into a meditation room.

"For inu, it is a bite. I will try to prevent any pain I can, but circumstances-" He started, then stopped and shook his head ruefully.

"What?" She asked quietly, surprised to see him looking so indecisive.

"The bite is usually given in the passion of coupling, and I am told it masks the pain. But-"

"I've dealt with pain before," She told him, smacking his arm playfully although her stomach felt as if it had bottomed out only to let in a thousand angry butterflies. "How bad can it be?" When he only stared at her intently, eyes giving nothing away, she tried to smile and failed.

"Come," He said at last, and she followed him past another door, and then another, finally coming to
his bedroom. Her throat suddenly feeling too small, she tried to swallow, succeeding only in making a half strangled sound that made him turn to her, eyes blank.

"I'm sorry," She whispered again.

Instead of answering, he moved to sit on his futon and gestured for her to mirror his actions. She did, sitting across from him, dizziness overtaking her.

"I apologize for any suffering," He finally said, voice thick. Nodding tightly, she waited for him to do something, anything. Effortlessly, he moved her into his lap and held her nudge her face with his nose gently. Following the silent direction, she tilted her head back and exposed the column of her throat, suddenly reminded of the vampire movies from her time.

When one hand moved to pull her kimono open at the neck, small, distressed noises welled up in her throat that died from pure shock when he responded with shushing, comforting sounds. Once her shoulder was exposed, he stopped, and exhaled just loudly enough for her to hear, a long suffering sound.

"I am sorry," He whispered as his lips met the junction of her neck and shoulder. The breath that fanned out over the exposed flesh was hot and moist, completely at odds with the cool air in the room, sent a shiver running through her. His lips closed over the spot, and for a moment she thought it might not be so bad.

Then his teeth pierced her flesh, sinking in and only stopping once his fangs were fully embedded. Tears poured down her cheeks as she fought his hold on her, and his only response was to hold her even more tightly, his arms becoming steel bands around her.

Then she felt it, a part of himself being pushed into her, seeking, almost pleading with her for access. With a gasp she gave in, accepting the energy and feeling it settle into her, the spark becoming a slow, steady glow. Even more mystifying, a single spark of her own energy seemed to flow into him, although if he accepted it as she had his own, she didn't know.

But within moments, his teeth pulled back from his flesh and she shuddered evenly, the feel of his tongue lapping at the wound utterly foreign and yet welcome. His iron grip loosened, although tense muscles didn't relax. She went limp in his embrace, suddenly exhausted.

"I can see why they choose to do it during sex," She sighed. He stopped his ministrations and pulled back, eyes tightly shut. Blood stained his lower lip, and she reached a trembling hand up to wipe it clean. When her thumb made contact, crimson eyes opened wide and she stopped, digit still at his lips, pinned beneath his stare.

"Are you alright?" It was a strangled whisper, full of fear and doubt. He closed his eyes once more and shuddered violently, refusing to answer. "Sesshoumaru," She pleaded.

Instead of saying anything, he laid them both down on the futon, holding tightly to her, trembling violently. Running fingers over his face and through his hair, she murmured nonsense words and comforts, fear gnawing at her gut.

"Sleep," He finally commanded in a voice not entirely his own. Her fingers still woven in his hair, she brought her face close to his and let their noses touch, intent on offering any comfort she could. But exhaustion soon won out, and the last thing she saw were red eyes looking at her with a desperation she couldn't begin to fathom.
Sesshoumaru felt his clan leaving, flying back to their castle in the sky as dawn began to light upon the shiro. Once satisfied that even his mother had left, he pulled himself from his new mate's embrace, senses tangled and body aching as if he'd been warring with youkai all night.

And in a sense, he had. Reflecting bitterly on his instincts and their demands, he stretched, trying to ease the tension still lingering in his muscles.

The inner beast, something he had always treated as a separate entity, had risen to the surface, lustful and wanting and demanding to be given everything he knew the miko could not give. Instead of obeying his will, the instincts had taken over and it had been by a slender thread of control that he had not done something he knew would harm the human that lay sleeping on his futon, oblivious to the danger that prowled around her, digging through trunks and removing clothing hastily.

Her blood had been so powerful, he lamented. Like a drug that had pulled and teased at him, sending him spiraling deeper and deeper into her, surrounded by nothing but her. That she had been in pain had been irrelevant to his instincts, and it was with a sense of self loathing that he remembered the blood in his body surging, hot and heady below the surface.

Changing quickly and leaving the room, he was surprised to find Shinzuru sitting, leaning against the wall just outside of his door.

"She is alright," Sesshoumaru told the youkai in as cool a tone as he could manage.

"I know. You wouldn't settle for anything less. I came to see how you were holding up," The youkai admitted.

"There is nothing for you-"

"Don't lie to me pup. You look ragged, and I don't need to be one of Resshin's kind to know you're feeling out of sorts," The older man rebutted gruffly. His expression softened and he sighed heavily as he stood. "You are what you are pup, no shame in it. Come on, walk with me."

Unable to deny the youkai's request, he fell into step next to the male that had been a sort of uncle to him through centuries, and was thankful there were no more questions as they made their way into the inner gardens, false dawn casting the world in blue.

"I almost dishonored myself," He finally admitted as they moved over the stone paths.

"But you didn't," Shinzuru countered in a soft tone, eye still focused somewhere in the distance.
"I did not think-" He started, then faltered. "I did not expect it to be-" And then he foundered, unable
to say the words that wanted to come out.

"It's a heady experience, at least from what I've heard. Even for those not connected in any way.
Your father thought himself in love with your mother for a time, simply because the exchange," He
explained. A noise of disbelief rose from Sesshoumaru's throat and the old man chuckled grimly.

"Oh, it's powerful stuff, never doubt it. Magic, some say, the most basic kind there is. That you two
were already friends and can combine your powers probably only helped it along."

"Why are you telling me this?" He asked at last, the words sinking in and having no real meaning to
him.

"Because I'm worried."

"She is fine-" Sesshoumaru started again.

"Not just about her," The youkai interrupted. "I worry about the both of you. I know the day will
come when you need an heir, and as much as you love the little ones, they aren't it."

"Perhaps you are wrong."

Shinzuru gave him a flat look.

"I have no illusions boy. You didn't deny yourself the pleasures of the flesh before she showed up,
although if you're managing now, you're being damned discreet."

"I am doing nothing of the sort," He answered, wondering why he suddenly felt so defensive. The
insinuations alone were enough to make his blood boil, and he had no idea why.

"All's I'm saying is that if you decide to step out on her, be more discreet than your father. It's the one
disagreement between your father and I that ever came to blows. No one deserves to have an
indiscretion flouted in her face."

Sesshoumaru bit back the growl and tried to force himself to breathe evenly. "I will not step outside
of my mating. What my father did was dishonorable, and I refuse to harm her that way."

"So you'd forsake the flesh for her sake?"

The sudden image of actually, truly mating with the woman in question sent a surge of lust through a
body still too weak to combat it's call, and it was with deadly force that he pushed the image out of
his mind.

"It is of little consequence," He ground out.

Shinzuru was eying him strangely.

"And if she were to take a lover?"

The already tenuous hold on his instincts snapped and it was with red, feral eyes that he gazed at the
youkai next to him. "She will not," In a voice that was his and yet not he stated calmly, although the
very idea of his mate beneath another sent his blood to boiling within him.

Shinzuru was quiet and calm in the face of the daiyoukai's sudden anger, and he nodded once, the
garnet of his eye glinting in the morning light.
"Best get back to her boy. She'll be as out of sorts as you, and need her friend there to help her figure it out."

With that puzzling statement, the moth youkai launched himself into the air, leaving an angry daiyoukai behind him.

Kagome groaned when she awoke, her shoulder throbbing gently. For one disoriented moment, she wondered why the covers around her were such a deep blue, and then the previous night came crashing down on her. Sitting up abruptly, she wondered if she was even supposed to be in his room.

"You are awake," A voice observed dispassionately.

"Morning," She mumbled, blushing to the tips of her hair. Sesshoumaru padded over to her gently and knelt next to her, pulling her kimono aside to expose the aching part of her neck to his intent gaze.

"It will be finished healing by this afternoon," He murmured. Gold eyes moved to meet her own, and the steady intensity in them made her swallow thickly. "I am sorry about the pain."

"It's nothing," She replied breathlessly. "I mean, it's something, um, but the pain, it's not bad or anything." She was babbling, and oh how she wanted to stop, but her mouth didn't seem to want to shut up and the silence was too unnerving to contemplate. "Are you okay? Because last night, I mean, I was worried. I didn't mean to just pass out on you-"

"I am fine," He answered, cutting off her statement. "The clan is gone. Including my mother."

"She would be, mission accomplished and all," Kagome muttered ruefully. Sighing, she broke her gaze with the daiyoukai and looked down at the covers.

"What now? I don't think either of us really thought past the battle," She admitted.

There was a heavy, tense silence before he put a finger under her chin and forced her to look at him.

"Now you are Lady of the West. You are alpha female of our pack, and Lady of the House of the Moon. You are still a mother, and still a friend. And you are my mate," He finished, his words even and authoritative. The last title almost made her shiver, and she just barely kept it from running down her spine.

"What does all of that mean? I mean, do I have new duties, or am I still just me?"

"You will never cease to be you," He sighed, his hand moving from under her chin. She pulled the covers closer around her and watched as he searched for words to explain everything he had claimed her to be.

"As alpha female of our pack, you have as much right and responsibility to the others as I do. None may challenge your word except me. There is little difference from before, except no one can try and force you out." The utter relief that swept through her at the assurance was quickly crippled by his next statement.

"As Lady of the West, you are a representative of our lands, and will take a seat on my council-"

"You're just saying that because you've been dying to inflict them on me," She grumbled with a small smile. When he didn't return it, apprehension began to grow in her stomach, making her queasy.
"The Lady always has a seat, and once again, she can only be overruled by the Lord. Me. As for the House of the Moon, perhaps you will be better suited to it's responsibilities than I. It holds sway over the boundaries between this world and the spirit world."

"What does that mean?" Kagome finally asked.

"I do not know," He admitted with a one shouldered shrug. "I never had any inclination to deal with spirits. Until now, my mother has acted in my stead. Now that I am mated, that is no longer possible. She will have to teach you."

The idea of spending any time with the inu youkai grated at Kagome's nerves, and she had trouble repressing the rage she suddenly felt at the thought.

"I have a feeling it can't wait, can it?" She finally asked. He shrugged once again, and she made a frustrated noise. When he moved away from her, she impulsively grabbed his hand, unsure of what to say next.

"We won't stop being friends, will we?" She managed.

"No. As far as being mates-" He stopped, as if once again unsure. "You may keep your own rooms." And then he pulled away from her and exited, making her feel as if he was fleeing her.

Somehow, the simple sentence had sounded so final, and so strangely damning. Ignoring the strange hollowness in the pit of her stomach, she stood and stretched, then allowed herself to actually look at the room around her, only to be surprised.

Most of the room was utilitarian, although it had a simple elegance that suited it's owner. There were chests lined up against the wall, glowing richly in the daylight filtering in through the windows and the open balcony door. The futon and the covers were deep blue, and there was a small table in a corner.

But on the walls hung two silk paintings, suspended between two pieces of wood, waving gently in a wind Kagome could barely feel.

One was the portrait that had been commissioned by Yuugao. Surprised, because she had thought it would hang somewhere for many to see, she smiled as she looked on it once again. The other, one she hadn't seen before, drew her attention.

It was of both her and Sesshoumaru, and though she loved it on sight, that the daiyoukai had chosen to hang it in his room startled her. In it, they rested beneath a tree that looked impossibly similar to the one they had created together within her core. She leaned against it, her blue eyes half lidded, almost sleepy, and the daiyoukai was laying down, his head pillowed in her lap, a startling white contrast to her red hakama. Pale fingers were threaded in the white mass, and she knew for a fact that she and Sesshoumaru had never lounged together in such a manner.

Smiling as her fingers barely grazed over the lines, she wondered if it had been the artist's fancy, or if the daiyoukai had requested something like that. Realizing where her thoughts were taking her, she shook her head and pulled her fingers away.

No, Sesshoumaru would never request such a painting. It must have been the artist's idea, maybe even a first attempt at the painting she had asked for, and Sesshoumaru, possibly trying to spare her feelings, had ordered another and kept this one. Paintings, no matter the subject, were too valuable to just throw away.

Shrugging the sudden depression off, she sighed and moved away from the wall and exited the
The middle room had more chests, and it took everything she had not to go shuffling through them.

"Mate I might be, but he likes his privacy," She mumbled, exiting the room and closing the door behind her gently, determined to remove herself from temptation. As she passed through the outermost room, she noticed for the first time that what little armor he did wear lay propped on a stand next to the empty sword stands. Only a table and cushions furnished the room, and despite it's original purpose, it struck her as a meditation room. The kind of room he spent more time in than his bedroom.

Exiting his suite at last, she was surprised to hear complete and utter silence. Knowing it was too late for the children to still be asleep, she surmised they were at breakfast, and let out an audible groan. How was she supposed to face the children? None of them would understand that actual situation, and she didn't want them to. They had all dealt with more than their fair share of growing up too quickly, and explaining a forced mating would only make it worse.

But she couldn't act like a normal mate to Sesshoumaru either. Would they even expect that? They knew their alpha, and despite the sudden change of title, he wouldn't stop being himself. So perhaps she would luck out and they wouldn't expect any changes. She hoped.

Her bedroom was as she remembered leaving it the day before, but she couldn't help feeling different as she looked at it. Nothing had changed, but she had. Suddenly the room itself felt too small, and the cream silk was glaringly bright.

Grumbling at herself about her own silliness, she changed quickly into a new set of her miko robes, setting the others aside to be washed, only to stop when she saw the bloodstain on the collar of the kimono. Guilt flashed through her when she remembered the daiyoukai's strange behavior from the night before.

"Argh, this is so stupid. Nothing's different," She snapped, impatient with herself. All the same, she gave in to impulse and folded the kimono, stashing it at the bottom of a trunk, unsure of why she was doing it to begin with. After washing her face in the basin near her small vanity and brushing her hair, she steeled herself, preparing for whatever was coming.

Sesshoumaru watched with hooded eyes when Kagome entered the schoolroom, eyes shining and a bright smile on her face. Even if none of the others could see it, he could smell the nervousness wafting off of her.

"Mama!" Rin shrieked when she spotted the miko. Kagome ruffled the girl's hair as she passed with a fond smile and sat herself next to him.

"So when is the wedding?" Nanmei asked immediately, smiling widely. Kagome, taking her first sip of morning tea, almost choked and he bit back a smile.

"Wedding?" She finally asked.

"Well, from what I've heard, there's not much in the way of tradition for inu mating ceremonies, but you're human! And a miko. Surely there's going to be a wedding," Nanmei said, smile faltering in the face of Kagome's sudden blankness. "I mean, don't you want to celebrate with all of your friends?"

"Y-yeah," Kagome stuttered. "I mean, if it's okay?" She asked, looking up to Sesshoumaru. He inclined his head once.
"If you wish it."

"I'm sure she does. No one got to celebrate, and I'm sure the kids will want to help. Not to mention all of her friends."

"Sango doesn't even know, oh man," Kagome groaned. "At least she can't think he's after the jewel." She glared when there was an undignified snort coming from her left, and when she looked up to Sesshoumaru, she did a perfect imitation of his own growl.

"Objections?" She asked in a low, dangerous tone.

"None," He answered smoothly as he reached for a plum.

"Good. I have to send letters out though, so it might be awhile. There's so many people. I wonder if they can manage to make it," She sighed at last.

"I can help," Shippou cried out, excited by the prospect of his mother's wedding. "I remember everyone!"

Nanmei giggled and listened to Shippou as he rambled on over names and explanations of who and what each person was, be it youkai, human, or in between. But Sesshoumaru felt the oppressive sadness beginning to weigh down on his mate.

"You are sad," He murmured.

"I just always thought my mom would be there for it, you know? I don't even know if I'll get to see her again," She admitted.

"How far into the future is your time?" He finally asked.

"About five hundred years," She answered, still gazing dolefully down into her cup of tea.

"Our lives are bound together now." When that didn't seem to penetrate, he tried again.

"You will live to see them again."

Her head snapped up so quickly he was vaguely surprised she didn't cause herself some strange injury.

"Are you sure?" She demanded.

"Miko, as you have often delighted in pointing out, my age numbers in the centuries. Our lives are bound, you will live as long as I. Aging slows when we reach adulthood. I doubt you will look much older than you do now when you see them again."

He was completely taken aback when she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him soundly on the cheek, laughing joyfully as she squeezed him tightly.

"This is the best gift I've ever been given," She managed breathlessly through her laughter. "I'll get to see them again! Thank you, so much!" She was still clinging, and he brought his arms around her, warmth curling in him as the scent of her happiness washed through the room.

"It was unintentional," He finally told her as she moved away, breaking their embrace.

"Doesn't matter. As long as you're okay with a second wedding when they meet you," She shot out impishly, grinning.
"If I survive the first one, I have little doubt I will survive a second," He intoned, readying to take a bite of the plum in his hand, only to have it snatched away. He watched as she bit into it with a mischievous grin, eyes narrowed playfully.

"That was the last one," He rumbled, brow arched.

"Too bad," She singsonged as she took another bite. He knew she was baiting him, although it seemed more personal somehow, knocking him slightly off balance. Watching her watch him, he finally made his decision.

Leaning forward, she began to lean back when he caught her wrist, keeping the plum perfectly in place. Eyes still staring evenly into her own, he brought his lips to the plum and paused just long enough to watch her blush. Then he sank his fangs into it, pulling away and effectively plucking the plum from her nerveless fingers.

Releasing her wrist, he palmed the plum and took a bite, savoring the mixture of tart and sweet.

"Hey!" She snapped. He gave her an arch look, only to feel slightly disappointed when she backed down.

"You two are so cute," Nanmei breathed, effectively making both the daiyoukai and the miko freeze and give her a blank look.

"Why are mama and papa looking at you like that?" Rin finally asked.

"Because they're both silly adults," Nanmei giggled, the sound only increasing when growling began from both directions.

Kagome glared down at the offending paper. Why was this so hard?

"Ugh, why does everything in my life have to be so complicated?" She groaned, letting her head thump down onto the desk.

"What's wrong?" Nanmei asked, setting her own brush down. They had been writing letters and creating invitations for the better part of an hour, and Kagome was positive that if the amount of time it took to use a calligraphy brush instead of a pen didn't kill her, figuring out how to tell Sango would.

"I have no idea how to tell Sango that she's coming to my wedding. I still feel badly that I couldn't even stay for hers and she doesn't like Sesshoumaru and-"

"Perhaps we should go to see her?" Nanmei suggested delicately. "Now that the jewel is no longer an issue, it should be safe. And if I go with you-"

"It's too long of a journey, I don't want you to risk your pregnancy, and Resshin definitely won't," Kagome rebutted, and Nanmei sighed in agreement. As her stomach grew, so did Resshin's protective instincts. He had decreed they were staying in the citadel so that the human woman didn't have to travel, and his clan's forest was closer than the taijiya's village.

"I wish my life wasn't so full of drama," Kagome groaned again.

"There are those that say, 'may you lead an interesting life' to be a curse. I've never thought so," Nanmei giggled.
"And why's that?" Kagome groused, glaring up at the woman from her spot on the table.

"Well, if I wasn't cursed with an interesting life, I never would have met you, and vice-versa. If you hadn't needed support, you never would have met Resshin, and thus, me."

"I know, but marriage? Even when I did want to get married I always thought it would be this big happy celebration. And that I'd get a choice," She added grumpily.

"Well, at least you're both friends. And there's lust too," Nanmei added slyly, ducking when a calligraphy brush came sailing in her direction. "Marriages have been made of much worse."

"Just because I've had a few dreams-" Kagome started, then stopped when Nanmei burst into peals of laughter. "What?" She demanded flatly.

"A few?" The woman choked out, then burst into laughter again.

"It doesn't matter," Kagome growled. Nanmei quieted, although her grin didn't fade as she began wiping her tears away.

"Kagome, maybe you should try initiating something. For better or worse, you two are stuck in this. You might as well try to make the best of it."

"I wouldn't force something like that on him," Kagome answered honestly. "You don't do that to friends."

Any trace of mirth fled the other woman's features, and she reached a hand forward to cover Kagome's own.

"So how about that letter?" Nanmei asked, sensing the miko's inner disquiet. "I'm sure between the two of us we can figure out how to inform Sango that you're marrying Sesshoumaru."

"Dear Sango, I would like to invite you to my wedding, as I'm getting married. You know, to the youkai you hate. Not like either of us had a lot of options, seeing as his mother is a psycho that loves to meddle," Kagome supplied sarcastically.

"How about, 'Sango, there have been some developments at the shiro, and I find I'm getting married. Please come for the ceremony'?"

Kagome inhaled deeply and Nanmei flinched, readying herself for the verbal assault she was sure was coming. Kagome exhaled and smiled brightly.

"That might work. It's sneaky, but at least it'll get her here, and then I can explain."

"Sometimes being sneaky is the only thing that works," Nanmei said, rolling her eyes as the miko grabbed another brush and dabbed it in the ink.

"I did not know you knew so many people," Sesshoumaru observed quietly as he went over the list she had presented him with. There were dozens of people, and if he hadn't known the woman better, he would have wondered if she was just inviting everyone she had met on her travels.

"Is it too many?"

"No, this is fine. I do not know the particulars of human weddings," He admitted. "So I will leave it in your and Nanmei's hands."
"Thank you again for this. I know that this isn't-"

"Again, you forget," He cut in, a hand held up to silence her. "I would not have had any real choice. That my mate is also my friend is more than enough. If having a formal ceremony makes you happy, then I wish for you to do it."

Stunned by his sincerity more than the words, she nodded dumbly and smiled.

"I need to explain a few things to you about the kind of ceremony I'm planning. It's not entirely shinto or buddhist. It's borrowing off of some western traditions too, and it involves groomsmen," She explained.

"Groomsmen?"

Laughing at his bewildered expression, she leaned forward onto the table and began explaining some of the concepts she was stealing from western weddings, laughing when he admitted that none of it made sense to him.

"It seems like a political trap," He offered, pleased that the comment only served the lengthen her laughter.

"Political trap?" She gasped.

"Hnn. I am supposed to pick one man to be the best? What if I am the best?"

If she didn't know better, she'd think he was teasing her.

"It's supposed to be a best friend," She explained.

"How is one supposed to pick a best friend?"

"It's just the person you're closest to."

When his gaze turned considering and he grew quiet, she wondered for a moment if the whole idea was too silly given the context. Sesshoumaru had friends, but he didn't really flaunt the fact, and she couldn't really imagine him choosing a 'best' out of the small group.

"You are already playing the part of the bride," He finally said, making her blush.

"Best guy friend. You know, umm, like Resshin. And the twins can be the other two groomsmen," She stuttered, feeling as if her face were hot enough to cook eggs on.

"I do not think I could call any of them 'best' though. The twins are too easy to offend."

"Then just call all of them your best men."

"And Shinzuru?"

"He's giving me away."

"Giving you...away?"

"It's a tradition for the father of the bride. He gives her away. I don't think he'll mind, do you?" Kagome asked, suddenly apprehensive about the idea. Would Shinzuru be okay with participating in a human wedding? What about Resshin for that matter? His clan had been nearly wiped out by humans.
"He will not mind. Are there any other roles I should be aware of?"

"Oh, well, there was one thing. I know it's going to sound really stupid but-" She stopped and looked at the table, suddenly feeling very small and very foolish. It was the one tradition she didn't want to do without, but given the situation, was it even remotely appropriate?

Strong fingers cupped her chin and forced her to look up into gold eyes that failed to completely hide their concern.

"What is it?" He demanded softly.

"In my time, when two people get married, they exchange rings. I know it sounds really stupid, but, my mom always said circles represented eternity. Never mind, it was-"

"It will take some time to have them made," He cut in. "When did you plan for the wedding to occur?"

"Oh-" Kagome stammered, too stunned by his acquiescence to stop the shy smile from tilting up the corners of her lips.

"Well, given the circumstances, we figured the solstice. Nanmei said it would give everyone enough time to get here," She murmured. He seemed amused by the choice, and she couldn't help but ask him why.

"It is nothing," He sighed with a small smile. "As for these rings, is there any particular design that is traditional, or a certain material?"

"Oh, they're usually simple bands, sometimes with designs, sometimes not. Umm, you don't have to do it, I know jewelry can be really expensive to make, and it's not a lot of time."

"I am sure I know someone up to the task," He assured her. "Is there anything else?"

"Oh, nothing yet. I'm sure we'll think of it all later. I don't want anything huge. Just simple and happy."

"I am unsure of simplicity. My retainer tells me Nanmei has been terrorizing those in the kitchens already, demanding to know just what their capabilities are."

He was rewarded by another giggle, and the tilt of his lips deepened just a bit more. She shook her head, but stood silently, then paused.

"I know that big celebrations aren't your thing, and that you probably don't want to do this. But thank you," She told him, smiling a small smile similar to his own. It was her blue eyes that conveyed the depths of her sincerity, and he inclined his head.

"You have more than earned anything that pleases you," Was all he said. She nodded once and left the study. In the sudden silence, he gave in and rested his elbows on the table and laced his fingers together.

It was still a small wonder, seeing the fingers intertwined, and even more to rest his chin upon them. But that pleasure, as strange and new and wonderful as it was, was ignored for the moment as he considered her words.

She had not told him the materials the rings were usually made of, merely that they were usually simple bands. He had a singular distaste for gold, it was often too soft to hold up to time, and the
color itself put him off. Silver likewise, would not hold up to time, although he preferred the color.

Considering his options, or lack of them more aptly, he wondered if he would actually be able to help her with this one request. Any jeweler would be more than eager to fulfill the request, but the request itself was special to her. He had not lied, she deserved to have what few hopes she had left fulfilled. This seemed to be singular among them, and he wondered if in her time, the ring was similar to a mating mark. Such marks were eternal, until death came to one partner or another at least, and the ring symbolized eternity to her.

It was too serious a request to give lightly. But what would be appropriate? What would give her some small pleasure amidst a celebration of a coerced joining?

When his idea struck him, he smiled softly to himself. Appropriate, and simple.

It was late by the time he ascended the stairs and walked past the two youkai guarding the family wing of the house. His mind still tumbling over the sudden outrage of servants and retainer alike, he was more than ready to indulge himself in a few hours of sleep. But as he passed the miko's room, the scent he had forced himself to ignore for weeks drifted out into the hall, tantalizingly warm and sweet.

Grinding his teeth, he paused for a moment in front of her rooms, allowing the scent to wrap around him and settle into his clothes. When it threatened to seep into his skin, he closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, only to choke on the sudden sharp intensity.

It was the first time that he wondered who she was dreaming about. What was fairly obvious, but the who eluded him. When the image of his dead brother flashed in his mind, he felt a strange stabbing in his torso, as if someone had pierced the flesh with a knife.

Gold eyes blinked open, and with a growl, he withdrew his hand from the door, angry that it had moved, seemingly of it's own accord. Leashing the sudden flare of emotions, he took another deep breath, this time through his mouth. Her arousal was a physical taste in the air, flavoring the inhalation. Turning smartly on his heel, he walked at a fast clip, determined to put some space between himself and the miko.

Once he was in his own rooms, he erected a barrier and inhaled again, only to be disturbed by the scent once more. Swords were removed and placed carefully on their stands. More determined than ever to be free of the scent, he left a trail of clothing to his inner sanctum, sighing once they were gone. One barrier fell, and a smaller once slid up into place, surrounding only his room.

Thankful to be free of the scent at last, he stretched languorously and lay down, pulling a blanket over himself only to curse again.

Her scent. Her blood. Her arousal. All faint, but the mixture almost too heady to bear. Expelling a gusty sigh, he turned over, wondering why her scent would affect him now.

The mating mark. That had to be it. Perhaps he was still held within it's thrall. His own father had thought himself in love with his mother, surely that meant there was some sort of compulsion brought on by the sharing of energies. Yuugao was not a person anyone would consider themselves in love with, at least, not if they were sane.

So it was the mark. Perhaps it was his own instincts, insidious and uncaring of circumstance, demanding he fulfill the role set to him. It would not be the first time he had warred with his own natural urges, and it would not be the last, although the idea was enough to make him grimace with
distaste.

Mate. How strange that he found himself with one. By his standards he was young yet, too young to have even considered a mate. Since he had marked her, he had not focused on the idea itself, instead allowing her to continue as his friend alone.

But they were not just friends anymore, as much as neither of them had wanted the current situation. Even though she was pretending nothing had changed, he felt different, although how he couldn't quite put his finger on. Perhaps the strangeness would pass with time. He hoped so, the feeling unsettled him to say the least.

Resisting the urge to pinch the bridge of his nose as the others did -what use had such a gesture anyway?- he shifted, settling more deeply into the plush futon, and cursed the scents his movement sent wafting into the air.

Kagome awoke once more sweaty and tangled in her blankets. Damning the ookami's ritual for the umpteenth time, she flung the covers away and sat up, blinking blearily. The strange heat still pooled in her stomach, and with each dream it seemed determined to linger a bit longer into her waking moments.

"Ugh, this is ridiculous," She muttered, standing and making for her wash basin. Visiting the basin was becoming morning ritual. Today she would be adding a quick visit to the bathhouse to that.

The cool water shocked her into fully waking, and when she looked out of the windows, it was to see a world still tinted azure in the false dawn. Praying the other residents of the wing were still fast asleep, she shrugged into a warm yukata and grabbed a towel and the soap from the basin.

Feeling like a sneak thief as she opened the door to the hall, she peered around cautiously before closing the door silently behind her and tiptoed down the hall and towards the ever present, ever watchful guards. Just as she was passing the children's room, a head popped out of the door, smirking knowingly.

"What's the cat doing creeping around at this hour?" Kasai murmured, smirk growing into a wide grin.

"I was going to take a bath," Kagome hissed, afraid of waking children with sensitive hearing.

"You know, I know the others have been walking on eggshells as far as this is concerned, wanting to spare your feelings and everything. But have you ever thought of just taking care of the problem?"

"What?" She asked dumbly, suddenly confused. The kitsune rolled his eyes to the ceiling and huffed quietly. Stepping out, he closed the door behind him and crossed his arms over his chest.

"Cat, any adult in smelling distance knows what you're dreaming about. Just take care of it."

Bone deep mortification set in, and for several tense seconds she was tempted to flee back to her own suite of rooms. Hiding sounded like a very good option. For years. Until she died.

"Oh come on, Cat, it's perfectly normal. Well, dreaming about it anyway. Can't say dreaming about it every night is, but who am I to judge? We didn't want you to feel embarrassed, but maybe if you deal with your problem, you'll stop dreaming." He offered.

"I can't believe I'm having this discussion with you of all people!" She snapped in a furious whisper, shame shifting into mortified anger.
"Well Shinzuru sees you as a daughter, there's no way he'd say it, and Mizu wouldn't be able to without tying his own tongue in knots. Resshin's too polite and Sesshoumaru, well, he's being noble."

"But-"

"Cat, you're normal. Human or youkai, everyone dreams about it. You're mated-"

"Don't even go there!" She hissed through clenched teeth. "Just don't. It's just some stupid dreams, and they don't need to be handled. If I ignore them, they'll go away."

She ignored the rude noise he made and shook her head vehemently.

"I'm going to go take a bath and forget you said anything about this," She muttered, eyes fixed on the floor as she began walking away. When he said nothing more, she allowed herself to look back. He was still watching her with an amused smile, and he had the gall to wave when she looked over her shoulder. Huffing indignantly, she turned ahead and tried to muster as much dignity as she could.

For once she was thankful for the eerie quiet of the guards and passed without looking at either of them. Refused to even ask herself if they could smell what every other youkai could apparently smell. Sending a quick prayer of thanks to the kami for small favors, she took a small comfort that at least the children didn't understand the scent.

Which left Resshin, who knew that she was dreaming, and who about. Nanmei could keep nothing from her mate, conversely, his abilities made it hard for Kagome to hide anything either. Even being around the youkai was enough to suddenly bring her thoughts zeroing in on the topic, mainly because she kept trying to tell herself not to think about it in his presence. It was during those times that he would stop, stare intently, and then mutter something under his breath. Whatever he said was never loud enough for her to hear, and she was always too afraid to ask.

Shinzuru had known for some time who and what she dreamed about, and even though she hadn't progressed much beyond the dance, there was still an acute embarrassment present when she thought of the youkai's awareness. That he knew she continued to have those dreams only deepened the feeling and made her want to curl in on herself.

The kitsune brothers knowing made her want to bang her head into a wall. That the two had somehow refrained from making any jokes was a miracle. Surely if Sesshoumaru or Resshin, or dear kami, Shinzuru, had suddenly dreamed of something that tinged their scents with what was obviously lust, the twins would have a field day with it. But Kasai's suggestion made her cheeks burn with more than just embarrassment.

How could he think she would ever do something like that? Just because she was mated didn't mean that she suddenly had the right or the will to act on any of her dreams.

By the time she reached the bathhouse, the anger and embarrassment hadn't faded in the least, and she shrugged from her clothing and dropped into the cold water with an angry hiss, although she was grateful for the sudden iciness that shocked the lingering traces of the dream into oblivion.

Scrubbing herself until she was pink and her scalp tingled painfully, she heaved a sigh of relief when she got out, feeling a thousand times better.

When she walked down the corridor of the family wing to her room, she resolutely stared ahead, even when Kasai's head popped out from the doorway.
Totosai stared at the daiyoukai incredulously.

“You what?” He asked dumbly. It was the first time the daiyoukai had ever seen the blacksmith in such a state, and had it not been for his own need of the youkai's services, he would have taken some pleasure in it.

“My mate wants rings-”

“You have a mate. Well, I know that. But the girl? A human? A miko?” With every adjective of the woman, his voice grew more and more shrill, unable to suspend his own sense of disbelief.

“It was beyond our control,” Sesshoumaru stated, feeling defensive in the face of the other male's incredulity.

“Oh so? Since when has anyone been able to force you to do anything?” Totosai rebutted.

“My mother banished her from the pack, then nominated her for the trial,” He replied coolly.

“And you let her?” The youkai rasped.

“I gave my word to protect her. I would be forsworn if I had not accepted the suit.”

“And she managed to beat you?” The incredulity was gone, replaced with that strange, intense consideration that made him realize the difference of their years.

“Our powers merged, there was no way for either of us to win.”

“So a draw,” He mumbled. For a moment Sesshoumaru felt something strange, as if he wasn't seeing the entirety of the youkai before him. The the old man shrugged and the utter stillness of the moment shattered.

“So rings. I've never been asked to make jewelry before,” The blacksmith rasped.

“These must withstand the test of time. Even youkai jewelers will not be able to accomplish such.”

“Flattery gets you everywhere with me,” Totosai joked as he gazed into the fire. “Since this is a tradition from her time, I assume she told you what the rings are made of?”

“She did not, but the metals humans deal with will not endure centuries. These must be made of something stronger.”

“You suggesting what I think you are?” Totosai asked, one eye open and the other shut as he turned to look back at the daiyoukai.
“How many would it take?” Sesshoumaru asked, answering the blacksmith's question.

“Oh, just one, especially since it's you,” he replied, looking as if he was going to burst into peals of laughter any second. Then he sobered, scratching his chin thoughtfully. “You know, fangs aren't the only thing I work with. Bone, flesh—”

“I doubt she would appreciate a ring made of flesh,” Sesshoumaru muttered disdainfully, the very idea repugnant. And he was not going to let the old madman get access to even a sliver of a bone.

“I wasn’t suggesting that. I’ve never worked with hair, never needed to. Hair's too fragile for weapons. But for rings, welladay, that's another matter entirely."

“And what would you use hair for?”

“That’s for me to know pup. You all but said I’m the only one that can do this, so just do as I say. Open wide,” he chuckled gleefully. Submitting to the indignity with as much grace as he could, he opened his mouth wide and watched the old youkai coming closer with the pliers. His eyes narrowed as the youkai tried to contain his laughter and failed, small chuckles escaped to mix with the sound of the fire in the forge.

It took one swift, surprisingly strong yank and the fang was free. Sesshoumaru closed his mouth the second the pliers and fang were out and he swallowed the blood and saliva that had accumulated.

“Now, I need some of your hair and some of hers before I can start any of this. How soon do you need it?”

“By the solstice. Doubtless you are invited.”

“I’ll consider that my invitation then,” Totosai chuckled. “That’ll be more than enough time. When will you bring her hair?” He asked, a knife already in his hands and moving for the daiyoukai’s head. Sesshoumaru tried not to flinch as the blacksmith, suddenly acting so familiar with his person, dug through his hair, cutting a lock at the base of his neck so that the shorn locks would be hidden.

“I will bring it tomorrow.”

“You want what?” Kagome asked, staring at the daiyoukai dumbly. She knew there were differences between youkai and humans, she’d be dumb not to. But...Her hair?

“I need a lock of your hair,” he repeated.

“Why?”

Suddenly he seemed very reluctant to answer.

“It’s not for some weird spell or something is it?” she demanded.

“No,” he snapped impatiently. “I promise you no harm will come from parting with it. That is all I will say.”

She watched him for a minute, and realized that he was using his ‘council face’ as she had come to think of it. It looked as if he were staring her straight in the eye, but the gold orbs were focused on some point just past her, or even inwards, she couldn’t tell.

“You promise it's not for anything weird, right?”
“You have my word,” He replied stiffly. She huffed once and turned, pulling her hair up to expose the back of her neck.

“Somewhere from the nape of my neck. I don't want an uneven patch showing too much.”

Always light on his feet, she jumped when she felt his hand gather a small lock, little more than a few strands really. Held just tightly enough to pull it taut, there was a whisper of movement, and the pressure gone.

“I am finished,” He murmured from behind her. She dropped her hair and turned to him, smiling brightly.

“So when do I get to find out what that's for?”

“Not for some time,” He answered coolly, already walking away.

The fair haired inu in front of her was staring at some point on the wall behind her, and Kagome was suddenly very sure she knew where Sesshoumaru had gotten his ‘council face’ from.

“I am well aware you resent my presence here. But the fact remains that you must be trained, and I am the only one able to do it.”

“I don't even know what I'm supposed to be doing,” Kagome snapped, still glaring at Yuugao. It was the first she had seen of the woman since the trial, and it was with absolute certainty that she realized it was too soon. Would probably be too soon for the next hundred years.

“We monitor spirits.”

“Why? Aren't there kami for that?” Kagome asked flatly.

“Perhaps. We focus more on the aberrations present in this world, and if they interfere too much with the natural order, we find them and put them to rest.”

“So you're an exorcist?”

Yuugao looked mortally offended by the idea.

“No, simple exorcists cannot do what we do. They banish a spirit, they do not send it to the netherworld. Few actually need to be guided. The undead priestess for example, her name was Kikyo.”

Kagome started at the name she hadn't head in close to a year, hadn't even thought about.

“Kikyou was an aberration?”

“What else would you call a woman summoned back from the grave? But she was not one that needed to be taken back to hell. It is rare for any that need guiding to be powerful enough to warrant our attentions.”

She must have looked suitably bewildered, because Yuugao sighed softly.

“Only those that can cause real problems with our presence require our special attentions. The others will fade in time. It was my duty, and will soon be yours, to handle those that are too powerful to be ignored.”
“So I have to send ghosts to hell or heaven?” Kagome asked, dumbfounded.

“Some. Not all need to be sent back. Enenra, as I’m sure you remember, is a powerful spirit, as is the Kerakera onna. They are benevolent. There are those that are not, although ones that need to be taken care of, as I said, are rare. I have only dealt with perhaps a dozen since taking the title from my father.”

“So, why the special training?” Kagome demanded. “Shouldn't I hear some sort of news about stuff like this?”

“It is easier to deal with the problem before it reaches such a magnitude. I will be teaching you to gain access to the spirit world. I warn you, they will put you to test, to see if they find you worthy, although I have little doubt they will.”

“And why's that?” Kagome snapped, angry at the mention of another test.

“Enenra and Kerakera-onna have both come to aid you, even if it was for small endeavors.”

“But it was while I had the jewel-”

“The jewel was a vile thing, one that repulsed those who served me. It was the one conundrum I never figured out how to solve. That you did is all the more reason for them to accept you. Once accepted, they will act as your own spies in the world. It's very simple.”

“So why the training?” Kagome groused. Because it sounded anything but simple. In fact, it felt as if Yuugao was being purposefully obtuse and vague, and other than dislike or contempt (neither of which would make sense in light of her tactics) Kagome could think of no reason she should be that way.

Yuugao looked ready to strike her out of sheer frustration, and Kagome almost hoped for it. She wanted a rematch against the youkai. Ever since the woman had come back, acting as if she'd done nothing wrong, she had imagined doing something, anything, to get acknowledgment of that wrong.

“You must learn how to access the spirit world, and turn your powers toward delivering spirits to heaven or hell. While your skills in battle might be impressive, they are not suited to your new duties. Now.” The woman snapped, moving to the small table and sitting gracefully. “Now you will come and sit. Standing is not conducive to this lesson.”

Kagome moved to sit across from the inu and watched as her mate's mother removed a necklace with a heavy, ivory disk hanging from it. Set in the center was a black stone that seemed to absorb any light that hit it.

“So what are we doing?” Kagome asked. “Isn't spirit work more suited to night?” The inu made a rude noise while rolling her eyes.

“Look into the stone,” She demanded coolly. Kagome shrugged once before looking at the stone again. For a moment she could swear she saw something flickering below the surface of it, like a pale shadow pushed against it from within, a koi fin barely seen in dark water. Leaning closer, she had almost decided it had been a trick of the light when she saw it again.

“Wha-” She started, but was cut off when the shadow seemed to move just beyond the bounds of the jewel and pull her into it.

Alice falling down the tunnel came back to her as she tumbled and rolled leisurely down into the darkness. Feeling very much like the confused girl from the English tale, she looked for anything that
might give her a handle on what was going on.

“Hello?” She called into the darkness. “Hello? Anybody here?”

Her calls were absorbed as completely as the stone had absorbed light. It was a surprise that she could see her own limbs. The darkness that touched her body seemed absolute as it met the edges of her flesh. Wondering if her own power would give any light, she summoned her ki and pushed it out, hoping that light might expose something of her surroundings.

Instead, there was nothing but more blackness, although she felt like she was floating in the center of a star, the darkness making her own aura all the brighter.

“We were wondering when you would come,” A familiar voice whispered. Kagome turned, looking for the owner, and could just barely make out the strange, smoky wisps of a human shape. The smoke began to solidify until a beautiful woman was standing before her, dark eyes shining brightly.

“I know. Took her long enough,” Another voice chuckled. The laughing woman came into view, her face and clothing no longer outrageous, but her voice too familiar for Kagome to forget.

“Hello, Enenra, and Kerakera-onna,” She greeted with a small bow.

“Don't forget us,” Another voice whispered. Kagome turned to see a beautiful woman with long hair that floated around her regally, one as pale as snow, and two rather plain looking women that seemed out of place given the fantastical situation.

“I'm afraid I do not know who you are,” Kagome answered, bowing deeply before them.

“We were the ubume that followed our children until they reached your lands. We whispered to them in dreams and told them the west was safe. We followed them until they came into your care, lady miko,” One sighed, although there was no sorrow in the sound, merely a lack of strength, as if they had only just enough to remain. “You freed us from our fear and earthly bonds by loving them. We have freed them of their fear of separation.” A plain faced woman answered.

“How, who-”

“What better life could they have than the one lived in your home, with you and your mate? Our whispers have kept them in your care.”

“Those two were ubume. I am Yuki-onna, and this is Harionago,” The pale woman said in a half whispered sigh, her voice light and airy.

“Thank you,” Kagome murmured, frightened of the two seemingly harmless spirits that stood before her, looking benign despite the legends she had heard since childhood.

“Have no fear child, I will not harm you,” Harionago answered with a smile. “My tricks are reserved for those like the bandits that you suffered under.”

Kagome knew her mouth was forming a small, surprised 'o', and had to forcibly calm her expression. That had never been a part of the legends involving that particular spirit.

“So, little priestess, your trial awaits. There is still one that you must meet, and this one must be met alone,” Enenra told her in a strong tone that belied her earlier whisper. “Once you are given your task, we will come to you again. Now go,” She urged, moving behind Kagome and pushing her forward.
Kagome, reluctant to leave the spirits for the seemingly limitless darkness, turned and saw the spirits fading back into the inky blackness.

“Why did they even show up at all?” Kagome sighed as she trudged forward. “At least they're not out to get me. And the ubume, two mothers. I wonder what they did to keep relatives away?” She asked out loud.

And Harionago. Kagome had been hearing horror stories of her from legends for years, and they were even more prevalent in the past. She should be afraid of the two not so benign spirits that had offered their help, but Harionago had said her attentions were reserved for evil men, and it made the miko wonder how such a beautiful woman had become such a malevolent spirit. And the Yuki-onna, what did she know of the snow woman herself, except from legend?

“Oi, I was wondering when you were going to get around to this,” A voice called out.

Her heart stopped in her chest, and she stumbled over her own feet, almost falling to her knees.

“Hey, don’t even think of crying, you've done way too much of that.” The voice snapped as an image began to emerge from the darkness, as if walking from some great distance, details becoming clearer and more defined with each step he took.

The white hair was first to take shape, and the two tiny, conical ears. Then the outline of red clothing, and finally the burnished gold eyes.

“I-Inuyasha?” Kagome whispered, throat tightening and voice thickening dangerously. Tears stung her eyes and made the image before her waver, forcing her to rub at them furiously.

“No crying. Dammit, don’t cry,” The gruff voice commanded, sounding almost angry. “You've cried enough. Dammit, Kagome-”

She threw herself into the hanyou's chest, clinging desperately as she felt arms wrap around her. But it was not like the embraces she remembered. Those had been warm, strong. This felt cool and almost insubstantial. When she realized it, she pulled back, stepping away to look up into the hanyou's eyes.

“I'm a spirit now, Kagome, it won't be like before. It can't,” He sighed. “You know, you sure know how to be a pain in the ass.”

The familiar gruff tone almost sent her to her knees with nostalgia, and she settled for seating herself on the invisible floor of the darkness, blue eyes scanning the male across from her as he also took a seat.

“I'm sorry, for everything,” She whispered. “I'm sorry I fell for Naraku's trick, that I didn't save you-”

“Hey, enough of that,” He grumbled, looking more than a little offended. “It is what it is. Death puts things into perspective. I was never mad at you for what happened. I was angry at Naraku and myself for not being stronger. But that's life,” He told her blithely as he crossed his arms and shrugged.

“In the end, Naraku was destroyed, and the jewel wished out of existence. I'm surprised you didn't think of the wish sooner, but it worked out for the best.”

“How can you say that?” Kagome demanded. “Sango-”

“Sango's always had a darkness in her heart, and it's something she'll always have to deal with. She
broke the bonds with those around her, but they were reconnected, and are forged of stronger stuff now. If anything, death taught me that things happen like they do for a reason.”

“What reason was there for your death?” Kagome demanded angrily, mortified that the hanyou before her wasn't blustering angrily or shouting or even sad. Just accepting, which wasn't like the person she had known at all!

“If I tell you, you'll just think I'm crazy. Besides, that's not why you're here,” he reminded her. “I'm supposed to give you the task. I just wish I didn't have to,” He sighed, briefly reminding her of her friend. “But it can't be helped. I want you to know though, that I'm sorry.” He sighed again, his ears down turned.

“For what, you-”

“You have to go back.” He cut her off, his voice serious and eyes beseeching. “I don't have any control over the task, and I'm sorry. But you have to go back to the fortress.”

Any thoughts Kagome had slammed into a wall when she realized what he was saying.

“Why?” She demanded. “Why do I have to go back there?”

“Because it scares you, because you hate that place more than anywhere in the world. You have to find the necklace,” He told her. “Find it and bury it beneath the Goshinboku.”

“Why?” She whispered.

“So I can rest. Being a ghost is fun and all, but I'm not meant to stay like this. Besides, I've seen enough miracles to shift my perspective for the next three lifetimes. I don't think I can handle any more,” He added in a mutter, eying Kagome in a way that made her feel as if he knew everything.

“I-,” She started, then stopped. Could she do anything less than accept? She should have looked for anything, something, when she was at the fortress with the others, but the illusion of her rape had still been too fresh, the feelings too raw for her to even go down into the basement where the hanyou had died and her innocence had been stolen.

“Don't worry, the others will help you on your way. No one else can go with you, but kami knows if someone tries to attack you, those women can handle it,” He added with a rueful smile. “Not to mention you've gotten a lot stronger. I'm proud of you, you know.”

He had never once, in all of the time she'd known him, said anything remotely resembling that statement before, and it was enough to make her hug herself tightly, knowing the strange shadow embrace of the spirit would only serve to discomfort her.

“Hey, you need to go back now. And listen to Yuugao, she's got your best interests at heart.”

The hanyou began fading, and Kagome reached out, a loud ‘wait’ dying on her lips even as the image dulled into nothingness.

That Inu Yasha had mentioned Yuugao, and for those to be his last words to her only made her more angry at the inu that had manufactured the whole mess.

But the darkness was receding, and she almost felt as if she were being pushed up, traveling her path down backwards. In a flash of blue light, she was suddenly aware of solid objects. The floor she was sitting on, and the table her arms rested on. Her head, pillowed by her arms, felt light and strange when she leaned back and stretched, her back popping noisily.
“Welcome back,” A voice said, breaking the silence. Kagome opened her eyes and saw Yuugao sitting across from her, two cups filled with warm tea waiting. “You were gone for a little over an hour.”

The events of her little trip caught up to her, and she rested her elbows on the table and buried her face in her hands, groaning loudly.

“I hate my life,” She muttered.

A cup was pushed towards her and she looked up, glaring at the pale inu.

“I take it the task is not to your liking?” Yuugao sighed. “It rarely is.”

“What was yours?” Kagome sighed, the anger seeping out of her. If even Inuyasha was telling her to take it easy on the youkai, then she should at least try. And being angry just took too much strength. After seeing the dead hanyou's spirit, she wasn't sure she could maintain much of any strong emotion for long.

“I had to bind a spirit to a sword. Sou'unga, to be precise. Hellish is not a strong enough term for that experience.”

“You created Sou'unga?” Kagome almost shrieked. “How-”

“My mate, Touga, won the rights to the sword when he engaged me in a draw. He hated it, but was the only youkai besides myself that could wield it, and I had no desire to even look at it after binding the spirit to the blade. He became it's guardian until he died.”

Kagome was silent for several minutes, wondering if even Sesshoumaru knew of the sword's origin. If he had, would he have wanted it instead of eschewing it and it's promises? Shaking her head and her wandering thoughts, she groaned again.

“I have to go back to Naraku's fortress and retrieve the subjugation rosary Inu Yasha wore. I can't take anyone, but the women,” Kagome stopped, wondering if she was going to sound crazy even to the inu.

“You have been offered aid?” Yuugao asked, eyes widening slightly.

“Yes.”

“Did they give their names?”

“Enenra, Kerakera-onna, two of the children's mothers, and-” Kagome stopped, wondering how much Yuugao knew of the last two.

“And?”

“Harionago and Yukki-onna.”

Yuugao relaxed enough to smile slightly. “That was to be expected. Harionago suffered a fate similar to your own, but was killed by the man that raped her. When I first heard of her, I thought to put her to rest, but she asked to stay and search for the one that murdered her. After she did, she saw that there were others like her, but not strong enough to take physical forms. She is their vengeance. If my son had not killed the bandits that harmed you, I have little doubt they would have run afoul of her sooner of later.”
“So, sometimes malevolent spirits can be allowed to stay?” Kagome asked, suddenly confused.

“It is our place to make judgment. Harionago is one of a few truly powerful spirits that intends harm that I have allowed to continue in this world. Her last thoughts for revenge will always drive her, and her hatred too consuming to send her anywhere but Hell. Some would say it is because I am female that I have allowed her to continue her mission, but it is not just because of the prey she seeks that I allow her to continue.”

“What else is there?”

Yuugao released a sad sigh, eyes conveying more sorrow than Kagome had ever seen the youkai bear. For the first time Yuugao looked not older, like a mother, but ageless.

“I cannot send her to an eternity in hell because she is consumed with a hatred that has been more than earned. If I could give her peace, perhaps it would be different, but I cannot. None can, so long as men live.”

Kagome understood immediately, but didn't voice the recognition of the inu's feeling. It was strange though, to realize that Yuugao pitied the spirit. The idea of the youkai pitying anyone was enough to shake her perceptions of the former alpha female, and she remembered Inu Yasha's words again. Deciding an abrupt change of topic was in order, she allowed a small smile to play on her lips.

“Two of the spirits that came to me were ubume that told their children to come to the western lands. They said when we took the kids in, they were freed. And that they're doing something to keep the relatives away. I don't know how I feel about it, but they said the children would be better off here,” She offered. Yuugao smiled gratefully.

“Practical and true. It is well then. It is likely they were the only ones strong enough to become spirits, and if they have lingered, they will make for good allies should you need them, if they choose to stay after the trial.”

Another thought occurred to Kagome, and she groaned again, realizing the sudden complication.

“How am I supposed to tell Sesshoumaru I have to go to Naraku's fortress alone? And the wedding? Kami-” Her head fell into her palms again, and she briefly considered just running for it. But Sesshoumaru would find her, no matter how far she got, he would find her, and be angry. And if she told him what her trial was, he'd still be angry.

“I will take care of the particulars child. Leave my son to me, and prepare to leave in the morning.”

Sesshoumaru stared his mother down, wondering if it were possible to kill her now that she no longer held the title of alpha female without bringing the clan down on his head.

“No.”

“You do not have a choice in this matter. She must complete this training before the solstice. It will not take long, a week, perhaps a little more.”

He refrained from inhaling deeply and from growling. Both signs of emotion would give away too much.

“Has it escaped your notice that she is planning a wedding?”
“She will come back in time. Sesshoumaru, she must do this, or else the spirits will revolt, and she will be dragged into their world.”

“This would not be an issue if you had not meddled so carelessly,” He finally snapped.

Yuugao said nothing, but stared ahead. He knew she was not looking at him, despite all appearances otherwise. Instead, she was focusing inward, her thoughts apparently more drawing than the current conversation.

“There is no choice. She has already agreed. We will leave in the morning,” She replied coolly, her eyes suddenly focused intently on him. “Mate or not, you have no say in this, Sesshoumaru. If you had taken a more active role in your duties, she wouldn't have to do this.”

“If you had not forced us into mating, this wouldn't be a problem,” He growled.

Yuugao said nothing as she turned to leave, and it took every ounce of willpower he had not to force a full on confrontation. Instead, he decided that the miko would provide better answers for what was happening, and left his study, grateful for the reprieve from tedious, insincere letters congratulating him on his mating.

It was simple enough to find her, their bond had only heightened his awareness of her, and even if he had not possessed a singular sense of smell or the ability to sense purity of her aura, the bond would still give him her location.

The guards were ever silent as he passed them, moving down the corridor of the family wing. Her doors were closed, and he stopped in front of them, suddenly feeling awkward. Despite their new status as mates, or in part because of it, he did not feel comfortable going into her rooms. Another reason was the scent that still pervaded the wood, and despite his best attempts, he could not help but breathe the scent in.

He tapped on the wood once, a polite knock that brought her from within the suite.

“Sesshoumaru,” Kagome greeted cautiously, looking less than pleased by his appearance.

“My mother tells me you are leaving in the morning,” He said by way of greeting, although the words were slightly stilted. Kagome sighed and moved to the side, gesturing for him to come in. He did so, already feeling trapped by the scent that was even stronger within the doors.

“I don't have a choice Sesshoumaru. It's something I have to do, and it needs to be done now.”

The incense of her arousal was making it damnable hard to concentrate, and he damned his instincts and the mating mark -when would it's effects fade?- while he tried to find a way to demand she stay. But then a thought occurred, and he bit back any sign of the sudden triumph he felt.

“Then you must go. Inform the children of your departure, and Nanmei.”

Ignoring her suddenly stunned gaze, he stood fluidly and escaped her room, already feeling better.

Time away from the shiro, from him, meant he could gain distance from her. Perhaps then the mating mark and his instincts would calm. Already feeling more buoyant than he had in a month, he opted to go to his rooms instead, already throwing together a plan to have her room thoroughly cleansed while she was gone.

She would go, and be safe with his mother. He would be able to focus and his instincts would finally fall silent.
Dawn came early, and her feet felt like they were made of lead. Despite lack of sleep, she felt wired and ready. To hide.

“Hurry,” Yuugao urged. “I told my son you’d be back in time for your wedding. If we dawdle like this I'm not sure you'll be back before spring.”

“I know,” Kagome grumbled. “I'm just not sure about this,” She sighed. “I'm surprised he's letting me go at all.”

Sesshoumaru's sudden capitulation had been strange and oddly discomfiting. Not to mention slightly hurtful. When he had accepted he had seemed only too eager to see her leave, and he hadn't spoken to her since. Was he already regretting the mating?

“Well, I might had skirted a few details,” Yuugao admitted as Kagome formed her cloud and threw her travel pack on it.

“Skirted?” She asked.

“He's on his way to see you off. Just go along with whatever he says,” Yuugao hissed as she smiled brightly. While Kagome fumbled with her bedroll and travel bag, she wondered just what Yuugao had told Sesshoumaru, or hadn't for that matter.

Or if it mattered at all.

She felt his presence before she heard him, and she turned, forcing a bright smile to her face. He in turn looked indifferent.

“I'll see you soon, Sesshoumaru,” She chirruped brightly, smiling so wide her face was hurting.

“Hnn. Travel safely,” He replied blandly. Ignoring his sudden coolness towards her, she moved forward and hugged him, flinching when he stiffened slightly. But his arms came around her, and she buried her face in his chest, hoping that the purpose of her trial wasn't making him too angry.

When she pulled back, he was looking over her shoulder at his mother.

“Come child, we must be off.”

Kagome said nothing as she sat herself on her cloud and leaned against her bedroll and travel pack. Sesshoumaru watched as they lifted into the sky, and she leaned over the side, waving down to him. Stung, she saw him turning away before he even had a chance to see her final farewell.

“He is still dealing with the change in your relationship,” Yuugao stated as Kagome leaned back against her pack and pulled the light blue jacket more closely around her. “Just give him time.”

“It wouldn't be a problem if you had kept your nose out of everything.” Kagome growled at the daiyoukai flying beside her.

“My son said something very similar. Both of you see little.”

“What is there to see?” Kagome demanded, growing angry with the other female, the hurt at Sesshoumaru's sudden indifference morphing into resentment of the woman's high handed actions.

“I love my son, although I know he does not acknowledge it, and most likely does not believe it. I wanted to save him from the choice I endured.”
“How did you save him from anything by taking his right to choose away? You don't help people by doing that-”

“At least the both of you are friends,” Yuugao snapped. “My son would not have had a choice in the matter to begin with. But you, you gained his friendship, and you were fulfilling most of the roles of any alpha female. You, at least, would not be cold to him, and he is not indifferent to you, as my mate was.”

“But you took the choice away from us,” Kagome sighed, wanting to stay angry but unable to in the face of the woman's confession. “What you did, and how you did it, it was wrong. Really wrong.”

“I wish for my son to find some form of happiness.”

“He won't with me, don't you get it?” Kagome demanded softly. “He doesn't like humans, at least not like that,” She amended, thinking of the human children that still slept in the shiro. “And I'm-” She faltered, suddenly feeling too confused by half. How had the conversation even turned this way?

“You give yourself too little credit, little miko. Your powers will always set you apart from humanity, even from other miko. You are as much of an anomaly as my son is. Besides, he calls you friend, that should be enough to make you realize you are not just another human to him.”

“It still wasn't right, forcing us into it like that,” The miko muttered, turning her gaze back to the sky.

“My only aim was my son's happiness.”

“Well, you failed. He's not happy.”

“Neither are you,” Yuugao sighed, as if that was the greatest disappointment of all.

“Did you expect me to be?” Kagome snapped.

“I did, considering your reaction to him.”

“What are you talking about,” She groused, flushing uncomfortably despite the cool air pushing against her as they flew.

“I might be old in human years child, but I am still in my prime. I am neither deaf nor blind, and my sense of smell is matched only by my son’s.”

That comment struck too close to home, especially after Kasai’s little talk with her, and she hugged herself tightly, refusing to look at the youkai prodding at her. Instead of responding, she stayed silent, completely ignoring the inu as they continued on their way.

“…I thought I had to do this alone.”

They were stopping so that Kagome could rest and stretch, and Yuugao was lost in her own thoughts, her golden eyes blank and disturbing Kagome slightly.

“Once we are beyond the border, I will take my leave of you. Your guides will help you from there,” The daiyoukai answered stiffly, not even looking at the miko. Kagome shrugged and rolled her eyes to the sky, wondering why, out of all of the mother-in-laws in the world, she had to get the meddling one. She had expected a woman that only halfway liked her, or wanted to be rid of her. The mother in law was always the monster of marriage horror stories.
Instead, she got the one that forced her into being with her son, and seemed to actually like her. Downside, the woman's tactics were probably like the ones the devil employed to trick people into selling their souls.

“Kagome, I know you dislike me, but we will have to learn to coexist.”

“You're not moving to the shiro, are you?” Kagome asked, suddenly panicked.

“No,” Yuugao sniffed disdainfully. “But we will have to interact at times. I told you earlier, I did this because I love my son. If you can forgive the taijiya planning to kill you, can you not forgive me?” She sighed.

“Sango was a good friend for years before that happened. I haven't known you nearly as long and you've been manipulating me and Sesshoumaru both since the moment you met.”

“Because I saw my son happy.” The inu interjected. “I wanted to save him from the fate I suffered. It is a special sort of hell, mating someone you don't even know. I didn't like Touga, and I certainly didn't love him, and the feelings were mutual. After I became heavy with child, he left, and I saw him only twice after that.”

“He left? But-”

“He sought his own pleasures. He had the west, I had the fortress in the sky. When Sesshoumaru was old enough, he claimed his right as a father and took him from me. And the last time was shortly before his death, when he gave me the meido stone. Then the child was born.” Yuugao blinked slowly, almost lethargically.

“You mean Inu Yasha?”

“Hnn, the hanyou. Touga had his reasons for everything, and if nothing else, he was a great tactician, but plans rarely survive first contact, and it was the one truth he had trouble learning. I don't think he ever thought one of his sons would die. Although to be fair, he was correct about Sesshoumaru needing to learn compassion.”

“I've met plenty of youkai that weren't compassionate. Why was it so important for Sesshoumaru? I mean, not that I'm not grateful,” She added hastily when the other female gave her a cold look.

“Because a leader cannot be without it. One must always think of the effects of their actions. And because Touga, despite his lack of contact with my clan, also dealt with the world of spirits, although not in the same capacity as I. He was warned, although he never told me who gave him the message. If Sesshoumaru did not learn compassion, he would become a tyrant. I don't know if he truly feared for his son, or if his own vanity would not let him leave behind such a legacy, but he bequeathed Sesshoumaru Tenseiga.”

“Well, it worked,” Kagome murmured, thinking of the daiyoukai she had known three years ago, the one she knew now, and how different they were.

“It did, which is surprising. As I said, plans rarely survive first contact. The hanyou, his death was not foreseen. Touga always imagined his sons fighting side by side, the swords were his way of living after death. I doubt he knew just how strong Sesshoumaru would become.”

“Hnn,” Was all Kagome said, earning a laugh from Yuugao. When she looked at the woman in askance, the inu shrugged playfully.

“You sound like my son.
When Kagome summoned her cloud again, Yuugao tilted her head just a fraction, as if listening to something Kagome couldn't hear, then barely nodded, as if agreeing.

“I have been told that you are to continue on alone. One of your guides will direct you from here on.”

Suddenly Kagome didn't want the inu to leave, which would have been laughable in any other situation.

“But-” She started, panic seizing her heart and sending it into overdrive. “But what if I get lost, or what if I-”

“Your guides will help you in the capacity they can. This is a test, little miko. Either you succeed, or you fail, and it must be on your own.”

And with that, the woman was lifting into the air, soaring into the air until her outline became one with the light blue sky.

“What a load of crap,” Kagome muttered, hopping onto her cloud. “I barely even remember how to get there!”

When her cloud suddenly developed a mind of it's own and began to move of it's own volition, she shrieked indignantly, wanting to get off but too afraid of dying from the height she suddenly found herself at.

“What's going on?” She shouted at the sky.

“We are guiding you,” A voice chuckled, and the miko forced herself to relax once she recognized the wry voice of the laughing spirit.

At least they were being of some use.

When her cloud touched down that evening, she was more than grateful for something to do. The spirits hadn't shown themselves in any way but to guide her cloud along it's path, and by the time the sun had started going down, she was wishing for anyone's presence, or any sort of conversation. The silence had been uncomfortable, every thought leading back to her new position as Sesshoumaru's mate and what that meant.

The clearing was perfect for a small fire, and it was with a single minded intensity that she hunted rocks to circle it, and then enough dead fall to see her through the night. By the time that was taken care of, twilight had dimmed into darkness, and the temperature had dropped several degrees. Shivering as she tried to light the fire, she growled, angry that she hadn't even been allowed to bring Ah Un, who could have lit the fire with one well placed fireball had he chosen to. Instead she was stuck with a flint.

Once the tinder caught, she rolled out her bedroll and rummaged through her bag, pulling out some of the jerky and dried fruit she'd packed. Chewing thoughtfully, she wondered if the spirits were still with her, or if they'd gone to report to Yuugao.

“Hello?” She asked, hoping for Enenra to materialize from the smoke as she had before, or Kerakeru-onna to pop out from nowhere. When she was met only with the sounds of the forest at night, she shrugged and took another bite of the jerky.

“This is karma,” She sighed aloud to herself, thinking of all the times she had wished for a little bit
more privacy in the shiro. For the first time in months, she was truly alone, and she wasn't sure how she felt about it.

“Not like I need to cry right now, or anything else,” She groused to herself after swallowing a particularly chewy piece of dried plum. Her repast done, she thumped down onto her bedroll, looking up at the sky. The moon was barely visible from behind the clouds, and the stars were mostly obscured by the dark wisps as well.

“Hope it doesn't rain,” She muttered as she pulled the blanket up to her chin, determined to get a good night's sleep. Despite the quality of her bedroll, the ground was still hard beneath her back, and she missed her comfortable bed, and a noisy dinner filled with the chatter of children. She missed the banter of the men and Nanmei, and most of all she missed the presence of the daiyoukai.

Ignoring the small pain in her heart, she rolled over, closing her eyes, suddenly tired. Wondering if keeping the cloud going almost nonstop was the cause, her last thought was that at least she would have some privacy while she dreamed.

The fire roared in the circle as it always was when she arrived in the familiar landscape, and as always, the world outside of the dream fell away. But something was slightly different. The sinuous shadows were not writhing around the fire as they always were when she opened her eyes. Instead, she was sitting in someone's lap. Knowing immediately who it was, she relaxed and let the clawed hands on her hips wander aimlessly along her sides as he nuzzled her neck.

When his lips latched onto the juncture of her neck and shoulder, she shuddered, tingles and shocks racing through her as his tongue brushed the spot, kissing it and sucking gently. The wandering hands went back to her waist, gripping tightly, claws pricking through clothing and scraping sensitive flesh as the kiss changed. Sharp canines grazed over the spot and she tilted her head, baring her neck even further to his attentions.

That strange, heady heat that had become so familiar was weighing her down, and she barely noticed his hands moving until they were between her legs, sliding down to cup the apex of her thighs. Barely conscious of her own reaction, she tilted her pelvis, giving him easier access as she moaned loudly, the kisses on the spot where her mating mark was becoming insistent nips.

His hand slipped beneath her underwear, and the other moved up, claws cutting her sarashi neatly to free her breasts. Her head was spinning as she was assaulted with sensation, and when the tip of a claw grazed over the sensitive bundle of nerves, fireworks exploded behind her eyelids. Despite her sudden climax, he continued, and in the logic of dreams, the most intimate part of him was suddenly pushing against her, into her.

The strange, hot, heavy fullness she felt was nothing compared to the slow friction of him inside of her as his arms wrapped tightly around her middle and moved her body against his. Losing herself to the heat tightening in her belly, she cried out his name, whimpering and moaning as his grip tightened.

When his pace quickened and his arms became almost unbearably tight, she felt herself tipping over the edge of reason. Sharp teeth bit into her flesh, cutting cold pain rounded with the warmth of pleasure, the edges between the two blurring and sending her hurtling even deeper into the darkness.

Kagome woke, panting and sweaty, the feeling of being bitten lingering and her mating mark almost aching. Half aware, she shifted, groaning when the phantom feelings of the dream lanced through her. Everywhere felt hot and tight, and the memory of him filling her made her face burn with embarrassment.
The dream had changed, and she wondered if it was because of the sudden privacy she had been afforded. She shifted again, getting ready to dig for the small jug of water she brought when her pubic region twitched and she moaned softly despite herself. Going limp, she closed her eyes, but instead of the normal darkness behind her lids, she was assaulted with images from her dream.

'I didn't even look at him for kami's sake!' She mentally shrieked, but her rebellious, over active imagination supplied her with plenty of images of what would have appeared had she turned her head. Shivering when she remembered his eyes the night he had marked her, she groaned again, somehow knowing instinctively his eyes would bleed to crimson if he lost himself to his passions.

The idea of him losing himself to his passions, with her, made her shiver again, and for the first time since the dreams had started, she allowed her thoughts to wander down the path they opened.

Would making love to him really feel like that? Despite his intensity, there had been something there, a strange, comforting quality, as if she had known he wouldn't harm her despite the violence of his own instincts. Her own experiences hadn't even played into it, and she shoved any thought of them away as she imagined his clawed hands gripping her hips, his breath hot on her neck as he nuzzled the flesh there.

Consciously, shyly deciding to do it, her own hands began to wander down, slipping beneath her kimono to move over the flat plain of her stomach. The night she had been marked suddenly formed in her mind's eye, and instead of being nervous and awkward, she was straddling his lap, facing him.

His lips were full and demanding as he along her jaw and neck, their naked skin contrasting. Silver hair was silky between her fingers, and his arms were wrapped around her, warm and reassuring. Her own moans mixed with the soft rumbles rising from his chest, almost as purr as she felt him against her, sliding against the wetness between her thighs. Shivers wracked her as the delicious friction increased, and she whined, wanting.

And then she was full, stretched to her limit around his girth. She moved on her knees, raising herself up as much as his grip would allow, then falling back down onto him with the aid of gravity, each time gasping when reached the base.

Again and again, picking up her pace. Soon she was bucking too hard to continue, too lost in sensation, and he was moving her over him, arms steel bands around her.

She met his gaze to see crimson eyes blazing with the vivid turquoise iris contrasting. After an eternity, he ended the staring contest by turning back to her neck.

The bite was different. Oh, it was no less brutal than it had been, but the pain was lacing the pleasure, sharpening the edges of it, making it more vivid as she climaxed on him, screaming his name.

When she came to, it was early morning, the whole world still covered in an azure gauze. Blinking blearily, she moved to stretch, realizing her hand was still in her hakama. Yanking it out as if burned, she looked around, as if expecting someone, anyone, to jump out at her and berate her for her actions only hours ago.

When no such rebuke was forthcoming, she huffed lightly and threw the covers away from her, stumbling as she stood and stretched.

“I didn't do anything wrong. Lots of people do it.” She muttered, guilt beginning to weigh her down. “If guys can do it while imagining anime girls in maid outfits, then there is nothing wrong with what
I did.”

Her conscience refused to agree with her, and mortification was setting in despite her best efforts.

“Kami. What's wrong with me?” She snapped impatiently as she poked at the fire with a stick, hoping to stir it back to life. “I can't believe I- Argh! I wish I didn't have these stupid dreams anymore!!” She shouted, glad no one was around to hear her.

“There is always a baku,” A new voice said. Kagome jumped, her already existing blush deepening. She turned to see Harionago sitting as if she'd been there all along, although Kagome was positive she hadn't seen her when she woke.

“Once you pass the trial, you can ask a baku to eat your dreams. I'm sure one would find such dreams a rare treat.”

“Does everyone know what I dream about?” Kagome shouted, shame and anger mixing into overwhelming frustration. The spirit's careless shrug only served to further humiliate her.

“They know what you dream of in a vague sense, but those of us bound to you, such as myself, it is difficult to ignore what is projected so vividly. Do not be ashamed, it is only natural to want your mate.”

“The whole thing's unnatural!” Kagome growled, sitting back on her bedroll and glaring at the spirit.

“Hardly,” The beautiful woman huffed. “You were the most suitable to take Yuugao's place, and you have feelings for the male, despite what you endured. I'd say it's quite natural to lust for him.”

“Everyone keeps acting like, like-” And she foundered, unable to continue.

“You and he are well suited? You are. Yuugao's actions were not entirely of her own accord. Though she may hold some sway in our world, there are times she is forced to do the bidding of beings more powerful than she. It was decreed that when she stepped down, you would be the one to take her place, or none at all.”

The mental gymnastics Kagome fumbled through to try and grasp what that could mean were difficult enough that she stopped halfway through, not even sure she wanted to know. If Yuugao had to bend to these 'higher beings' wills, then wouldn't she? Would she even have a choice? What kind of spirit could force Yuugao, one of the most powerful youkai she'd ever known, to do anything?

“In time you will learn,” Harionago assured. “Until then, you should head for the fortress. I know of a hot spring you may stop at tonight, if you hurry.”

The mention of a hot spring was enough to make her spring into action. Completely ignoring breakfast, she made sure the fire was completely dead before rolling up her bedroll and blankets and summoning her cloud, determined to have a bath that night.

Sesshoumaru growled again. His mother was gone, the twins were taking care of the children, and the miko was with his mother. Papers and scrolls covered his small table, and only a quarter of them had anything to do with the running of his lands, and he had been focusing on them.

So why couldn't he concentrate now? He'd been working on them since the night before, refusing to step foot in the family wing until the miko's room had been cleansed of any lingering traces of her scent. He'd made good headway until an hour ago, when the sun had barely been rising. Then something had shattered his focus.
The miko. Kagome.

Snarling softly, impatient with the direction his mind seemed determined to take, he pushed the papers away and let his elbows rest on the table, his face cradled by his hands.

This wasn't right! Distance was supposed to make the mark's effects dim. Instead, it felt as if the distance was only bringing her further to his attention.

“Sesshoumaru-sama,” A voice croaked. He looked up, surprised to see Jaken standing in front of the table, almost timid. He arched a silver eyebrow, knowing his glare was doing nothing to help the imp's disposition.

“Kagome-sama's friends are here. The taijiya and monk.”

Exhaling deeply, he refused, absolutely refused, to roll his eyes to the sky and ask what he had been in another life to deserve his current set of circumstances. Surely it had to be something awful. Perhaps the progenitor of Naraku's line?

“I will see to them,” He rumbled, standing gracefully and walking calmly past the imp, ignoring when the stuttering retainer followed, trying to get something out but unable to.

Had the imp been able, he would have been warning Sesshoumaru of the taijiya's rage as she scoured the shiro, looking for the currently missing miko. As it was, when he found the slayer, she was listening to an abridged version of the events that had forced both himself and the miko into mating, kindly, gently provided by Shinzuru.

“What?” Sango exploded, face red as she shrieked her indignation.

“We were forced into a mating,” Sesshoumaru cut in coolly, remembering very well the slayer's opinion of him. Sango turned, then blushed hotly when she set eyes on the daiyoukai.

“Uh, hello, Sesshoumaru-sama,” Sango mumbled, eyes dropping to the floor almost instantly. And wasn't that interesting? The ningen had despised him last time he had seen her. What had changed?

“We were afraid to travel before this, but Kagome sent us word of the jewel's destruction,” Miroku started, eyes going to his wife's stomach. Sesshoumaru had known the minute he smelled her that she was pregnant, although any visual proof was covered by her kimono.

“I see. My mate is currently with my mother, training for her new position. She should be back within a week,” He replied coolly.

“You will be given a suite of rooms while you stay. Nanmei is here,” He offered tonelessly before walking away, glad that the taijiya had become almost painfully shy in his presence. Had his mind not been occupied with his absent mate, he would have wondered what had turned distrust and dislike into such acute shyness.

Two more days passed in relative silence. The only times any of the spirits deigned to make themselves known was when she was actively looking for something, like a hot spring, a source for clean water, or food. Otherwise they were quiet, none daring to venture conversation as Harionago had done that first morning.
But her own thoughts were enough to keep her company. The information supplied by Harionago had shifted her perspective, making her wonder who and what had decided she of all people would take Yuugao's place, and why. Surely she wasn't that special? There were other powerful miko, and the jewel had apparently had no bearing on the decision. Her ability to combine her attacks with Sesshoumaru's wasn't unique, it couldn't be. Rare maybe, but not entirely unique.

And why couldn't someone else be allowed to take over? From the way Harionago had said it, it sounded almost as if the title itself would vanish if she didn't take up the inu's duties. But why?

“We are getting close,” A voice informed her. Kagome jumped, startled from her thoughts and looked around, trying to figure out where the owner of the voice was.

“That was quick,” She muttered when she couldn't find the source. A chuckle threaded with the wind and she relaxed, knowing immediately by the laugh who it was.

“Last time there were complications that kept you from making your way as quickly. You've been flying straight for days. Soon this will be over."

The very idea of getting the trial over and done with more than appealed to Kagome. The silence had long ago become oppressive, and the privacy she had been granted - if it truly had been, given the presence of the spirits – wasn't worth not being able to see her children and her friends. Ever since that first morning, she hadn't ventured to do anything like what she had, the very idea still making her cheeks burn with shame.

“How much longer?” She asked the air.

“Not long,” The voice replied enigmatically. “We cannot follow you into his lair.”

With that little piece of information, the air turned silent, and Kagome turned her gaze to the horizon, dread turning the contents of her stomach to lead as she looked for the darkness that marked the blight he had wrought on the land with his presence.

Instead she almost missed the fortress itself, covered in wild growth that had gone unchecked for almost a year. Despite the changing of the season, plenty of greenery was left covering the fortress, and she was hard pressed finding a place to land. Once she touched down, she looked around, remembering the last time she had stood in front of the giant double doors.

“I was still scared then,” She murmured thoughtfully to herself. The very idea of facing Naraku had made her quake in terror. Now the fortress itself looked broken down and empty. Maybe haunted by spirits, but the memories of her experiences weren't pressing down on her as they had then. Instead, she was able to take a deep breath, remembering what Sesshoumaru had told her as they faced down the illusion that had replayed her rape.

“I lived through the real thing. Nothing could be that bad. I survived,” She muttered as she pulled on one of the tall doors, grunting as she exerted more force. It scraped against the ground and groaned heavily as it inched open. When a space big enough for her to squeeze through had been opened, she stopped, sneezing as dust and stale air mingled with the crisp cool air outside.

“I can do this. I've done it before, and that was when he was still alive. I can do it now,” She told herself, quashing the little voice that reminded her the last time she had walked in, she had been accompanied by her friend and two youkai that had sworn to protect her.

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A/N: A lot of people have been asking about when Sesshoumaru and Kagome finally have sex,
since it has been a recurring theme. Not for awhile, actually, although awhile at this point is a relatively short awhile. This story still has a bit of a ways to go, and my whole intention throughout this story has been Kagome reclaiming her own sexuality after her assault. We are drawing to a close however, and all I can ask is that you be patient.

As for FFNet readers. This chapter has been edited of all MA materials in accordance with FFNet policies. The uncensored (and future chapters containing such materials) will be appearing at Dokuga, and when I get a chance to upload it, at my AO3 account.
As she walked through the fortress, she wondered if it had always been so silent. Unnatural and eerie, the quiet was far more disturbing than the looming darkness of the inner chambers. Light filtered in through broken doors and walls, but it seemed to stop short, as if the shadows had formed a wall it would not cross.

Dust and cobwebs darkened the water stained shouji screens, and her steps only served to stir both. Ignoring the tickle in her nose, she kept moving, wondering if her candle would be enough to light the darkness of the dank cellar that awaited her.

When she found it, the giant heavy door was still open, as they had left it months ago when they retrieved Miroku. The stairs led down, disappearing into the inky blackness, and her heart skipped a beat when she peered down into it.

Her heart, already beating so hard it seemed to echo in the silence, began a strange, irregular rhythm that made her gasp for air for several minutes as she contemplated the room that awaited. The organ seemed to skip beats and then try to overcompensate, beating rapidly, somehow managing to force it's way around her chest, then into her throat.

Steeling herself, she lit the candle with her flint and tucked the stones back into her sleeve, determined to get the whole thing done and over with. Inhaling deeply, one foot went in front of the other, the flame casting flickering shadows, each one seemingly alive and dancing over the walls as she began her descent.

The steps were longer than she remembered, and it felt like a small eternity before she reached the bottom. When her foot touched soft earth, she shuddered involuntarily, unable to ignore the chill that wracked her.

The candle did little good, the darkness of the cellar was absolute. Any light was swallowed, and it flickered as she held it in front of her.

“How did he keep it lit so brightly in here?” She murmured aloud, remembering the time she had spent in the pseudo dungeon. When Inu Yasha had been killed, it had been as bright as day, and there had been no candles or lanterns. So how had the hanyou kept the room so brightly lit?

Maybe...She stopped and summoned her ki, forcing it to the surface and out, imagining a glowing sphere around her body.

When her eyes opened, the room was washed in blue light, and everything laid bare. She blew out her now useless candle and advanced forward. A platform, where Naraku had sat and laughed as the writhing appendages had ripped apart the man she loved, loomed.

The bones were no longer in front of it, as she had imagined they would be. But of course they
would have moved the body. No one would want to deal with a rotting corpse. But where would he have put it? Surely they wouldn't have buried it. Would the necklace even be with the bones anymore?

Feeling sick and praying that after she had passed out and been moved that Naraku hadn't absorbed the flesh, or eaten it. What would he have done with the body? Where would the necklace have gone?

Growling in frustration, she moved on light feet, hoping the object she was searching for was somewhere near the platform. The blue light was steady, and her eyes scanned the floor. Nothing.

Looking on the platform, she saw several indistinct shapes just beyond the line of light. Moving forward, the light moving with her, she looked for anything that looked like the rosary. Instead, she stepped back, realizing what was on the platform.

Bones. Hundreds, thousands, of bones, human, youkai, animal. All of them piled indiscriminately, a macabre shrine to the dead.

Moving closer, she looked for anything that could have once been an inu youkai's infrastructure, but saw nothing that would give away such an identity. But she did see something glittering strangely, reflecting the light back at her.

Beads. The rosary was within the pile of bones, and she had to get it. Shivering once, repulsed by the idea of touching the mountain of remains, she was steeling herself to touch it, her hand reaching out, when the bones themselves began to shift and move, clattering angrily as they started to form two towers, then joined, and in horror she watched as a body began to shape itself.

The mouth was speaking before the head had formed enough to give shape to eyes, and her heart sped up as it rumbled angrily down at her, the creature easily twice her height.

“You would disturb our rest,” It whispered, the sound itself seeming to form from dozens of voices, all lacing into an eerie sigh.

“I have been given a task,” She squeaked, awed and frightened of the monster. “I did not think-”

“You do not often think,” It accused. “If you had, we would not be here. It is your fault we died. You did nothing as we suffered,” It hissed.

Distress welled up in her throat, escaping as a low moan of denial as she shook her head furiously from side to side.

“I wasn't strong enough then-”

“You have always been strong enough,” The whispers hissed angrily, cutting at her. “You were just lazy and selfish. You couldn't even save the one you claimed to love!”

Her composure shattered, a wail piercing the darkness as the glow around her shimmered and blinked, then puttered out like a candle starved of oxygen.

Sesshoumaru stopped, his eyes going wide as something ephemeral and yet heavy shifted and changed.

“Sesshoumaru,” The voice started. He growled, silencing the voice as he tried to get a bearing on the
strange feeling. Distress and pain lanced through him, but it was not his distress, was not his pain.

“Keep watch on the children,” He snarled impatiently, a strange, insistent tugging echoing from the east.

“Where are you going?” Shinzuru demanded.

There was no answer. The daiyoukai, satisfied with the direction he had been given, had taken off, leaving a perturbed moth youkai gaping.

“If you had just tried to fight Naraku, we would have lived. He would have lived,” The voices hissed as they circled her, tightening around her like a noose. Dizzy, she tried to drag in air, succeeding only in shallow, short pants as the voices kept up their chant, a damning mantra she couldn’t shut out.

“No,” She whispered furiously, trying to hold on to her sense of self. “Sesshoumaru said I wasn't ready. We had to distract the others. There was nothing we could do,” She muttered, trying to convince herself more than the spirits.

“Nothing you could do? There was nothing you could do to save the innocent children murdered in the war?” The voices hissed.

The accusation stung, and she had nothing to say in the face of it. Innocent children had lost their lives, all because she hadn't found a way to unlock the power that had always been sleeping within. Could she have saved those lives? Could she have stopped Inu Yasha's death? What would her life be like now if-


Sesshoumaru.

“No!” She shouted angrily, summoning her ki and letting it reflect her rage as it sparked to life, a vivid, cold blue, the edges sparking, a small star in the cellar room.

“We tried our hardest. I have made mistakes, that I will not deny. The people that have died because I was unable to summon my own strength in time will always weigh on my conscience. But I did try, and we did succeed,” She shouted at the strange bone monster, facing it down without a flicker of fear.

There was a sigh, and the bones crumpled, falling to the floor before turning to ash, then swirling into the air and seemingly out of existence. The rosary lay innocently on the platform, the beads reflecting the blue light back at her.

Warily she approached and picked them up, fingers trembling lightly. With a flash of gratitude, she was happy she didn't have to face down his bones, and hoped that they hadn't been sucked up into that grotesque monster that had vanished into thin air.

“I need to get out of here,” She muttered, stuffing the beads into the pocket of her sleeve and flinching when they clattered against the flint. Taking them back out, she stared at them a moment before slipping it over her neck and tucking it into her kimono.

Shivering as the cold beads touched her skin, she turned and resolutely made her way back to the stairs.
“You have done very well so far,” A voice informed her as she reached the top of the stairs. Standing on the main floor of the fortress, Harionago and Yukki-onna both watched with impassive expressions. Kagome wished for any of the others. Why were these two becoming such prevalent fixtures?

“So far?” Kagome snapped, unsure of what the spirit meant.

“It is our duty to strike at your weaknesses. You did not succumb to the whispers of doubt that live within. You did well,” Yukki-onna supplied, eyes glinting strangely.

“You, you mean that was you?” Kagome demanded sharply. “You-”

“You, not us, but other spirits. Your strength is not in question. Your emotional fortitude is. And you have done well,” Yukki-onna finished.

Disgusted with the two spirits and feeling more than a little betrayed that she had been tricked in such a manner, she made an angry noise in her throat and stalked past them, ignoring their presence and leaving the echoing, empty fortress and gratefully stepping into the sun of late afternoon, trying to soak up what warmth it could offer.

“She is right, you know,” Harionago said. Kagome turned and found she was alone with the spirit, and a cloud summarily popped into existence.

“It doesn't mean you guys had to-” She stopped, unable to find the correct word for what they had done.

“Trick you? If we had prepared you, such a test would have been pointless. You have the strength to hold the position the moon inu have held for centuries. But some question if you have the will. There are those that would exploit your hurt and shame. But you persevered.”

“And what would have happened if I had failed?” Kagome demanded, already raising her cloud into the sky, eyes locked on the floating form of the beautiful ghost beside her.

“You would have been taken to the spirit world. When one does not pass a trial, they lose their lives.”

“What? How could you?” Kagome exploded, so angry she didn't care that she was shaking her finger at the spirit. “Did Yuugao know about this?” She demanded hotly.

“She suspected, but it is not her place to warn you. After you return, she will be allowed to explain fully-”

“I don't want this stupid position,” Kagome growled. “Let her keep it. The last thing I want to do is deal with a bunch of mercenary-”

“Though we are spirits, miko, we are still subject to certain laws. Remember that there are forces we all bow to.”

The sharply worded reminder made Kagome shiver. Maybe they were right. If these 'forces' were something even Yuugao had to bow to, then what could spirits do? And her? What could she do in the face of beings powerful enough to destroy her without a second thought?

“We will guide you to the goshinboku. Perhaps it would be best if you hurry. We have never forced one that is mated through the trial,” Harionago observed.
“What does that have to do with anything?” Kagome groused.

“It seems your distress signaled to your mate. He is on his way,” The spirit observed dispassionately.

“He’s on his way?” Kagome squeaked, suddenly realizing how bad everything could be if Sesshoumaru, knowing only that she had been scared or hurt, came and burst into the trial.

“This must be finished on your own.” Harionago declared quietly, her form already fading in the light of afternoon. Kagome felt the tug directing her cloud, and started pumping her energy into it, determined to force it to fly as quickly as Sesshoumaru could. What would happen if he found her before the trial was complete? Would she be taken to the spirit world, when she was so close to finishing? She wasn't sure if she would be able to bear it.

And how would he feel? Would he be sad, or feel responsible? Or would he be glad that he was no longer saddled with a mate he didn't want?

Curling into a ball and making herself smaller, she allowed the spirits to guide her as she hid her face from the biting wind, trying to focus on the smooth texture of her kimono or the faint thrumming of her cloud pulsing in unison with her heart. Anything really, except the idea that he might be happier if she was gone.

When he found her, she was asleep beneath the goshinboku, dark rings beneath her eyes contrasting like ugly bruises against her waxy, pale flesh. A small area of overturned earth was near her, and he could smell the faint scent of his ill fated half brother emanating from her hands and shirt.

His mother, of course, was not in evidence.

Something calm, chillingly cold, settled over him, and his mind blanked as he walked forward, looking down at her, then the area that had been dug up and then covered. Silently, his hand plunged into the soft dirt and grabbed the cold glass it felt. When he pulled it back up, the dirt shaking loose from it, he almost dropped it.

Clamping down on the rage, he eyed the rosary dispassionately. Why had she bothered to find it and bury it? The answer obvious, he tasted blood in his mouth as it hit him. She still cared for the hanyou, still loved and missed him. Why else would she have gone back to the scene of her rape, for the necklace stunk of Naraku's fortress, just to find it and bury it?

Forcing himself to breathe evenly, he pushed the glass and bone beads back into the ground and covered them before turning back to her.

“Miko,” He stated calmly in his normal, modulated voice.

She did not stir.

Anger, hot and poisonous, seemed to slip just beyond his control, and it was that anger that sent his youki flaring impressively, pushing against her aura. It was a demand for attention that even she, in such a deep sleep, could not ignore.

“Wha-?” She groaned, foggy eyes blinking as she looked around.

“What are you doing here?” He demanded. Immediately she looked around, as if waiting for something to jump out at them, but relaxed when she saw nothing.

“I thought Yuugao told you,” Kagome murmured, standing, her form swaying unsteadily. He
crushed the urge to help support her and watched her lean against the goshinboku, her pulse fluttering in her throat.

“She told me you both were going to train at her castle. Not that you would be alone,” He growled, wondering why the women had insisted on lying to him. To be sure, he would not have allowed her to go to that place alone, and especially not for-for-

“Oh, I wonder why she lied,” Kagome murmured sleepily.

“Perhaps it was the nature of your goal,” He replied coolly. “You stink of the half breed.”

She flushed angrily, her mouth opening to shout something, but she stopped suddenly, her eyes becoming wide, owl like as she stared over his shoulder.

He had noticed it as well, and a small part of him had hoped she would not.

“The well,” She whispered, hand already reaching out to touch the wooden frame that was still covered in ivy. He stepped aside, watching her walk to it, her hands caressing the wood lovingly.

“Go back if you wish,” He commanded dispassionately. She started, hand jerking back from the wood as if it suddenly burned.

“Go back?” She asked, eyes glistening as she looked at him.

“Yes.”

“What if I can't come back?” She breathed.

“It is your decision.”

She fell to her knees, not even crying out at the impact. He wondered if she even felt it. Already he could smell her blood in the air, and it pricked at his already fraying control. Her tears fell, and he watched as she fought some inner battle he couldn’t begin to understand. Irrational anger surged through him, realizing that it was actually a hard choice for her, deciding whether to stay or to go. Her shoulders shook and she buried her face in her hands.

“If it is so difficult, perhaps it is best for you to go back.” He knew his voice was cold and he forced every bit of emotion down, trying to deny the sudden hurt he felt. It was irrational and foolish, and if he felt such a thing, then it was best she leave.

“Sometimes you make me so mad you idiot!” She shouted at him, her voice piercing the darkness around them. “I can't believe that after everything we've been through, you'd think I'd just leave you!”

Her words soothed that strange hurt for a bare moment before the sudden wind brought the stale scent of the hanyou to him, and his eyes narrowed. Humans were fickle creatures, and he had been a fool to forget it, even for a moment.

“Look, I know you're mad about your mom lying to you, but I didn’t ask her to. Inu Yasha told me this was the only way he could rest, and she knew that. Don't take it out on me,” She snapped, standing and stalking past him, limping slightly as she walked away from him. “I'm not going to abandon everyone just because I miss my family. You said I'll get to see them again. I trust that.”

Satisfaction warred with anger at her confession, and since it was the easier of the two to handle, he latched on to the anger.
“You did all this so the half breed could rest?” He asked. Instead of waiting for a reply, he nodded once, ignoring that her mouth was opening to say something. “The old woman is here. Perhaps you would like to visit her before you leave. I will see you at the shiro when you return.” His tone was cold and final, and he gave her no time to reply before he was gone, knowing she would only see the light of his departure.

The world was a blur as he shot through the night, making his way to the castle. The night, with its cool, crisp flavor, did not hold its usual lure, and even the idea of hunting did not suit him. Like a shooting star, he streaked across the sky, ignoring everything as he pushed his body to its limits, determined to reach his home posthaste.

Suppressing a sigh when the citadel came into view, he made for the inner gardens, touching down in minutes and forcing his own emotions to calm before he stepped inside. Before he had a chance, another was in the gardens with him, eyes wide.

“Hell pup, what happened?” Shinzuru demanded. Sesshoumaru said nothing, stalking past him, only to feel a hand on his shoulder.

“What happened?” Shinzuru demanded again, voice rough.

“She is fine,” He said, trying to shrug the hand off. The grip only tightened, and it was only out of respect to the older youkai that he didn't rip the offending appendage off.

“I didn't ask that. I asked what happened,” The mouth youkai growled.

“She went to Naraku's fortress to retrieve a token of the hanyou to bury.”

“Why would she want to bury a token of Naraku's?” Shinzuru demanded.

“Not his. Inu Yasha's. His spirit told her it was the only way he could rest.”

Shinzuru's hand squeezed his shoulder once before dropping away.

“Maybe she wanted to end it formally before her human wedding,” The older youkai offered.

“It does not matter,” He replied before walking into the shiro, leaving the older demon standing in the dark, his single good eye narrowing in speculation. The inu ignored him and the statement, meant to comfort, which only further served to scrape against the leash holding his temper.

None were in evidence as he glided calmly through the shiro, although he was pleased to see the guards flinch as he strode past them and into the family wing. Ignoring the two heads that popped out of the children's rooms, his movements were controlled, as his breathing was. Nothing would give him away. Walking past the miko's rooms, he was pleased to note the scent of her arousal had been scoured and removed.

Once he reached his own rooms and closed the door behind him, he put up a barrier and let go, the anger surging from that dark, strange place he did not often acknowledge. The air crackled with the intensity of his aura, and he moved deeper into the suite, moving to the chests that held priceless relics and scrolls, all treasures he had found value in over the centuries.

Opening one chest, he reached down and brought out the rough linen bag he had retrieved the day after she had left for her 'training'. Opening it and shaking the contents out, he stared at the two rings, eyes narrowing on the two metal circles that lay on his palm, looking inoffensive and simple.

Totosai had done his work well. The fang he had taken had formed a base, a pure silver that had
pleased Sesshoumaru. And somehow, by some trick of his own, the blacksmith had taken the hair and used their residual energies to recreate the glow of their powers once they had joined. A vein of pure energy circled each ring, shifting with the light so it was never one color, but an iridescent paleness that shimmered every color.

Closing his hand around the rings, he growled and clenched his fist even more tightly. Each second he tried to close it harder, hearing his knuckles pop and feeling his claws digging into his flesh. His blood burned the air, and after several minutes, he opened his fist and stared down, amazed.

Despite his best efforts, the rings still lay there, unharmed. Not crushed, not broken. Not even bent. The only sign of his struggle to destroy them was the blood that smeared over their surface, marring the solid silver and shimmering hair.

Not even bothering to wipe them off, he put them back in the bag and threw it into the chest, slamming the lid shut with a satisfying bang and stalking from the room and into his own. For the first time ever, he pulled his swords from his sash and threw them carelessly on the table near his bed and the armor followed, shrugged aside just as carelessly.

Why was he so angry? He had always known she'd loved the half breed, knew that she would never stop. Mates did not have to love each other, his own parents were testament to that. But the thought of her leaving the shiro just to do something for the wretch sent his blood boiling. That she hadn't seen fit to even tell him, letting his mother do the talking and then leaving-

And the well. Her longing for her own time had cut him, although he was loathe to admit it. Was she not happy at the shiro? She had power, a position thousands of youkai women coveted, and a pack, children to look after. Why would she want to go back so badly? How could it be such a difficult decision?

Snarling, he threw his kimono across the room, dissatisfied that it didn't crash and bang when it landed, instead rustling softly to the floor.

Pacing the room, he felt like the walls were caging him in. Instincts raged against the cage he kept them locked in, and in his anger, he let them slip. Running for his balcony, he yanked the door open, not even realizing that he broke it free of it's track as he leapt into the night sky, feeling the transformation take him.

An angry howl echoed through the shiro and the citadel, and he bounded on the air, determined to burn his rage out with each lunge higher into the sky.

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Shinzuru had long ago left the shiro behind and was sitting beneath Bokusenou's branches. When an angry howl pierced the night, he shuddered.

He felt the female's aura long before she came into sight. When she finally landed, barely stirring the air, he stood, shoulders shaking angrily.

“Are you happy now?” He demanded angrily, voice rough. When she said nothing, he looked at her, and was shocked by what he saw. Her eyes were bloodshot, and shadows of dark smudges beneath them contrasted against her pale skin. Her lower lip was between her teeth, and he saw that she had worried it to bleeding.

“I had no choice,” Yuugao finally declared.

“How can you say that?” He roared. “How can you tell me that-”
“If she didn't take my place, the line wouldn't have just failed, the house would have fallen. There would not have been another,” She explained. “It was her or no one. But she was already mated. He wasn't supposed to be there,” She groaned, falling to her knees, looking small and alone. For the first time since he had met her, centuries ago, he felt a flicker of pity for the woman.

“How can you be so sure?” He demanded, sitting himself gracelessly, almost falling as much as anything.

“The oldest old ones told me. The Lady would accept no other. But he wasn't supposed to be there during her trial,” Yuugao whispered, her fingers laced, hands clasped tightly in her lap.

“The Lady?”

“A Kami. She has been content to let us choose through the mating trials, but now she has chosen the miko, and I couldn't tell them,” Yuugao sighed, another angry howl echoing in the distance, punctuating her sentence.

“And her trial?” Shinzuru pressed.

“She thought it was to get the token of the hanyou and bury it. I knew there was something more to it, but I couldn't warn her, it's forbidden,” Yuugao sighed, looking up at the night sky. “They chose to test her emotional stability, but trying to make her feel the blame for those that died under Naraku's reign,” She started.

“But none of that was her fault!” Shinzuru growled.

“I know, but if she could be swayed to believe it, she would have been considered unsuitable. She wasn't. And there was another part to it,” She murmured, voice filled with guilt.

“What was it?” He demanded sharply, suddenly uneasy in the face of the inu's shame. What could have moved the inu to act, or even feel, in such a manner?

“She is not from our time. The portal that was closed to her, the spirits created the image of it, to see if she would give in to temptation and leave.”

“She didn't, did she?” Shinzuru asked, panicked. Sesshoumaru had only told him the girl was fine, not that she was still in this era. What if she had left? Was that what had sent the daiyoukai's temper flaring?

“She did not,” Yuugao confirmed, making him relax. “But Sesshoumaru got to her before she completed the trial. He wasn't supposed to be there. The Lady is angry,” Yuugao declared. “And Sesshoumaru, he doesn't understand. He just thinks that Kagome went to do something for the memory of her first love.”

Shinzuru wished for the solidity of Bokusenou's trunk behind him, because everything the inu was unloading on him had his head spinning, and he felt dizzy and nauseous. As it was, the tree was a good ten feet away, and the ground was cold and unforgiving. Despite that, the idea of just falling backwards was more inviting than he cared to admit.

“This goddess, what will she do?” He finally asked. Yuugao shook her head and shrugged helplessly.

“I don't know,” She whispered. “So far she's done nothing but make her displeasure felt. That might be the extent of it. There's never been a candidate that was already mated. We didn't think about the mark calling him to her,” She sighed, threading her hands through her hair.
“We?” Shinzuru asked, marveling that there was still something he didn't know. How much more could the inu have been hiding?

“The other spirits. It was Enenra that suggested they mate, and Kerakera-onna was the one to suggest forcing them into it,” She admitted.

“And the trap itself?” He bit out.

She sighed again, hands dropping back to her lap. Shrugging once, he barely heard her admission of guilt. She offered nothing but the word 'mine'. No apologies, no excuses, nothing.

“Maybe it would have been better to let the line fail,” He muttered darkly, looking to the sky. He felt the pulse of raw energy rippling through the world, knew Sesshoumaru was miles off, and the power released was a mere drop in the proverbial bucket.

“No,” Yuugao gasped, startled by his statement. “That can't happen. It can't,” She whispered furiously, suddenly angry. “You remember Sou'unga. Do you have any idea what, who, that was before I bound the spirit to the sword?” She hissed. When he shook his head dumbly, surprised by the sudden shift in her mood, her eyes only hardened.

“It was one of Kagutushi's halflings.”

“You're lying.” He didn't even pause before he said it. There was no way she could be telling the truth. Nothing with that much power could be bound to a sword. Could a god even become a spirit?

“Think what you will,” She snapped. “His own father killed him for his dual bloodline and didn't even care enough to do something about the spirit. The trials test our weaknesses and try to exploit them.”

“And how was that supposed to test you?” He sighed, resting his palms on the ground behind him and leaning back slightly, putting his weight on his hands as he eyed her warily. This was not the youkai he had known for centuries. Not even an echo of her usual, cool indifference clung to her, and the arrogance that was as much as part of her as her own markings had vanished.

“They tried to trick me, as they did the girl. I was promised that if I did not bind him, he would be my slave and destroy all obstacles to my happiness,” She admitted. He shook his head, confused.

“But binding him to the sword did the same thing, didn't it? You could have wielded Sou'unga had you chosen to.” But she shook her head slightly, a denial.

“Not those kinds of obstacles. My father asked that I take his place. I never wanted to, simply because I did not want to be bound by any duty. But the aosigibi were challenging us for the title, and he was old even then. So I accepted.”

The last statement was a soft sigh, and filled with centuries worth of regret.

“Now you know why there must be someone to carry out my duties. So I forced it. And now this. You are her father, even if you share no blood. I don't know what will happen, but I fear for the both of them. They will not accept my aid, not after what I've done-”

“Maybe you can explain.” He cut in, suddenly feeling for a woman he had always thought to be cold and calculating. But if she spoke the truth, and by the sudden, open honesty in her demeanor he had no doubts she was, then there was more to her behavior than he had ever considered. But she was shaking her head again.
“It won't matter. Now more than ever they need to be unified, and I fear that my son's interference has made that impossible.”

“He didn't know,” Shinzuru sighed, a half hearted defense.

“He blames the mark, although it's the most foolish thing I've ever heard. Marks can't force something like that. As of yet, he seems unaware that he might actually feel for her,” Yuugao admitted. “I had hoped-” She stopped, and shrugged again.

“Come on,” Shinzuru grumbled, suddenly uncomfortable in the silence. “It's almost daybreak, and I have a feeling she'll be returning sometime today. We'll both need rest if we're going to deal with those two.”

Yuugao said nothing, but stood, her knees bending slightly as she prepared to vault into the sky.

“Wait,” He started, suddenly feeling awkward. Her gold eyes flashed to him and the naked hope in her eyes took him aback.

“Yes?” She finally prompted, after several tense minutes.

“For what I said before, I'm sorry,” He finally muttered, finding it hard to look her in the eye. It was a strange thing, to apologize to her, but he knew, from centuries of serving beside his best friend that some things were beyond the control of youkai and human alike, and that gods, when they had a mind to, forced choices that were not choices at all.

She shook her head, and the disappointment forcing her shoulders low made him feel bad suddenly, although he didn't understand why.

“You didn't know,” She murmured before launching herself into the sky, quickly becoming nothing but a pale star before disappearing into the dawn. Shaking his own head, he was preparing himself for flight when a rusty voice stopped him.

“She's got as much of a story as Kagome does,” Bokusenou informed him. Shinzuru turned abruptly, wondering why the youkai had not spoken before.

“So it seems,” He replied blandly.

“I have respected her wish for privacy, and I will continue to do so. But she is much like the miko taking her place.”

Shinzuru snorted dismissively. “Those two couldn't be further apart than if they were the sun and moon.”

“Yuugao is what Kagome could have become. Think you she started life as she is now? She has craved freedom for centuries. Just when she regains hope, it is always taken from her, and it has been such since she took her father's place. Sesshoumaru's dedication to his duties does not just come from his father,” The tree spirit advised before his face shifted and changed, hiding behind the guise of regular bark.

Understanding that those were the only words he would get from the tree, he made a disgruntled noise before launching himself into the sky. Yuugao's warning and her careless comment about mating marks was eating at him, both warring for precedence in his mind. He settled on the simpler one, the mating mark. His best friend, her mate, had told him the mating mark had caused him to believe himself in love with her for a time. As far as he knew, Touga had no reason to lie, but the woman had been so blatantly open that he couldn't see her offhand comment as a falsehood.
Even before getting her with child, Touga had begun withdrawing from the inu, and after they had confirmed conception, he had left the sky fortress as if it had been hell itself. The moth youkai had always assumed it was because of Yuugao’s meddling, manipulative nature. Now he wasn't so sure.

Stung that his best friend and comrade might have lied to him about something so important, and though he knew the great inu youkai had held many faults, he had never considered deceit to be one of them.

When Kagome landed in the inner gardens, she was ready for the silence, however much it disturbed her. Despite the time and weather, she had been hoping that the children would greet her. Surely Sesshoumaru at least would have felt her approaching. In her heart he was a beacon, a light in the darkness. Ever since she had been bestowed with the mating mark, she could feel him, could see him, no matter where he was. Surely he could feel her as she felt him.

When no one greeted them, she sighed silently, helping Kaede down from her cloud. Once the miko was touching the ground, the cloud seemed to implode and popped, the same sound it made when she summoned it out of existence.

“Are ye sure I will be welcome here?” Kaede demanded quietly.

“T’aint no” Kagome assured her. The quiet was deafening, and she walked into the shiro, the older miko following silently.

Suddenly she realized she didn’t even know who to talk to for a guest room to be made. The whole situation of her mating had been rushed and strange, and silently she admitted she hadn’t exactly embraced her role as the new lady of the castle.

“Kagome!” A voice shouted. It echoed through the corridor, and she flinched, wondering how the taijiya had gotten the message so fast. Turning to face the owner of said voice, she forced a bright smile and prayed she wasn't showing too many teeth.

“Kae, Kagome, when did—”

“It's a long story,” Kagome muttered. And definitely not one she had not anticipated - or wanted - to repeat so soon. Kaede had listened intently and agreed to come to the shiro until the wedding after much pleading on Kagome’s part.

“Kagome has had a long journey, and needs a bath and rest. Mayhap you two could catch me up on your village,” Kaede told them, the request holding a steely note that turned it into nothing less than a command. Sango stopped, eyes wide and blinking while Kagome smiled brightly for the first time since being forced on her little adventure.

Already the older miko was proving to be a steady ally.

“The children have been waiting to see you,” Sango began.

“I have to see about getting a room set up for Kaede, and then I'll be by before grabbing a bath,” Kagome said, already walking away from the small group. They said nothing, but watched curiously as her attention shifted away and she followed the feel of her mate to his study. Ignoring etiquette, she opened the door and saw him looking blankly down at a scroll.

“Hello,” She greeted. His icy eyes glanced over her before moving back to the scroll, and she resisted the urge to make an irritated noise. Something was wrong with the daiyoukai, and for the life of her she had no idea what it was.
“Sesshoumaru,” She started, stopping when she saw him stiffen.

“What is it?” He asked quietly, his tone cool and frighteningly apathetic.

“I brought Kaede back with me. I- umm, I have no idea who to talk to about finding a room for her,” She admitted with a blush.

“Jaken,” Sesshoumaru rumbled. Kagome noticed the small imp for the first time since she’d opened the door and was surprised by his weary expression.

“I will see to it, Sesshoumaru-sama,” The youkai mumbled before lethargically dragging himself from the room. Kagome watched, shocked, as he left, forgetting to even close the door behind him.

When several minutes passed in silence, he finally looked up, his expression even cooler than before.

“Well?” He prompted.

“What's wrong?” She demanded shortly, the anger and frustration of the past several days catching up with her, sparked by his indifference.

“Nothing.” He replied before looking back down at the scroll.

“It doesn't seem like 'nothing',” She accused, moving closer to the low lying table, and him, wondering if the scroll had anything to do with his temper.

When he didn't even acknowledge her sudden proximity, she moved to the other side of the table and knelt next to him, hurt stabbing her heart when he stiffened.

“Sesshoumaru, please, what's wrong?” She whimpered, suddenly feeling lost.

“Nothing.” He repeated, voice cold steel.

Ignoring his rigid posture, she wrapped her arms around him, her forehead resting on his shoulder. His arm pressed into her chest painfully, and she wanted to move, to find a more comfortable way to embrace him. But she felt that if she released him for even a second, he would suddenly vanish.

“What did I do?”

“Nothing.”

A small sniff escaped before she could force it down, and she felt the familiar sting of tears and blinked several times, refusing to let them fall.

“I'm sorry your mother lied. I didn't know she'd lied until you showed up. She just said she skirted a few details. I didn't think she would just outright lie.”

“Why didn't you tell me?” He demanded softly. She looked up and saw his eyes staring straight ahead, resolutely focused on the doorway.

“You didn't give me a chance,” She accused softly. “You seemed happy to see me go.”

That admission cost her more than she had thought it would. Remembering the threat of being dragged to the spirit world, she shuddered heavily, the question that had haunted her then coming back. Would he have been better off, happier, if she had been taken?

“Why did you come?” She finally asked.
He said nothing for several moments, and she was worried he wouldn't answer when he opened his mouth twice and then closed it with a decided click.

Finally he sighed.

“I felt your anguish through the mark,” He admitted.

Warmed by the thought, she squeezed him tightly and relaxed.

“They tricked me, the trial wasn't getting the beads. At least, Harionago said it wasn't. They were testing my 'emotional fortitude',” She muttered bitterly. “In the cellar, there were all these bones piled up on the platform Naraku used to sit on. The beads were in there. I reached for them and suddenly the bones, they,” She stopped, and he could feel her body tensing as she relived the experience. Her anger and hurt reached him through the mark, doubling the effect of the scents that were already seeping into the air.

“They formed this- this monster. There were so many voices, and they kept telling me that if I had just tried harder, everyone would be okay, that no one would have died. That I could have saved everyone if I had just tried.”

Her voice was shaking and she hated it. He could feel her own flicker of self loathing even though the memory had anguish seeping through their shared bond mixing with the unpleasant scent of her agitation.

“Trial?” He finally asked, wanting to do something, anything, to change her current mood and the cacophony of scents and second hand emotions assaulting him.

She pulled back, eyes wide, and the surprise that washed over him, both physically and ephemerally, was enough to make him want to sag in relief, although he resisted the impulse.

“You didn't know?” She murmured. He gave an almost imperceptible shake of his head, not entirely pleased to be admitting such ignorance, but easily grateful enough for the reprieve his senses were allowed.

“I could kill your mother,” She muttered. He snorted in response, and she giggled, finally relaxing a little and shifting her position so that she sat next to him, their shoulders touching and arms pressed together. “She told me she skirted some details. I figured it was because you wouldn't let me travel alone, much less to there.” A rude noise came from the back of her throat and he fought the urge to chuckle at her easily understandable anger at his mother. “But the new head, or whatever, is supposed to undergo a trial. Because I haven't had enough. Ugh. I thought it was to go find the rosary and bury it beneath the goshinboku. They tricked me.”

The last was less a statement of fact and more an accusation, and he tried not to feel the bitterness she was feeling, although his own emotions were no better.

It seemed the miko was destined to constantly confound him. Once again he felt ashamed of his actions, and the memory of his own irrational anger was enough to make him crave simpler days.

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“Sesshoumaru?” She finally asked, breaking through his thoughts. When he said nothing, she barreled on, asking the question that scared her.

“Do you, I mean, when you told me to go through the well, did you mean it?”

He couldn't help flinching, even though he did his damnedest to stay completely composed. But in his own defense, it was probably the last question on earth he wanted to answer.
“Your presence would be missed,” he quipped. There. Ambiguous, yet honest. Certainly vague enough to keep her from assuming, or realizing, anything.

She huffed lightly as she pulled away, her face an angry mask.

“My presence would be missed?” she demanded softly. Much too softly, especially given her current expression. When he said nothing, she growled and stood, stalking away.

“You have become too noisy as you walk,” he observed dispassionately, stopping her right before she reached the door. She turned and her mouth was open to begin an angry tirade when the statement slipped out, too quick to stop. “We will train tonight.”

Kagome was delighted to discover that—unlike every other door in the shiro— the door to his study slammed quite noisily.

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When Kagome was rushed by her gaggle of children, she let out a breath that she'd been holding since she left. All of them were safe, happy, and healthy.

“So,” Sango said as the children rushed back to their game with Jaken and the twins and their new play partner, Kohaku. Kagome knew what the slayer wanted to know, and wasn't sure how to answer.

“If I say it's a long story, can it wait till tonight?” Kagome murmured, not wanting the children to hear. “They still don't understand what happened,” she added with a nod in their general direction. Sango nodded once and Nanmei giggled, then blushed as she realized how inappropriate her reaction was.

“My moods have been all over the place, forgive me. I was just thinking maybe we should gather in the bathhouse. It’s the only place we’ll find any kind of privacy,” she added.

“You don’t know my husband very well,” Sango snorted, earning a guffaw from the other women.

“It's not a bad idea,” Kagome mused aloud, eyes in the distance. “I was only able to take a quick bath, and a soak would do me good. I've been spoiled by my futon here. I have knots in places I forgot existed.”

“Pampered life of a lady already getting to you?” Sango asked with an arched brow, narrowly avoiding a hand swatting her arm with a giggle.

“Sesshoumaru wants to train tonight though,” the miko sighed, allowing her arms to collapse and her back to hit the floor. “He says I've gotten too noisy when I walk.”

“You just got back!” Nanmei gasped angrily. “Well, ignore him. You're going to relax tonight.” Her tone brooked no argument, not that Kagome was going to try. Ever since she'd gotten back, she'd felt as off balance as she had when she first woke in the shiro, although slightly less terrified, but only slightly. Seeing Sesshoumaru had been the emotional equivalent of a kick to the stomach. Embarrassment, shame, and most of all fear had vied for dominance, and when he'd given her an out—anger—she'd latched onto it.

But now the anger was fading and she was thinking rationally again, and with the cooling of her temper, she just felt confused and scared and soul weary.

Luckily Yuugao had not tried to make an appearance, although she'd been informed that the youkai was somewhere in the shiro. Shinzuru had seemed distracted when he told her, and each time he saw
her, he looked ready to say something, although he never did. If her mind hadn't been occupied with Sesshoumaru's strange behavior and the events of the past several days, she would have asked. As it was, she was occupied, so when he sighed and shook his head, she wrote it off as stress.

“You girls go on and bathe. We'll watch the little ones,” Shizuru told them. Kagome nodded gratefully, standing and stretching only to wince when her back and knees popped.

“Hot bath, now!” Nanmei laughed, pushing Kagome in front of her playfully.

“I'll meet you guys at the bathhouse,” Kagome assured, waving them off. “I need to get into a yukata and grab my stuff.”

As the taijiya and former miko in training walked off, Kagome was amazed at the transition of her friends. Nanmei seemed just as happy as before, but with Sango, who seemed comfortable in the presence of the woman. In fact, as they chattered and giggled, they looked like they had been friends forever, and Kagome couldn't help but feel a degree of relief for whatever had happened while she was gone. Even the children were accepting Sango without reservation, which was another miracle.

Walking down the corridor, she opened her door and looked around. It was her room, and yet something felt off. Earlier she'd just ignored it, hurrying from her bath to meet the children. Now she paused and looked around, wondering if someone had been in her rooms.

Not a thing was out of place, and everything was accounted for.

So what was so different?

The room seemed to echo as she walked into her inner chamber and over to her wooden chests. Opening one, she took out one of the yukata on top, grateful that someone had seen fit to change out the linen ones with something warmer. When she was moving to open the chest holding her soaps, she paused and looked at the chest holding her kimono.

“No,” She snapped aloud, resisting the urge to dig through it. Shaking her head, she opened the other chest and pulled one of the oiled paper packages out, not even paying attention to which bar she grabbed.

Flinching guiltily when she closed it a little harder than she intended, she turned and spun, oddly anxious and eager to leave her room behind her. Almost fleeing the family wing, she raced down the stairs and to the bathhouse.

Grateful she encountered no one on her way, she slipped in and closed the door behind her, relaxing in the scents lacing the steam and the chattering of the two women already soaking in the onsen.

Stripping and dunking herself into a smaller tub, she made quick work of bathing, not bothering with hair that was still damp from it's previous shampooing. Once finished, she dunked herself and rinsed, then walked to the large onsen and sat herself down at the edge.

Finally she felt like she could relax. The water was almost too hot, and muscles forcibly relaxed under the heat.

“So, I've heard the story from Nanmei and Shizuru, even Sesshoumaru. But you still haven't told me what happened,” Sango prodded almost as soon as Kagome had relaxed against the rim of the big tub.

“I'm sorry. It's been a long-” She paused. Day was an understatement. So was week. Month? Months?
When was the last time she'd had a true break from all the drama?

“Day?” Sango asked.

“Year,” Kagome muttered, sinking lower into the tub and exhaling, watching the bubbles rise to the surface and pop. The other women made sympathetic noises and Kagome let her whole face fall into the water before bringing it back up and dragging in a deep breath.

“Sesshoumaru's mother is going to drive me crazy.”

“His mother?” Sango asked. She'd heard tell of the daiyoukai several times, but only in vague terms. And she had yet to even catch a glimpse of the elusive inu.

“She's the one that cornered us into the mating. And then the stupid trial for the new head of the House of the Moon,” Kagome said, fingers making air quotations as her voice became deeply exaggerated for the title. “If I have to go through one more trial, test, challenge, or anything remotely similar, I'm going to blow my stack.”

Nanmei made a noise startlingly close to a giggle and Sango snorted. Kagome pushed water at them, completely ignoring bath etiquette. Instead of it's desired effect, both women burst into giggles.

“So glad my misery is amusing,” The miko grumbled dourly.

“Oh, Kagome, it's not that,” Sango sighed, her giggles quieting. “It's just that you told me about those dreams, and I come here and find out you're mated to the person from those dreams, and all you do is complain about your mother in law.”

At the mention of her dreams, Kagome remembered the sharp turn they had taken, and the other two women watched her face light up in a perfect imitation of an incandescent tomato.

“That's telling,” Nanmei giggled. “I haven't seen a blush like that since you first mentioned them.”

“Shut up,” Kagome muttered, sinking even lower into the bath, effectively garbling the last half of her words.

“You know he had your room cleansed while you were gone? Kasai mentioned it. Said Sesshoumaru was having issues avoiding your door,” Nanmei tried. Kagome only uttered a small cry that turned into a choking gasp when water rushed into her mouth and she coughed and spat it out.

“I hate my life,” She moaned. “Everyone knows, don't they?”

“They know what, not who,” Sango offered. “Although, if he's been having problems avoiding your door, you should probably just- I mean, you're mated,” She offered, brows lifted.

“You are as bad as Miroku!” Kagome accused, leaning back against the rim and looking towards the ceiling, wondering if there was some sort of divination by steam trick she could use to figure out her life.

“I'm married to him,” Sango snorted. “I've become a pervert in self defense.”

“Ha!” Kagome quipped. “It doesn't matter anyway. I can't use our mating against him like that. It's wrong.”

“If he's having issues avoiding your rooms I'm pretty sure you won't have to force anything,” Nanmei added in a suggestive tone, eyebrows wagging.
“Since when are you two such perverts?” The priestess grumbled.

“I'm assuming it started with our wedding nights,” Nanmei replied cheekily. “Sango?”

“Not on my wedding night,” The taijiya admitted slowly. “But not long after either,” She added with a blush.

Kagome eyed both women, both blushing, beautiful, pie eyed and obviously thinking about things she'd only dreamed.

“Kasai told me the same thing,” She blurted before she could stop it. Oh kami in heaven, did she really just say that? This was not the twentieth century, and these were not her ultra candid friends

“He did what?” Nanmei asked, her reverie shattered by the miko's declaration.

“He told me to go to Sesshoumaru,” She admitted slowly.

“Kasai said that?” Nanmei choked, surprising Kagome. The miko turned to her friend, owl eyed and suddenly very afraid.

Both women were suddenly too interested and shocked and she knew they wouldn't let it go that one of the males had made such a suggestion.

Drowning, that could save her. However, the tub did not suddenly become eight feet deeper, and she buried her face in her hands and nodded once, wondering if her blush was burning through her hands, because she felt her entire body flush with hot shame.

“When?” Nanmei asked, voice filled with almost girlish giggles.

“This isn't funny!” Kagome snapped hotly. Both women stilled and Nanmei's blue eyes widened in concern.

“I never said it was, and I'm sorry if you thought we were laughing at you.”

“Have you thought about approaching him?” Nanmei asked thoughtfully.

“What?” The miko gasped. “There's no way-”

“What about a kiss?” Sango countered.

“No! You two might have happy marriages but this wasn't my choice, or his. I can't, I won't force my feelings on him, especially not under the cover of our mating. He agreed to become my mate to let me stay, how could I repay it with something like that? I'd be as bad as the bandits,” She snapped.

“Miroku didn't try anything at first with me either,” Sango admitted, eyes shying away from both women as she spoke. “He was afraid of hurting me, of doing something I wouldn't be okay with. I had to let him know that it was okay. He always waited for me.”

“Oh. I didn't realize,” Kagome whispered, anger draining from her at her friend's confession. The taijiya looked acutely embarrassed, not even able to make eye contact.

“I just don't know if I can,” Kagome finally sighed. “Thank you guys for listening. It's just a really screwy situation and I really have no idea what to do,” She admitted. “And doing that, I mean, it doesn't seem like it'll help, you know?” She appealed, hoping to appease her friends and soothe their egos.
“It was a pretty silly idea, wasn’t it?” Nanmei giggled. Sango snorted and Kagome allowed herself to relax as the conversation turned to more mundane things, none of them having to do with her mating or upcoming wedding ceremony.
The inu daiyoukai eyed his mother coolly, gold eyes giving nothing away as she poured tea for the both of them. Ever since arriving back, she had been quiet and withdrawn. He assumed it was because of his ire for finding out her deceit, although he couldn't be entirely sure. The shadows smudging the pale skin beneath her eyes would have worried him if he had not been convinced she was planning something.

“And why has my son decided to visit me today?” She murmured, her vivid gold eyes meeting his own.

“I wish to learn how to cloak my aura as you do,” He intoned, ignoring his cup of tea. The right corner of her lips tilted up in what could only be called a smirk.

“And why does my son finally come to me for this training?” She asked. “When he has always been more comfortable announcing his presence to the world?”

“My reasons are my own,” He ground out, refusing to explain anything to her. Every time he looked at her his fury only seemed to grow, and it was only because she was one of the few youkai that could cloak her aura that he was asking her.

Besides, as he saw it, she owed him.

“Fine. It is not so difficult,” She sighed. “And you have always been a quick study. Come with me,” She announced imperiously, as if she were deigning to grant him some huge favor instead of submitting to penance.

He followed on silent feet, surprised when her path took him out of the shiro and to the skies. Wondering why they could not simply practice in the shiro, he followed. It was only when she began her descent that he realized where she had led him, and simmering anger began boiling into fury once more.

“Not here,” He commanded, voice laced with ice.

“Why ever not?” She asked in what he assumed was feigned innocence. He refused to tell her that this was one of the few places he was free to be more than just the western lord. Saying such to her would give away more than he was comfortable with anyone knowing, and she might infer things that were not meant.

“Not here,” He repeated, his body shifting minutely as he let his youki flare in an impressive display of dominance.
“I appreciate your theatrics, but did you not come to me seeking help?” She asked, brow tilting up mockingly.

“This Sesshoumaru is now your alpha, and you are no longer alpha female. You will grant this Sesshoumaru’s request and follow his command.”

He was surprised by the sudden flare of dejection in her gold eyes as they dimmed and she nodded once, her shoulders sagging infinitesimally, but enough for him to notice. Convinced it was due to her own brand of theatrics and manipulation, he brushed the surprise away and took to the sky, leading her to a small clearing over a mile away.

“Sesshoumaru,” She started after they had landed. He looked at her, knowing every nuance of his posture proclaimed intense dislike while giving away none of the underlying rage. She seemed ready to say something, then stopped, shaking her head.

“You must pull your aura in,” She stated simply. “If you can make such declarations through your aura, then you can control it.”

Wondering why she had seen fit to take him from the shiro for such a simple lesson, he did as she explained. Feeling his youki spiking around him, he began by pulling. It responded, and it followed his command, his satisfaction reflecting in the energy that slowly began to recede into his body.

“No,” His mother snapped. “You are only reigning it in, not concealing it.”

He refused to point out that reigning it in was exactly what she had told him to do. How was he supposed to conceal it?

“Let it spiral into the core;” She commanded, eyes narrowed in interest as he tried to follow her instruction. When it coiled into a tight spiral around him, she looked mildly satisfied. When the ki began to disappear, a glimmer of pride began to shine in her eyes.

When it was completely gone, locked tightly within him, she nodded once.

“You have inherited more than my poison at least,” She quipped, tone devoid of pride at her son’s achievement.

He refused to ask what she meant.

“Your father could never access the core, despite trying. It matters not. If you did not know that path, you could not accomplish hiding your aura. Masking, yes. But not concealing.”

He had no idea if she was muddling through some form of backwards praise or trying to tell him something. And he didn’t care. Despite the lesson, or whatever latent abilities he had inherited, she had betrayed his trust for one of her silly games. At the very least it was obvious she had not achieved her goal, whatever that had been. But it was not enough.

Forgoing any goodbyes or even a simple acknowledgment of gratitude, he vaulted into the sky, letting his own aura begin to escape, not quite ready to reveal this newest ability to those within the shiro.

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“I just got back,” She groaned when she met him in the gardens later that night.

“You have other coats,” He answered, ignoring her grousing completely.
“I know, I just like this one,” She responded, holding up her arms to reveal to small hands that barely peeked out from the edges of the oversized blue jacket she had been given last winter. He looked from the ends of the sleeves to her smiling face and refused to look a gift horse in the mouth. She was no longer complaining.

“Come,” He commanded, not even waiting for her to form her cloud before launching himself into the air. When she shouted indignantly at him from the ground, he allowed himself a small, smug smile. She had been sullen that he wanted to get back to training so quickly. It was no longer an issue.

He landed in the field minutes later, content that his mother's presence had left no physical marks on what he had come to consider a very sacred space. When the miko landed across from him, her cloud dissipating with a pop as she jumped from it, he rushed her, darting to the left just as he was about to reach her. A girlish scream cut through the air and he paused, amused at the sight of her clutching her chest and breathing rapidly.

“What the hell, Sesshoumaru?” She demanded. “Are you trying to scare me half to death?”

“You are too noisy,” He almost purred, adrenaline already pulsing through his veins, readying itself for the chase. She stilled, blue eyes widening to an almost comical degree.

“Run swiftly and quietly,” He commanded. “Or I will catch you,” He added, unable to stop the smirk from forming.

She didn't address the fact that no matter how quickly or quietly she ran, he could catch her. His superior speed made such a chase almost ridiculous. But she didn't think about it. Instead, she completely ignored reason and turned smartly on her heel, lunging forward even as she turned. He watched, eyes glimmering as she made for the treeline, intent on the forest and perhaps the hollow in Bokusenou's roots.

When she was halfway there, not even looking over her shoulder to confirm if he was following, he relaxed and began to pull his aura in. He could feel it spiraling and tightening into a coil, ever smaller as it heeded his will and began to wind into his body.

He did not understand the theory behind it, not completely. However, theory could come later. He was able, and at the moment that was all he cared about. By the time he finished, she was almost to the trees, and he looked to the moon, smiling at it's perfect crescent shape.

Darting forward, he made his way to her in seconds. When he was suddenly blocking her way, she gasped, clutching her chest once again and backpedaling, eyes wide in surprise.

“What-” She started even as she was moving backwards.

“Run,” He commanded in a deep voice, something dark in him satisfied when she turned to her left and fled. Several seconds passed, and he wondered how long of a head start he should give her, or why he was giving her one at all.

One thing he did notice however, was that she was running quickly for a human and that she was as quiet as she could be while running over the fallen leaves. Accepting that men following would be creating their own noise in such a scenario, he didn't correct her. Instead, he listened to her breathing.

She was pacing herself, her breaths still even.

Time to remedy that.
Once more he appeared in front of her, seeming to blink into existence.

“Run,” He rumbled, pleased when her scent was peppered with annoyance instead of fear. When she turned and chose a new direction, he allowed her time to put some distance between them. As he watched her flee, he was startled to realize that he was anticipating their chase, which was strange enough on its own.

Training with her was no longer a duty. It had become something akin to sparring. To top that, it was fun.

Well, for him at least. He could hear her cursing him under her breath off in the distance as she circled back and headed for the field.

Catching up to her, he followed like a pale shadow, amused that she could no longer sense his presence. As she ran, he stalked, anticipation growing with each passing moment, although anticipation of what he could not say. Yet his blood seemed to burn as it coursed through him, hot and heavy, almost foreign.

When she began to visibly tire, her steps slowing and her breath coming in short pants, he decided the chase was over. With a strange, alien triumph made him want to howl his victory, he clamped his jaws shut and clenched his teeth to hold it in as he swooped down from the tree he had been residing in. Soundlessly he caught her, pinning her between his body and the nearest tree. She pushed back from the tree, forcing her back into his chest to avoid pressing her face into the bark.

“Caught,” He whispered into her ear, feeling victorious, possessive and hungry all at once as his hands moved to her hips, unaware and careless of his grip.

She shuddered delicately, making him aware of how tightly she was pressed between himself and the tree. His already heightened awareness seemed intent on latching onto details. The clover and honeysuckle smell she emanated mixing with sweat, the softness of her hair against his cheek, but most of all the smell of her arousal, hot and heady, sent his senses spiraling into overdrive. Her bottom was pressed against his groin, and he had no trouble at all imagining what it would feel to like to be pressed against her naked flesh, sending jagged bolts of lust shooting through him.

It was her small, breathless moan filtering into the air that made him step back abruptly, as if he had been burned by the contact. Self loathing and revulsion formed a solid, leaden brick in his stomach.

That damnable mark! Somehow it had channeled his own lust to her. Even as his own hunger was obliterated by self derision and contempt her arousal was fading into confusion and spikes of fear. Not even questioning where the sudden lust had come from, he took another step back, needing the physical distance as much as he needed air.

“Sesshoumaru?” She asked, turning towards him slowly, as if afraid to look at him. When he met her gaze, he saw nothing but bewilderment. Feeling as if he had taken advantage of her trust, even if only in his imagination, he bit the inside of his cheek, tasting blood as he fought his instincts and his senses. Her sudden confusion served to douse whatever he had been feeling much more quickly than his own mounting disgust.

“You are doing much better,” He finally replied, his voice more harsh than he had intended. When she flinched he felt another stab of guilt. “You need to build stamina.”

An image of them rutting until she passed out popped into his head and he cursed his word choice. Yet the miko was completely oblivious, and his own mental imagery was thankfully not shared through the mark. Instead, she huffed indignantly and began stomping away from him, heedless of
the noise she was making. Thankful they had somehow skirted the edges of a possible crisis, he followed silently.

“How are you doing that?” She finally asked, voice tight as they passed the edge of the forest and began walking through the field.

“I had my mother teach me,” He admitted. She scowled at the mention of his mother and continued on in silence. Feeling as if he had broken something between them, he was amazed by the realization that he didn't want it to be broken, and what was more, the idea of harming her, however unintentionally, made him feel guilty.

Which was ridiculous. But it didn't mean he could stop it.

“Miko-”

“Kagome,” She interrupted. “Or do we have to go through all that again?”

“Kagome,” He began again, stopping. She paused and turned to him, expression carefully neutral. The vacant expression on her face felt like a kick to his stomach.

’Please, do not let my foolishness destroy what she has gained,’ He begged some unseen deity, cursing his instincts and himself for not realizing that they had somehow slipped past his guard, turning a chase into something intimate and sexual, something predatory. Things he could not be where his mate was concerned.

“Are you well?” He finally asked, shocked by how sincere the question sounded.

“I'm fine,” She sighed, her tense shoulders relaxing. “It's just been a really long day. I could use some sleep on a real bed. Without ghosts randomly popping up.”

“Ghosts?”

“Just this new duty. At least I'll never be bored,” She replied with a small smile. “Although they can appear at the most inconvenient times.”

Her scent was overwhelmed with embarrassment and tinges of anger and frustration. He waited for her to elaborate, and when she didn't, he refused to pursue it. They began walking again and he was relieved when the silence lost its edge.

“I did not realize becoming my mate would further complicate your life,” He finally apologized.

“At least we're friends,” She chirruped, smiling up at him.

That trusting, innocent smile was another physical blow, more crippling than any of the others. Mate she might be, but in name only, and he had to remember that. First and foremost, she was his friend and pack, and that meant protecting her, even if it was from himself. Especially from himself.

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Kagome bit back a sigh as she ran a damp cloth over her skin, washing away the sweat and dirt from her session with the daiyoukai. Sesshoumaru had been silent the entire way back, and his aura had remained locked away, hidden so that she could barely tell what he was feeling, which worried her.

When she had been pressed into his body in the woods earlier that night she had felt...Something. For a moment it had been as if he wanted her as intensely as she wanted him, and her body had
responded to that thought before she even fully understood what was going on.

His whisper had been a purr and done a hundred things to her body that she had thus far only dreamed of. The solid heat of him behind her and his hands on her hips, claws pricking through clothing and grazing her skin had sent billions of suddenly very alert nerves into overdrive.

And the second she had moaned he had stepped away, making his position on the matter very clear. What wasn't clear to her was his concern for her, which she could tell from his question and vaguely through their mark. But it bothered her immensely that he hadn't revealed his aura during the meeting or the walk to their rooms.

Worry that had been forming since the incident roiled in her when she realized that he might have been hiding anger. Or worse, disgust.

Done with the bath, she dropped the rag into the basin and pulled the shift over her head, grateful that her skin had lost that over sensitivity from earlier. Shivering once, unsure if it was from the cold or from her own thoughts, she darted under the covers, pulling them tightly around her in an effort to ward off the cold.

Her thoughts however, lingered, and would give her no peace. The only relief she felt was that she had not gone through with Nanmei's suggestion, having considered it despite her vehement refusal of such a ploy. Despite her staggering relief at not having an opportunity to make such a fool of herself, she nonetheless felt humiliated that even an unconscious, innocent invitation, for it could have been nothing else, had been so completely rebuffed.

Worry that she had irrevocably altered her relationship with her best friend took second place when she allowed herself to indulge in a rare moment of being a scared, insecure young woman, rejected by someone utterly out of her reach. The tears came, and she found little consolation that she was allowed them in complete privacy.

By the time she arrived for breakfast the next morning, Sesshoumaru had already come and gone, and the children seemed no less subdued than normal. Nanmei, Sango and Kaede were all chatting amiably about the wedding as she sat. When they paused to greet her, they all stopped, noticing the dark circles beneath her eyes and the dull film that seemed to cover them.

"Kagome, are you alright?" Sago demanded, eyes wide. The miko murmured something noncommittal in return, not wanting to talk about anything to anyone. Sleep had not come after her bout of tears, or the mind numbing worry, the self berating or even the anger. In fact, she had cycled through all of those steps twice before giving up on sleep altogether, and by that time the sun had been rising.

"Kagome, you don't look so well," Nanmei started.

"I'm fine," She mumbled. "Just didn't sleep well." At all. Not that she was going to admit that to the women, knowing an explanation would be wanted, and she was too tired to lie or even evade such demands.

However, it seemed her reference to her sleep was enough, and she let the two women assume what they would. It was easier than the truth, and far less humiliating. Although in the cold light of day, the dreams took on a new cast, and she felt stupid for even dreaming of him, despite her lack of control over her subconscious. And a hundred times more foolish for speaking to anyone of them. It would have been better if she had said nothing at all. Perhaps they would have gone away if she
“Child, what ails ye?” Kaede demanded, too observant for Kagome's tastes.

“I'm fine,” She ground out, staring at the bowl of rice in front of her, unsure why she had even served herself. Her stomach was still tied in knots and the very thought of food made her nauseated.

“Sango, Nanmei, if you'll excuse us,” The old miko quipped in her gravelly voice, not even looking at the two bewildered women as she stood and grabbed Kagome's upper arm in a surprisingly strong grip. Given little choice, Kagome stood and followed, allowing the old woman to practically drag her from the schoolroom.

“Where may we speak in private?” Kaede demanded. Kagome chuckled, but it was a cold, mirthless sound.

“I never have privacy anymore,” She shot out. Kaede, undeterred by the declaration, began moving through the shiro, somehow managing to find her way to the doors leading to the inner gardens. Kagome would have been amazed at the woman's memory if she wasn't so angry that the miko was dragging her out into the cold.

“What is going on?” Kaede demanded once they were a safe distance from the doors.

“Nothing,” Kagome bit out, crossing her arms over her chest and refusing to look down into Kaede's too observant eye.

“Child, I have known ye for four winters. Lying is not your strong suit.”

“Why does everyone feel the need to get into my affairs?” She shot back, the hurt and insecurity still too close to the surface.

Instead of continuing their almost argument, Kaede sighed and began walking, not even checking to see if the younger miko followed. Feeling remorse for her poor treatment of her respected teacher and friend, she followed silently.

“Sango tells me thee might have come to the end of your mourning for Inu Yasha,” The old woman said, breath steaming as the words hit the cold air. Kagome felt that the comment might have been an accusation or disapproval, guilt seeping into the mess her stomach already was.

“I think so,” She admitted. “I still miss him. But it doesn't hurt like it did before.”

Kaede nodded sagely. “As it should be. And you have explained your new duties to me.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” Kagome asked, confused at the sudden change of subject.

“I am merely trying to understand what ails ye.”

“It's just nonsense,” Kagome muttered.

“If it is so foolish, why does it affect ye so? Rarely have I seen you in such a state,” The old miko observed. They continued walking several minutes and Kagome wondered if she could somehow soak up the old woman's calm and serenity. Kaede had once professed that she had never been in love, had never desired to be. Inu Yasha and Kikyo's tragic tale had left too deep an imprint on her soul. Maybe that was her secret.
“I made a mistake,” She finally admitted. “I fell in love with someone who doesn't love me.”

The old woman made a clucking sound with her tongue as they continued walking circles around the gardens.

“Ye thought that once before,” Kaede offered, gaze turning to the sky. “Ye were wrong once. Mayhap it is so again.”

“I don't think so. It was a pretty clear rejection.” And admitting that out loud hurt more than she cared to admit, even to herself. Mortified that the old woman didn't seem bothered in the least, she realized with a sinking heart that it was a stupid problem. Not even Kaede seemed overly worried about it.

“Perhaps ye might explain to me,” Kaede demanded, her tone taking on a gentleness that had been absent thus far in their discussion. Faced with that tone from an older woman that she trusted, she gave in, knowing that while Kaede wouldn't be able to fully understand, she might have enough wisdom to point her in some general direction.

“We were together, alone. And he was-holding me,” She lied, not sure what the old miko would think if she told the truth. Taking her history into account, Kagome was afraid the old woman would conclude that Kagome's rape had somehow linked a chase with sex in her head, and she knew it wasn't that.

“Go on,” Kaede prodded as Kagome searched for words.

“I didn't offer or anything, nothing verbal. But it was out there. He pulled away. I'm afraid I screwed things up,” She admitted.

“Thous mate is a strange one, to be sure,” Kaede observed. Kagome was nodding when she stopped and glared down at the short miko.

“I didn't say anything about my mate,” She groused, feeling as if she'd walked into a verbal trap. However, Kaede's raised brow only made Kagome feel as if the miko was silently calling her an idiot.

“One would have to be blind not to see it.”

Kagome groaned, wishing once again that a hole would open beneath her feet and just end her ever mounting disgrace.

“It is nothing to be ashamed of,” Kaede rebuked gently. “It is no great sin to love your mate, or even act on that love.”

“It is a stupid childish fantasy,” Kagome snapped, more irate with herself for the whole situation than the miko's words.

“It is not foolish, and ye are certainly not childish. Thou needs love, Kagome. Much as my sister needed it. Life without it is difficult to fathom. Ye have surrounded yourself with children and friends, and perhaps it is enough to sustain you. But it is not enough to make you happy. Although you seem to have a talent for loving those most difficult to love.”

“It's not difficult to love him,” Kagome whimpered. “It's so easy it's stupid. *I'm* the problem. Not him.”

Kaede made a rude noise, jerking Kagome from her own spiraling self loathing.
“Why would thee be a problem?” The miko demanded.

“Maybe he wants a youkai. Or someone that doesn't have disgusting scars,” She muttered bitterly. “Someone that hasn't been used by a dozen different-”

“Stop that this instant,” Kaede cut in sternly, stopping and glaring up at the younger priestess. “Despite the short time I have spent with Lord Sesshoumaru, I feel comfortable in saying that such would not bother him. Ye engaged him in a draw, so you are both equals, despite the difference of thine blood. I also trust that he is not the kind of male to hold a woman's rape against her, or find scars disgusting.”

“Then what is it?” Kagome demanded, knowing even as she shouted that she was being unfair. The miko was trying to help her, and even though she was being taciturn, she was right. Kagome knew she was indulging in self pity, but the insecurity ate at her. Was it her species? Was it her rape or the scars that blemished her skin, permanent reminders of another youkai using her? Who would want to see something like that on a lover? And he knew every detail of her ordeal, his voyage into her core long ago forcing him to see more than he had probably ever wanted to contemplate or know.

Or worst of all, he couldn't see her that way. She was just a friend that happened to be female. She wasn't sure which one would be worse.

“Perhaps it is his honor,” Kaede answered simply.

The answer was so simple, so incredibly out of the blue that Kagome couldn't help the short bark of laughter that escaped.

“In what way would his honor keep him for making love to his mate?” Kagome asked, voice dripping with sarcasm.

“Perhaps he does not think ye are ready, or that thou does it because it is expected of ye.”

It was hope, and Kaede had dangled it in front of her completely unaware of just how much that hope terrified her. Kagome squeezed her eyes shut, trying not to let the words sink in, however strange or desperate they were. But even as she tried to ignore them, they made a sort of sense to her. Sesshoumaru had promised to protect her, even if it was from herself. He had reiterated that once by the goshinboku. Was this his way of trying to protect her, to be honorable?

Before she could stop herself, she was clinging to those words of hope, savoring their warmth and sending a prayer to the kami that it wasn't foolish, that he wasn't disgusted by her or angry at her reaction to him. That he was simply keeping his oath.

“Aren't you alright, child?” Kaede asked again.


“Then believe it,” Kaede said almost dismissively as she began to move closer to the shiro, intent on getting inside and warm again. Kagome, clinging to faint glimmer of hope, didn't even notice the cold anymore.

Yuugao was a mess, and not even the most polite of terms could disguise it. Shinzuru felt another flicker of unease as he sat across from her, watching her pour tea. Despite the dark shadows under her eyes and her normally kept, styled hair pouring down her back freely, she was perfectly composed and seemed oblivious to her state.
“Why is it you have come today?” She asked, voice rasping slightly, as if she was coming down with a cold. Which was ridiculous, although the edge to her voice was not lost on him.

“I need you to promise me that you will tell me nothing but the truth,” he started. She flinched, gold eyes growing shadowed as she looked away from him. He continued, feeling twinges of remorse at his unforgiving tone. “No tricks, no deceptions, no manipulating. I need to know the truth, it's important.”

“I will speak only the truth,” She replied, eyes still off in the distance. He couldn't stop a brief flicker of worry to mingle with his own trepidation and hesitation. Her normally vivid gold eyes were dull and tired, almost vacant.

“You said that a mating mark can't create emotions.” The statement was also a question, and he could see her shoulders sagging infinitesimally and knew that for whatever reason, she did not want to answer this particular question.

“It cannot. It can only share emotions, if it is a strong enough bond,” She answered woodenly. “My son's bond with Kagome is of such strength.”

“What of the one you shared with Touga?” He demanded, tone sharper than he had intended. But the truth loomed, and he was still unsure if he wanted to know. Even as he asked, he wasn't entirely sure he would believe her answer, or worse yet, that he wouldn't want to.

“It was not a strong bond. Merely enough to mark us as one another's mates. The only thing I ever felt through it was his death.”

“He told me that the bond's magic caused him to think himself in love with you,” He accused, temper spiking as he heard this new story. She flinched again, this time upsetting her tea cup when her arm jerked, it's contents spilling and soaking her sleeve. When she didn't even move to right the cup or clear her sleeve of the mess, he wondered if this was costing her as much, if not more, than it was costing him.

“I know what he told you.”

“Was it the truth?” He demanded, angry at her hollow response. She stared at the wall blankly for several minutes, gaze turned inward. Ready to pose his question again, he was stopped when she whispered.

“No, it was not.”

“Why would he lie to me?” The one eyed youkai snarled, the entire conversation derailed by his frustration. He had wanted to ask about the bond for Kagome and Sesshoumaru's sake. After hearing the girl's confession to the elderly priestess, his heart had shattered for her. The situation was not the same as he had experienced so long ago, but her anguish was close enough to his own, and he had to do something, anything, to help her, no matter the cost.

But his intentions had changed, and the conversation was no longer about helping his daughter. A seed of doubt that had been planted with Yuugao's comment had grown and flourished, making him distrust the man he had called brother.

“It was the best way to handle the situation,” She answered honestly, voice thick with emotion. Ignoring her tone, he felt his temper spiking at her vague answers.

“The truth, Yuugao!”
“I didn’t want to mate him. He didn’t know at first, and he was infatuated, you saw him dote on me. I tried to be a good mate and forget. I tried to care for Touga, but—” She stopped, and he shocked to see her eyes misting, as if she were about to cry. Holding onto his anger, he waited for her to continue.

“Touga would not lie over something so simple. Or was he just trying to save face?” Shinzuru demanded.

“No! No,” Yuugao repeated, her voice quieting. “He wouldn’t have lied just to save face. I’m not sure he even cared about his reputation. It was not that I didn’t love him, but that I loved someone else.”

“Why would that be such a problem?” He snapped, not understanding and not believing, not wanting to believe.

“I cannot tell you. He swore me to silence,” She whispered, eyes moving to the table. “The consequences of anyone ever knowing would be beyond comprehension.”

He was going to press for more, feeling that he would get it if he pushed hard enough. But the woman’s seeming fragility stopped him, slapping him in the face and only adding weight to her words. Though he couldn't completely understand his friend's motives, if the who was so important, perhaps it was enough to know the why. In the face of the why, did the who matter? Telling himself it didn't, he ran the inu's confession through his head again and again, picking it apart and trying to find anything that rang false.

When nothing presented itself, especially a motive for her to lie, he accepted it. Though it was a bitter pill to swallow, he couldn't fault his friend. If the 'who' was such a problem, then the deceased daiyoukai must have had good reason. While it hurt that he had been included in the deception, he acknowledged that at least now he knew the truth of the situation.

“You wanted to know why Sesshoumaru thought his feelings were caused by the mark,” Shinzuru began.

“It was you. I guessed as much from your line of questioning. Touga promised our son would never know of it. Sesshoumaru will listen to nothing I say. The truth will have to come from you.”

“How am I to explain that Touga lied?” Shinzuru asked, knowing that despite Sesshoumaru's longstanding grudge against his dead father, he still used him as the bar he measured himself against.

“I don't know,” She sighed wearily. “You'll think of something. He trusts you.”

While the last wasn't meant as an accusation, and hadn't sounded anything but resigned, it still felt as if he had done something wrong. Confused and soul weary, he nodded and stood, mind already trying to come up with the most diplomatic way to tell the pup that his father had lied, and hoped to cast it as something honorable. But without the person Touga had been protecting, he had no idea of their purpose, not really. Yuugao had made it sound as if the ramifications could be political, which wasn’t entirely unsurprising given the climate of the lands around the time of their mating. But after finding out that he had been lied to, he wasn't eager to cover it with another falsity or assumption.

“You know, Touga's been dead for a good while. You're free to pursue this person,” He offered, hoping it might evoke a name.

“Not possible,” She murmured with such finality that he wondered if the other youkai was mated or dead. Choosing not to push any further, he exited the room, glad to leave the oppressive atmosphere. Once he had escaped however, the sorrow seemed to follow him, and when he was outside the door
to Sesshoumaru's study he paused, no longer sure of himself.

'Tonight,' He resolved. By the end of the day, he would have something to give the pup.

Kagome looked at the training field with wistful eyes. After being resurrected by Tenseiga, Kotaeru had asked for time to go see his daughter and her new family, death having shaken something in him. She couldn't blame him. If she had died, she'd want to take some time off and see her family too.

But a goodly portion of her day had been devoted to training, and it had been a time when she could force everything else from her mind and focus on whatever physical tests the youkai would throw at her.

After her talk with Kaede she hadn't felt able to go back and face the other two women or even the children. Nanmei and Sango meant well, she knew that. But both of them were married to men they loved and pregnant, and she'd be lying if she didn't admit to herself that she was a little jealous of their situations no matter how happy she was for them.

Because of that love, they viewed the world, and especially the her specific problem, through rose colored glasses. Miroku and Resshin both were good men, men that were comfortable with their emotions. Kagome couldn't blame them for working with what they knew of love.

But Sesshoumaru was different from the forest youkai and the monk. Vastly different, and because of his ease with her she had forgotten that. Kaede had brought that realization back.

She wanted to curse Sesshoumaru's honor despite it being one of the things she loved most about him. The daiyoukai didn't like half of the things he had to do for his lands and his people, but he did them because it was the right thing to do. If he hadn't been doing the right thing, he would never have helped her. And he would never have become her friend.

More than anything, she wanted to hope that the lust she had felt echoing through their bond hadn't been her imagination. And if it was his honor that kept him from acting on it, then she would have to find some way to show him that she wasn't pretending to feel something for him. At the same time, the prospect frightened her. If she hadn't already done something to harm her friendship with the youkai, she knew she easily could destroy it.

They were stuck together, and he had admitted that they still had centuries to go. How bearable would those centuries be if she fumbled and did something to shatter the friendship they had already worked so hard to form? She wasn't sure if she could live with being mated to someone she never saw as Yuugao had. The idea of enduring centuries without even his friendship hurt worse than the idea of enduring it without his love.

Weighing her options, she stared at the field, eyes vacant. Would be taking a chance be worth it? Or would she endure in silence as she had with Inu Yasha? Could she do that again, and hope for the best as she had with the hanyou? The daiyoukai was much more reserved than his half brother had been. She could be waiting, hoping for centuries, and there was never any guarantee he wouldn't fall in love with someone else. Quashing that thought before it could sting her any more than it had upon conception, she pushed herself away from the wooden fence of the field.

A pair of emerald eyes watched his movements, and if he looked, he knew he would only see the insolence he felt bearing down on him. Refusing to acknowledge the kitsune's presence, he
continued reading over yet another complaint.

After Kouga's refusal to take Harukaze's lands because of an attack she had known nothing about, he had rooted out the last of those who would attack. While it had left a bitter taste in both his and the new Southern Lady's mouths, it had been necessary to circumvent war, and the female had accepted that, and been grateful she had not lost her new title.

His advisers however, were trying to find a thousand different ways to say the same thing. The contract had been broken. Why hadn't he considered someone new for the title after the wolf's refusal? Why was he allowing enemies of the west to live, etcetera. And they still hadn't stopped despite each complaint being ignored.

But the highborns politicking was easier to deal with than the problem he was seeking to avoid. After his own error, he was willing to admit that spending time with Kagome, his mate, was not a good idea. He needed more time, more distance, to quell his own instincts and hopefully dull the effects of their bond.

How long would it last though? His own father had pupped his mother and fled within a few months, suggesting it hadn't even lasted that long.

“You know, you could just talk about what's bothering you,” Mizu offered, breaking the daiyoukai's train of thought.

“Why are you here?” Sesshoumaru asked, ignoring the kitsune's statement.

“I drew the odd lot,” Mizu sighed, leaning back and cradling his head on his arms. He appeared to contemplate the ceiling, but Sesshoumaru could feel the kitsune's magics swirling lightly around him, trying to discreetly probe for an answer.

With an impatient flare of his youki, he banished the magic and raised a brow when Mizu only shrugged with a sigh of resignation.

“While standing guard over the children, Kasai and I couldn't help but hear you and Cat return last night.”

Sesshoumaru waited, wondering where the kitsune could be going with his observation.

“Cat cried for most of the night. And you threw a shield around your room, but we could tell you weren’t pleased before you did it. I'm going to assume that like our new Lady, you didn't sleep last night.”

“It is not your concern,” Sesshoumaru intoned, voice devoid of any hint of his anger.

Mizu gave a derisive snort. “You're a jackass.”

His comment was met with stoic silence, as he expected. Mizu said nothing else, electing to leave the daiyoukai alone to think over his words.

Yuugao stood and ignored the mess on the table, shedding the outer kimono she wore thoughtlessly, letting it fall to the floor in a careless pile. Walking into the inner chamber of her suite, she closed the door behind her and moved for the small chest in the corner.

Once opened, she pulled out a bundled swathed in layers of shimmering raw silk. The off white
fabric, untouched by dyes or bleach, felt cool to the touch and slipped around what it concealed like water, unwinding with little help from the daiyoukai. After it had fallen away, she held a chunk of smooth volcanic glass, hands trembling.

“I know why you are here, and I will not let you complete your goal,” She whispered as she stared down at the smooth, mirror like surface. Deep in the recesses of the darkness, she perceived fluttering, tendrils of smoke like limbs that waved in the darkness, anxious and yet patient.

The glass pulsed in her hands, an angry response to her quiet declaration. Feeling the stone's power weakening, she began feeding her strength into it, repeating a process that had become ritual over the course of the last three days.

Her reserves of youki already dangerously low, she gave until there was little left, then severed the connection between herself and the glass, satisfied that the prison had been reinforced. Exhausted, she was barely able to wrap the silk back around the small prison and put it back in the wooden chest before stumbling over to her futon.

“Lady,” A voice whispered. Yuugao opened her eyes and smiled wearily at the beautiful spirit kneeling next to her bed.

“Yes, Harionago?” Yuugao rasped weakly.

“There is a mirror in her room now,” The spirit informed her. Yuugao gave a small groan and wanted to bury her face in the pillow and suffocate herself and be done with it. However, she had created a mess that Kagome alone couldn't escape, and her son would be of little help. Knowing she owed it to them to fix it, she nodded once.

“Guard her. If another one comes, keep it away from her or her away from it. Do whatever it takes.”

“If they would consummate their bond, this would cease to be an issue.”

“No, if she is pupped, and that usually takes more than once,” Yuugao sighed.

“You should tell your son,” A new voice added. Yuugao gave an unladylike snort as she regarded the pale spirit through narrowed eyes. The snow maiden's face was a mask if indifference.

“My son will trust nothing I say.”

“He will if it concerns the miko's safety.”

“Go back to guarding her, the both of you. I will find some way to deal with my son. And if there is a way, destroy that mirror. At the very least, find a way to get it out of her room!”

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Kagome was surprised by the mirror the servants had brought to her chamber. When she had asked, she hadn't expected anything bigger than a hand mirror. Instead, they had brought a full length mirror in a heavy frame up, setting it in a corner and bowing out silently.

Now that she had it, she wasn't sure she wanted to go through with her plan. A hand mirror wouldn't have been so completely honest, and the looking glass seemed to loom. Shaking her head and steeling herself, she walked over to it and looked at the woman that peered cautiously back.

She had changed since the last time she had clearly seen herself. Her face was a little longer, a little leaner. There were dark shadows beneath her eyes from her sleepless night. Blue eyes looked darker,
wiser, than she remembered. There were a firmness to her mouth, and she wondered if it was because she had frowned so much.

She looked older, mature. The last time she had seen herself so clearly was well over a year ago, in her mother's home. Too busy for primping, it had been just a sparing glance as she brushed her hair. Back then she had still looked soft and girlish. While she could still see shadows of the girl she had been echoing in her face, she had matured beyond them, and looked like a woman.

The entire effect was disconcerting, and she looked away for a moment, afraid to continue.

Steeling her resolve, she began undoing the ties of her hakama, nervous fingers fumbling and taking twice as long it normally did. When she was finished, she let them drop around her legs, shivering once as her limbs were bared to the cold air. Her kimono followed, and then the first layer kimono she wore followed, leaving her in her sarashi and underwear.

She met her eyes in the mirror, afraid to look down. Inhaling deeply, she stepped back, letting her eyes drift down.

She had avoided looking at the scars, or even acknowledging them. For the most part, she had succeeded, and unless someone brought them up, she was able to forget they even existed. For the first time, she looked directly at each one.

Like two pale bracelets ringing her upper arms, one sat lower than the other, each about two inches wide. The skin was darker by a few shades and raised slightly. She was startled to realize for the first time that on her left arm the scar drew a line at the same level Sesshoumaru's arm had been cut off at. She brushed her index finger over it, noticing that the scar was softer than the surrounding flesh, smoother.

Feeling slightly braver, she dropped her gaze to just below her sarashi, where another ringed her ribcage, easily over two inches wide. It had healed as smoothly as the strange armlets, although it wasn't as raised. It seemed to stand out more, somehow darker than those ringing her arms. Lifting her arms and turning slowly, she craned her neck to look at the whole of it. Her back was smooth and white and interrupted by what looked like a reverse tan line. Finishing her spin, she was facing the mirror again.

Last of all came her legs. Each one had a band halfway up from the knee, and they had not healed as smoothly as the others had. The lines were irregular, from her struggling against him to close her legs.

Stepping back again so that she could easily gaze at the whole of herself, she considered the marks, turning and looking over her shoulder and then facing herself again, trying to see them as someone else would see them, instead of seeing only how she received them.

“It looks almost like some sort of tribal paint,” She murmured, thinking of pictures of tribal peoples that had been in magazines and her textbooks. Each one interrupted her flesh and looked almost intentionally placed. And while no one would ever find them beautiful, they were striking in their own way.

“I'm beautiful, and they are a part of me. They're not disgusting of ugly. Just there,” She said aloud to the room, still staring at herself.

Waddling into the room, Nanmei was surprised to see a very cheery Kagome already eating and
talking animatedly to Sango about the taijiya's pregnancy. Both of them were saying names aloud, each shaking her head in turn.

“Hey, I resent not being included in this,” Nanmei pouted as she struggled to sit down gracefully. Kagome blushed guiltily.

“I'm sorry. Sango told me you had gone for a nap and we were just passing the time,” Kagome apologized.

“Still haven't thought of a name?” Nanmei asked with a smile.

“I still have awhile,” Sango murmured.

“What about you Nanmei?” Kagome asked.

“Resshin and I have been thinking, but so far nothing seems to fit,” Nanmei admitted. “He doesn't want to follow tradition since it entails naming his child after a passed relative. It would be too much of a reminder of losing his home and family. And we're not terribly creative,” She sighed, her hand on her belly, rubbing it absentmindedly and wrinkling the silk.

“Do you know the gender yet?” Kagome asked. Nanmei and Sango both laughed at this, making her blush.

“How would we know the gender before it's born?” Nanmei finally asked.

“Oh, we have a way in my time, but it's not possible here,” Kagome admitted.

“Your...time?” Nanmei choked, eyes going wide. “I thought you were from another land!”

“Might as well be,” Sango giggled, earning a poke from the miko.

“Hello children,” Kaede greeted as she shuffled into the schoolroom and took a seat. Everyone greeted the miko, the children themselves saying hello through mouthfuls of food and the women nodding and murmuring hellos to the old miko.

“So, you've traveled through time?” Nanmei asked, eyes gleaming excitedly. “What's it like in your time?”

“I'm not sure I can talk too much about it,” Kagome finally sighed. “I'm scared of changing something.”

“But if you're from there and here, it wouldn't change, would it?”

“How would we know anyway?” Sango asked.

“I hate time paradoxes,” Kagome groaned, pinching the bridge of her nose. Mostly she didn't want to think of the well, her family, and what awaited them. Oh, she'd use what she knew to her advantage, and she figured she'd earned that much from her travels. But openly speaking of it seemed too much like chancing fate, and that was the last thing she wanted to do given the way her luck was currently going.

“Maybe some other time. Besides, we were discussing baby names,” Kagome finally said, forcing a bright smile to her face.

“So we were,” Nanmei giggled.
The two pregnant women and older miko kept the young priestess so busy with possible names that when dinner came to an end, she had barely noticed that Sesshoumaru had never come, although she refused to let it bother her when she did. After her time with the mirror, she felt a bit more confident, a bit stronger, and even, dare she say it, beautiful. Worthy.

And those strands of hope glimmering in the darkness were growing brighter, giving her something to cling to, making it easier to cope with his distance.

Shinzuru was sitting across from the pup he had, in part, helped raise. The daiyoukai looked calm and composed, completely indifferent. But the moth demon saw the cracks in the visage. Sesshoumaru's brush strokes were hurried and forceful. Despite the layers of kimono he wore, his tense shoulders were too easily apparent, and he sat straight enough that it seemed his spine had been replaced with a sword.

“Pup, we need to talk,” Shinzuru finally told him.

“Speak,” Was all the daiyoukai bit out.

“I spoke to your mother about the mark,” Shinzuru started, stopping when the pup's cold, imperious gaze rose from the papers on his desk and to him. Reflecting that the deceased inu daiyoukai had never had a look like that in his arsenal, he realized that there were things Sesshoumaru had inherited from his mother other than appearance.

“It can't manipulate you, like I was led to believe,” He added hastily, knowing he was treading on thin ice by mentioning the female at all. The daiyoukai, however, didn't seem to understand the significance of the statement.

“Are you suggesting my father lied?” Sesshoumaru finally asked, coolly, calmly.

“There was cause,” Shinzuru defended. “Still not entirely sure about it, but your mother.”

“And just what did my mother,” He uttered the word as if it were poison. “Say was the cause?”

“Your father did care for her, quite a bit. Then he realized she loved another. After they confirmed conception, he left.”

“My mother is lying,” Sesshoumaru bit out, his mask beginning to crack, revealing the fury beneath it. Shinzuru wanted to put some space between himself and the pup, but then he remembered Yuugao's quiet desperation and Kagome's declaration of love, and he couldn't bring himself to pull back before he'd said his peace.

“She isn't.”

“My mother is a born liar. My father would not have lied for something so trivial. So she is lying about something.”

“But she is not lying about the mark,” Shinzuru insisted. “If you feel something for Cat then—”

Shinzuru knew he'd said something wrong even as the words left his mouth, although he had no idea what. After watching to newly mated pair together, he hadn't expected the daiyoukai to respond so vehemently to the suggestion that he might actually care for his mate as something other than a friend. But the displeasure emanating from the inu left little room for interpretation, and for the first time, Shinzuru was afraid that the daiyoukai would turn on him.
“My mother is using you to act out her schemes. If you think about my father's reason to lie, you will see it makes no sense. And my relationship with Kagome is none of your affair,” Sesshoumaru replied coldly, eyes narrowed and filled with rage. “Leave.”

Shinzuru wanted to say something more, wanted to try and reason with the pup, but he knew it was a losing battle. Nodding tightly, he stood and walked quietly, taking extra care with the door, knowing he would destroy it if he wasn't careful. Opening and closing it gently, he began walking, trying to figure out if the boy was just angry at the supposed lie or him.

And the more he walked, the more his thoughts were consumed by the female inu's confession. In the context it didn't make sense. Touga would not have felt the need to explain his sudden cooling towards the female to anyone. Not only that, but anyone that had gone through the process of the bond would have known it was a lie. So why the deception? It didn't make any sense. Despite the ring of truth to the woman's words, he couldn't imagine that they'd been the truth anymore.

Running a hand through his hair, he accepted that the inu was a more accomplished liar than he had thought. Damning himself, he knew he should have expected such from her.

Which only left him with questions again. Did a mating mark manipulate people's feelings? If it did, was it manipulating Kagome and Sesshoumaru? For a moment he wondered if it would be such a bad thing. The two had cared for one another before the mark. Perhaps such a manipulation could help friendship grow to something more. It's effects would eventually fade, as with Touga, but what if before that they-

Immediately he stopped those thoughts, knowing that such would not happen, and should not. Not if the two were to find any real happiness in their lives.

Another question looming before him was the female's deception. He could easily see her lying about the mark, and could understand her reasoning, especially after his own train of thought. But the reason for her dead mate's lie made no sense any longer. That it had to begin with only bothered him more.

Resolving to speak to her again in the morning, he headed for his room in the family wing, hoping to catch his adopted daughter before she went to sleep. Perhaps one of her embraces would ease the strange ache beginning to build in his chest.

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In the dark of the night, he padded silently into her room like a sneak thief. No one stirred, not even the guards at the end of the hall. Feeling the slightest bit guilty, he slid past each door, taking care to close them quietly. Once he had finally reached the inner chamber, he paused, rethinking his decision. When she turned over, as if aware of his presence, he almost bolted then and there.

But she continued sleeping, blissfully unaware of the predator lurking in her room, eyes sharp on her dreaming form. He stepped forward, coming that much closer to his prey. Inhaling deeply, he was surprised by the lack of what he sought. Before her trial, her room had been soaked in the scent of her arousal. Now there was barely a trace of it, and even that was curiously stale.

Reasoning that she was safe so long as the scent stayed a pale shadow of it's former strength, he moved gently to the futon, kneeling near her head. The scent grew barely any stronger, but it mingled with the tang of her dried blood, and he worried for a moment that something had harmed her. With a light touch, he began moving the blanket down from where she had it tuck beneath her chin.
Shocked by the revelation, he dropped the edge, eyes widening as he moved back, careful to stay quiet.

The blood was on the collar of the kimono, and the scents that had been stale and muffled by the blanket had only strengthened with the removal of it, each one as recognizable as the last. Her blood and his scent, pure and undiluted and so impossibly clear mixed with the faint tang of her arousal and his own. Quickly he recognized it for the kimono she had worn the night he had marked her, a seeming lifetime ago.

Why was she wearing it? He glanced back to her face, saw the frown there as if she knew something was wrong. Quickly he checked to make sure his own aura was still concealed properly, and once done, almost sighed in relief. Something sleep addled came past her lips, unintelligible and muffled as she clumsily drew the blanket back up, covering even her nose this time.

Standing fluidly, he began moving away from her, knowing the tightening of his groin did not bode well for either of them. If he stayed, he risked hurting her and dishonoring himself, both of which he would not allow. Moving swiftly, barely conscious of the noise he made, he escaped. Completely forgetting to close either set of doors leading closer to her inner chamber, he closed the door to the corridor behind him and exhaled gustily, leaning back and wanting to groan.

“Neat trick,” A voice commented dryly. Refusing to acknowledge the kitsune, he began to walk towards his rooms when the same voice stopped him.

“You could always try kissing her, see what happens,” Kasai remarked in that same sardonic tone. “She's your mate. And she might surprise even you.”

Sesshoumaru counted to ten, glad the kitsune could not see his face or read his still concealed aura.

“My relationship with her is none of your business,” He finally managed, his voice as calm and cool and collected as he wanted, something he was very proud of in that moment.

“Well, at least you guys have a few centuries to work it out,” Was all the kitsune said, and Sesshoumaru could practically hear him shrugging as he stepped back into the children’s rooms, sliding the door shut behind him. Following his friend's example, he went to his own room, closing the door gently behind him.

Images of the miko, his mate, he thought with a groan that seemed too eager to escape, in that kimono, eyes open and filled with invitation was almost enough to unman him. Hastily he removed his clothing as he walked through each room, not even bothering to close the doors behind him. Grateful for the open windows and the cold seeping in, chilling his too hot skin, he practically fell onto the futon.

Sleep did not come easily, but it did come. With it came dreams of his untouchable mate, suddenly willing and eager for him.

When he woke, he could still feel her touch, her breath against his lips.
The morning sun was too bright for Shinzuru's remaining eye, and he blinked, wondering if perhaps he was getting to an age where he needed to sleep on a nightly basis. His people, the moth youkai, loved the night completely, and in holding with being a strange anomaly for his clan, he loved the day. From the sunrise to the glorious sunsets, he loved every second. The night was just another reminder of a breed that had considered him anathema.

Centuries of sunrises had been his, and he had anticipated each one, wanting to feel the warmth on his tanned skin. This sunrise was met with nothing but anxiety. The bench beneath him was cold stone, and it seemed resistant to soaking up any of his own warmth. It was just as well, he needed to move anyway.

Moving like a ghost past the servants coming and going, he fought against the sudden nausea roiling in his stomach. Lies, so many deceptions hanging in the air like dust motes, seeping into his skin and only serving to further ignite his temper. It had occurred, more than once, that there was no point to his endeavor. The female inu had lied and acted and manipulated with such regularity that he wondered if even she knew her own self and the game she played anymore.

When his shadow fell on her door, he paused. The entrance had become menacing, dark. It promised nothing but bitterness. Shaking his head, he knocked once, knowing even then that she was awake.

"Come," She called out. He blinked stupidly, wondering if he had misheard. Her voice sounded so strained, so weak despite being muffled by the door. Forcing himself to add that to the list of her acting skills, he steeled himself and opened the door, not even looking at her as he stepped in and closed it behind him.

There was nothing said in greeting as he moved to sit across from her at the small table. His naginata sat across his lap, giving him something to hold in his hands as he took in her haggard appearance. The shadows beneath her eyes had darkened into bruises, and her fair skin seemed translucent. Despite his own senses being inferior to hers, he could hear her heartbeat, rapid and irregular.

"What's wrong?" She finally asked, voice even stranger than it had been the day before.

"I should be asking that," He shot out, the words completely different than the ones he had wanted to say. But her visible condition could not be a lie. Something was wrong with the daiyoukai, and no matter her skills at deception, some things could not be faked.

"It is merely a passing illness," She replied, waving his concern away. "Why have you come?"

"It doesn't make sense," He blurted, once again surprised at his choice of words. "The reason for the lie. Everything you said, none of it makes any sense at all."

"If you doubt me, ask others who are mated but not in love. They can tell you if their marks manipulated them," She replied stonily, eyes glued to some spot over his shoulder. Her lips were pulled into a small, tight frown.
"I need to know the truth, Yuugao."

"That is not possible."

"Why not?" He finally snapped, any thought to her condition gone in the wake of his temper. Instead of answering, she merely stared blankly ahead, and he could see the pulse in her throat fluttering wildly, then pausing as if her heart was stuttering.

"Please leave," She whispered, not even acknowledging him as she stood and began stumbling away. Surprised by her strange behavior, he watched her instead of obeying her quiet command. She moved deeper into her room, not even closing the door behind her. She was just out of sight when he heard the strange thump and rustle of silks. His naginata clattering on the floor echoed in the silence as he bolted into her room, propriety forgotten.

She was less than a foot away from a small chest in the corner, a pile of tangled white hair and vivid silks that clashed garishly with her blue veined white skin. He turned her onto her back and pulled back, hissing when the pendant she wore placed a barrier around her. Then the stone in the center of the pendant began to swell and grow, losing any semblance to stone and becoming an inky, smoke like darkness that swept over her form. The room turned cold, numbing his fingers.

He tried touch the barrier, only to be burned when it rejected him. Half of her body was obscured by the mass within the shield. When a surge of his youki did nothing to weaken it, he looked at her face as the shadow cloaked it, hiding the brilliant white of her skin and hair from him. She was completely hidden from him.

"Sesshoumaru!" Shinzuru roared, terror gripping his heart.

The shield shimmered, and suddenly everything was gone, as if it, and the daiyoukai, had never even existed.

"Sesshoumaru!"

Fury washed over Kagome and she jerked awake, feeling as if she were having a seizure. Her heart was hammering furiously in her chest, and she blinked, startled by the intensity of the emotions echoing. Without thinking she knew it was from her bond with Sesshoumaru, but what could cause such rage?

Not even bothering to change, she ran from her rooms, not noting the open doors or even the two kitsune in the corridor as she raced past them. Her bond led her through the shiro, down the stairs and through various hallways. Not pausing for breath once, she was panting by the time she reached Yuugao's rooms.

"What's wrong?" She gasped as she walked in, sides heaving from her run. Shinzuru was staring, wide eyed at a spot on the floor as if it were the gate to hell itself. Sesshoumaru's gaze was cold and impassive. Resshin was looking from Shinzuru to Sesshoumaru, his ever changing eyes cycling through the colors more quickly than she had ever seen.

"Leave," Sesshoumaru commanded in a quiet tone.

"Something's wrong." She insisted.

"It is none of your concern," He began again.

"Wrong!" She shouted, still panicked by the anger and confusion pulsing through their bond.
"Where's Yuugao?" She demanded, her eyes moving to Shinzuru.

"Vanished. She just fell, was barely breathing. And then the necklace," He groaned, leaning against the wall and rubbing his face, as if he still couldn't believe what he had seen.

"That is enough," Sesshoumaru bit out.

"It is not!" Kagome snapped, still on edge from his own chaotic emotions filtering through to her despite the tight control he had over his aura. "You told me that I'm as responsible for the pack as you. She's pack."

"Shinzuru speaks the truth," Resshin said, ending the argument. "I have seen it through his eyes. The Lady Mother vanished."

"It is another trick," Sesshoumaru began.

"Doubtful," Resshin replied, his voice calm despite Sesshoumaru's furious gaze. "There is something not right here. I feel-" He started, but stopped, unable to articulate the feeling itself.

"The stone was probably the meido stone," Sesshoumaru started.

"No," Shinzuru snapped. "I know that necklace, I was with your father when he had it forged and when he gave it to her. This one was different. White, with a black stone in the center."

"It's the one that she used the day I was told about my trial," Kagome answered, remembering the strange necklace vividly. "I always thought it hypnotized me or something, like a focal point for meditation. She never really explained what it was."

Shinzuru made a noise, and everyone's gaze rested on him as he ran his hands through mussed auburn hair.

"She said something the night you finished your trial. She said that since Sesshoumaru interrupted, the lady was angry."

"The lady?" Kagome asked, confused.

"A kami. She said a goddess told her you would be the next, or none at all. And that Sesshoumaru's interference had angered her."

"How did he interfere?" Kagome demanded. "He didn't get there until after I'd buried the rosary!"

"The portal to your time was another test. If you had gone through it, you would have failed. His appearance was viewed as an interference. I don't know any more than that," Shinzuru admitted. Then his good eye widened and for a moment he looked almost relieved.

"Bokusenou said your mother had a story, and that he has respected her privacy. He didn't gainsay anything she said. Maybe he can explain this."

"I will go-" Sesshoumaru started, but was stopped by the sudden fury, as potent as his own, bleeding through the bond he shared with Kagome.

"Oh no, not without me," She snapped. "If I am somehow involved in this, I want to know what's going on and if I can help."

"We do not have the time for this," He ground out through clenched teeth. Her choice of apparel was not lost on him, and for all the world he did not want to see her wearing that kimono and nothing else
in his mother's suite.

"I'm going to go change and we are going to Bokusenou or I can meet you there. Your choice," She hissed as she was turning on her heel, already lunging into a run. When she was gone, the daiyoukai turned to his two friends and felt the slightest bit irked by their hooded expressions.

"She'll need to come with us. If it is linked to her trial, then she may have a part to play," Resshin reasoned.

Sesshoumaru did not want her anywhere near the situation at hand if it turned out to be something besides his mother's penchant for the dramatic. When she had come running into the room, hair messy and wearing that kimono he'd very nearly been undone with want and the need to get her away from the crisis at hand.

"You will not dissuade her. It will be best if we wait for her to change, and then go to Bokusenou," Resshin tried again. "Your mate is as strong willed as you."

"Alert the twins, have your mate and Kagome's guests taken to the children's room. Tenka and Jaken are to go and stand guard as well. And my men at the entry to the family wing are to move to the children's room."

Resshin nodded once, moving so swiftly Sesshoumaru barely even noticed him.

"Something's wrong Sesshoumaru," Shinzuru stated calmly, her earlier terror having faded. Grateful for the return of the warrior he had known all his life, the daiyoukai only nodded, refusing to repeat his suspicions.

"Something was wrong with her before that darkness took her. Like she's been ill."

"What was she trying to do before she fainted?" He asked instead.

"I don't know," The moth demon admitted. "She wasn't moving for the futon. But I'm not sure what she was aiming for."

"It matters not," Sesshoumaru said, already making his way from his mother's suite into the hall. Shinzuru followed him through the hallways and out into the sun. It was still early morning, and the day promised to be a long one.

"I'm here!" Kagome announced. Sesshoumaru turned and saw her dressed in her normal red hakama and white kimono, thankfully not the one she had been wearing earlier. Even as she was running out of the shiro she was pulling on the oversized blue coat he was beginning to find endearing on her. Banishing such thoughts, he shook his head when she began to focus her ki to create her cloud.

"It will be faster if you hold on," He told her. Blue eyes widened, as if completely taken aback by the suggestion, he tried not to feel hurt. Apparently she was afraid of him... But as soon as he thought it, he saw her eyes widen even more and concern echoed through the bond. Damning the mark again, he was still gratified when she darted to his side and wrapped her arms around his waist.

"Like this?" She murmured. Instead of answering, he let his youki wash over them both, and concentrated. He had never tried with a passenger, and for a moment he worried her miko energy might reject his own. But as always, her ki accepted his without protest. And they were off. Anyone outside of the sphere would have only seen the bright globe of light around them and heard the spectacular crackle of energy, like lightning.

They would not have heard the miko complaining of motion sickness.
"How can you do this all the time?" She mumbled, hand going to cover her mouth. He hoped desperately that she wouldn't vomit all over him. The smell would be enough to make his own stomach roil.

"Do not become ill," He commanded, as if the command would somehow make her better.

"It's just going so fast." Came the muffled reply as blue eyes watched the world outside of them blur by.

"Then do not look at it," He rumbled, only to be further surprised when she looked up at his face instead. Her eyes were open and honest and trusting and everything he didn't want them to be right now.

"Sesshoumaru," She started, then stopped, blushing lightly.

"What is it?" He prodded, knowing that time was at a minimum before they landed at Bokusenou's roots.

"It's not the right time," she finished, eyes dropping to his chest. He cursed her strange habit of beginning and never ending something. Usually it turned out to be important to her, and -in a startling moment of clarity- he realized that it meant it was important to him too.

"We will finish this discussion later," He intoned just as they landed in the wood, feet barely whispering over the dry, brown leaves beneath their feet.

"And what has brought the children to my forest today?" Bokusenou asked. When Resshin and Shinzuru landed seconds later, their faces set in grim lines, the tree's expression grew pensive.

"Bokusenou," Shinzuru began, then paused, realizing his lord would want to speak first. Instead, Kagome turned to him and gestured for him to keep talking. When his gaze moved to the daiyoukai, Sesshoumaru only inclined his head slightly in affirmation.

"The other day, when Yuugao and I spoke here, you didn't refute anything she said," Shinzuru began.

"Of which topic are we speaking?" The tree youkai asked, eying the older demon thoughtfully.

"About all of it, in a way," Shinzuru sighed, moving to seat himself. Old demon that he was, he knew when a long talk was coming, and it was with a sense of relief that he watched the others follow his example.

"First, I need you to answer the question that has been bothering me for some time," Shinzuru began, unsure if he could ask when the subjects of that question were present. Wondering if he was signing his own death warrant, he forged ahead. "Can a mating mark manipulate someone's emotions?"

Sesshoumaru stiffened, and Kagome looked at her mate with worried eyes as anger and anxiety began seeping through the bond, jabbing at her own awareness. Not caring why he was angry, she slipped her hand into his own, giving him no choice but to lace his fingers with hers.

"That is hardly relevant," The daiyoukai began.

"I think it is," Shinzuru snapped.

"Children, stop," Bokusenou rumbled, his old voice beginning to deepen. When the moth demon and the inu daiyoukai ceased whatever it was they were going to say, Bokusenou contented himself,
knowing they would stop their staring contest the moment he began to speak.

"The mating mark cannot manipulate it's bearers emotions. It is merely a bond. If it is a strong bond, there will be times when one or the other will know of their mate's emotions, especially in a time of duress or crisis. Does that answer your question?" He chuckled, amused at the sight of the two youkai now watching him. Resshin looked satisfied, although the tree knew why. Kagome, for her part, looked confused, as if she wasn't sure what was going on.

"You said 'know of'. What do you mean?"

Kagome's blue eyes swung to the daiyoukai, stunned that he had latched onto the current conversation instead of his mother.

"Precisely that. I think perhaps, it was the primary reason such bonds were forged. Mothers that are nesting or nursing cannot leave their own, and would need to signal in case of attack. The mark was simply a way of alerting their mate that she and her cubs were in danger." Bokusenou deliberately danced around the issue he knew was clouding the daiyoukai's mind, hoping the pup would catch on. It was amusing to see that daiyoukai at a loss, to say the least. Especially over something so simple.

"So it does not impose one's feelings onto their mate?" He finally asked.

Kagome was staring up at him as if he'd lost his mind. He was stalwartly refusing to look at her.

"No, it does not," Bokusenou finally answered.

Sesshoumaru continued not looking at Kagome in such a way that everyone knew he wanted to.

"Sesshoumaru," She started again. He wouldn't look at her, but in the sudden silence in the clearing, she knew he would have no choice but to hear. "That talk we're going to have? You're going to explain to me exactly why you thought I was forcing emotions on you."

It was with a will of steel itself that he did not look at her and inform her that it was the other way around. And he would be damned if he admitted that he thought her arousal had merely been an echo of his own. Ignoring the hurt flickering through their bond, he stared ahead, determined to give nothing away, even through their bond.

"Shall we get back to the task at hand?" Resshin finally cut in, looking too satisfied by half, his shifting eyes hooded and a small smirk playing on his lips.

"Indeed we should. Now Shinzuru, the rest?" Bokusenou prompted.

"When Yuugao said the lady was angry, do you know the truth of that?"

If Bokusenou could have shifted and settled, he would have. As it was, he didn't, settling instead for a gusty sigh.

"That is a story even I do not know the whole of," The tree admitted. "It started long before I was a seed. Izanami's anger has been simmering as long as I have been alive. Her anger at Kagome is something I cannot confirm or deny."

Kagome started, terror gripping her heart. Izanami was the one that had been commanding Yuugao? Izanami, the creator goddess? Small wonder the youkai had been unable to refuse her. Kagome imagined that the will of that particular goddess was a be all end all, and the consequences wouldn't just be dire, but catastrophic if it was ignored.
"She wore a necklace bearing a white pendant with a black stone in the center. This morning, she fainted, and the stone, it grew and covered her in darkness. Then she and the necklace vanished."

"She fainted?" Bokusenou asked, worry evident. Shinzuru nodded thoughtfully.

"She looked ready to fall over the whole time I was talking to her. She's been getting worse the last couple of days," The auburn haired youkai added.

"Recently I felt something, although what I cannot say. But the black stone in the necklace is the bone from the tip of Izanami's finger. The story I was told is that when she was trying to follow her husband back into the world of the living, he pushed a boulder into the mouth of the cave, blocking her escape. But the tip of her finger had gotten caught just outside. He cut it off, and presented it to the first head of the Moon House."

"But Yuugao has to listen to Izanami?" Kagome asked, confused.

"Yuugao is a powerful female, perhaps one of the most powerful I have ever known. But Izanami is a goddess. One does not ignore a command, or a warning, from such a being," Bokusenou reasoned. "I know little of the House of the Moon, merely that it is a coveted title. It has always been one of those at it's head that hold it's secrets, and those secrets are passed on to the new head once they take their place."

"Great," Kagome grumbled, feeling even more lost than when she had arrived.

"So this necklace, any idea where it would have taken her?" Shinzuru asked tentatively, as if afraid of the answer.

If trees could shrug, Bokusenou would have been doing it. It was times like these that he wished he had a somewhat human form.

"It could have taken her to Izanami, or it could have been some other god using the bone to their own ends."

"So what now?" Kagome asked, looking at the others. "If she's with Izanami, we have to go get her."

"Incorrect," Sesshoumaru started, standing fluidly. "You will stay with the children-"

"Like hell!" She shouted as she stood. A finger jammed into his chest, enough reijki behind it to make her point clear. "I know that look on your face. You're about to do something appallingly stupid. Well, you're not going without me," She snapped, her foot coming down hard on the ground to emphasize her point.

The tension was cut by the old, rumbling laughter of the koboku no kai. The miko and daiyoukai turned angry eyes on the tree and he stopped, although his bark was twisted into a smirk. Kagome turned back to the daiyoukai and was about to speak when Sesshoumaru cut the tirade off.

"I will have to go through Gozu and Mezu's gate. There is only one way they will allow you to pass."

Anything she could have said was cut off by that quiet declaration, and he could feel her frustration breaking against him like a tidal wave, and the fear beneath it.

"What about the shard of Hosenki's armor, the one you used to get to your father's grave last time?" She tried, eyes tearing.
"I only had the one, it was caught in my clothing during the battle. And it could only be used once."

He could see her, feel her giving up, and he felt himself mentally flinch, knowing he was the cause. But nothing could be done. He was the only one that could use that gate without meeting the normal criteria. And no one was worth her death.

"Come, we should get back to the shiro. The little ones will be frightened, no doubt. They'll want to see you off before you go," Shinzuru added.

When Kagome formed her cloud with it's signature pop, he tried not to feel hurt by her sudden distance. It was as irrational and illogical as she was behaving, and he would not give in to her antics. Instead, he focused on the information the tree had given him. Not the news about his mother, that was something still too vague to think overmuch on. Making assumptions would do him little good. But the information regarding his bond was almost too much to contemplate on it's own.

A million reasons why it could not be true sprang to mind immediately, his own cynicism reminding him that hoping could be as foolish as wanting her in the first place. Yet, there was little reason for the tree youkai to lie. What to believe?

He could always ask another, mated youkai what was true. As soon as the thought entered his mind, he struck it down. The personal nature of the question notwithstanding, he refused to admit such ignorance to another. And none were mated to a miko. Her own ki might very well have changed the nature of the bond itself.

Shaking his head to clear it of such thoughts, he focused on the task at hand. The group was nearing the shiro, and the miko seemed to be making herself smaller and smaller the closer they were. When they landed in the inner gardens, he was displeased to note that she said nothing, merely walked ahead of the males with light, hurried steps.

"Sesshoumaru," Resshin began.

"She cannot go. Do not think to sway me," Sesshoumaru started.

"It's not that," Resshin sighed, a wealth of feeling held within the sound. The daiyoukai turned to his friend, curious what the normally silent youkai would want to say in the face of this new dilemma.

"She thinks you don't trust her," Resshin informed him. "When you asked about forcing feelings on another through the bond-"

He refused, absolutely refused to admit he thought he was forcing his own lust on her, even though Resshin could see it as clear as day. There was a line that the forest youkai had drawn out of respect for his lord and friend, and Sesshoumaru knew he would never cross it.

"You should tell her."

"It is none of your concern," Sesshoumaru bit out, already wanting to focus on finding his wayward mother. The search would be a hundred times less complicated and frustrating than the conversation his friend was trying to force on him.

"Sesshoumaru, I won't break with my ethics, would that I could in this instance. But it is as a friend that I ask you to tell her."

Ignoring the demon's words, he began stalking into the shiro, leaving the other two behind. The halls were quiet and seemed to echo strangely. The servants, understanding the level of alert, were not in evidence, all of them within their own quarters. He could feel their whispers and the scent of their
fear made him want to destroy something as he navigated the halls and corridors.

 Barely paying heed to the stairs, he took several at a time, suddenly eager to assure his pack that everything was fine. With an approving glance, he was passing the two silent guards, feeling their own youki probing him, searching for the tell tale signs of an illusion. The door opened in front of him and Rin came flying out, eyes wide with fear. She clung to his legs, burying her face in his hakama as the scent of her fear and everyone else's fear filled the room.

 The instincts within him snarled at the distress emanating from his pack. His mate was not in sight, as he had expected, making him even angrier. These were her children, their children, and she wasn't there, where she should be!

 "Did your visit to Bokusenou yield answers?" Kasai asked in a quiet, respectful voice.

 "Few that were relevant to my mother's disappearance. I must travel to Gozu and Mezu's gates."

 "I know you've managed it before, but are you sure-" Mizu began, then stopped, realizing what he was going to say in front of the children.

 "As long as I carry Tenseiga, I will be allowed to pass unharmed," Sesshoumaru informed them. The children were all watching him with tearful expressions, and despite his growing fury that their adopted mother had still not made an appearance, he leashed it and knelt.

 "I will be back soon," He assured as they came hesitantly, moving closer to him. Rin had no such reservations, and threw her arms around his neck. Her body trembled and he could smell the bite of salt on the air.

 "Is momma going with you?" Shippou finally asked. Sesshoumaru shook his head.

 "She is not able to enter those gates," He answered, knowing the kit would understand. More and more children were moving to hug him, and his heart stumbled in his chest with the realization that they saw him as something more than just alpha.

 The happy moment was interrupted by a scream and the sound of shattering glass. Terror shot through the bond, echoing shrilly through his being. He was darting from the children and towards his mate's room when something stopped him, making him stagger.

 There was nothing. Absolutely nothing coming through the mark. The feel of her was gone.

 Moving quickly, Sesshoumaru didn't even bother with opening the doors to her room, instead cutting through them neatly before he reached each one. He felt the others at his back, knew they were surveying the wreckage just as he was. But their fear and anger could not equal his own. They did not know, did not feel the sudden absence of her energy within him.

 Searching the air for scents, he snarled angrily when two spirits emerged from a particularly large chunk of the mirror.

 "Where is she?" He snapped.

 "Yomotsu-shikome," One of the spirits answered, her long dark hair still moving strangely despite the lack of wind. When he saw the ends tipped in barbs, he knew who she was, but not why she was in his mate's rooms.

 "Why should I believe you?" He snarled, pulling Tenseiga from it's sheath.
"We are your mother's creatures," The pale spirit next to Harionago snapped. "It is by her will alone that we have been allowed to stay on this plain."

"Enough," Harionago snarled, her hair dancing in jerky, angry movements, as if to reflect her mood. "Yuugao is with Izanami, and the miko as well. We must go find them."

"Is there a faster way than Gozu and Mezu's gate?" A voice behind Sesshoumaru demanded. He recognized the slayer's angry tone and was about to tell her to go back to the nursery when Harionago's voice stopped him.

"For one that is alive? No. It is the simplest entrance. Tenseiga will guard the boy."

He did not appreciate being called boy by anyone, even a spirit almost as old as his mother. The situation however, kept him from commanding the spirit otherwise.

"If he had just pupped her this would not be an issue," The other spirit, still unnamed, snapped impatiently. The snarl that erupted from his throat surprised everyone in the room, including him. The pale spirit was looking down the length of her nose at Tenseiga, which hovered, poised and ready to pierce her head.

"Well, it's true," She accused. "Your mother did everything in her power to see the miko safe, and your own stupidity undid all of it. Now she and the miko both pay the price. Or maybe you're glad. After all, it's no secret you despise your mother, and you never even consummated your mark. Have you even noticed it's absence?"

"You will not speak to this Sesshoumaru in such a manner," He growled, wanting to plunge Tenseiga through her. She was his mother's creature, and he was still unsure of he trusted her words in the least. But the disappearance of his mating mark was enough to prove that something more than a mere spirit was at work. And his mother, for all of her power, could not undo such a bond.

"Enough, the both of you. Sesshoumaru, myself and the Yuki-onna will accompany you. As the dead, we will be able to pass through the gates. We must hurry. I do not know why Izanami wanted the girl so badly, or why she took your mother, but I am sworn to Yuugao, and it was her order that we protect miko."

"You failed," Sesshoumaru snapped. "Why should I allow you to follow?"

"Because we would rectify our mistake. If you would have us stay away, you will have to cut us down."

The spirit's simple words were enough to decide him. He might need their aid in the underworld, and he was not one to throw aside tools so carelessly.

"Shinzuru," Sesshoumaru barked.

"Yes?"

"Keep my pack safe. I will bring back my mate," He replied, already gathering his youki to prepare for the long flight to the volcano where the cave hid the gate.

"There is one thing that I would suggest we do," Harionago cut in. "There is someone that would aid our cause," She offered.

"I have neither the time nor the inclination," Sesshoumaru stated coldly, impatient with the delays and wishing he could cut the spirit down and be rid of her presence.
"Shoki is not far, I feel him near. He will not give aid to me. Normally he would not help any youkai, but for the miko, he might consider it," She admitted, worrying her lower lip. How strange, he had always thought spirits left behind such habits once their bodies died. Apparently he had been incorrect.

"Why should I seek his aid?" He demanded, the very idea if asking for the help of the spirit appalling. Few knew of the supposed king of demons, but his mother had once angered the spirit, and the castle in the sky had suffered his attacks. He had only been a pup then, and a young one at that, but he could not forget the spirit.

"He is one of the strongest of our kind. He will choose to help the miko. Especially since Izanami has destroyed your bond."

"It matters not. She is still this Sesshoumaru's mate," He growled, angry that spirit spoke so easily of his mating's sudden dissolution. Harionago said nothing, and her expression only faded into apathy.

"He would see her brought back. Come, I will guide you," She answered instead.

The energy he had been gathering around him condensed and grew into a shield. He was surprised by the feel of the spirit tugging at him, her energy somehow interlacing with his own enough to direct him. The world flew by and he cared nothing for it, reminded only of how he had held his mate only an hour before.

The dissolution of his bond with her left an echoing void where the spark of her ki, gently cradled in his own, had once been. The loss ground against already raw emotions, and he tried to shut the feelings out, knowing they would do little good. Yet images continued to assault him, mixed with phantom scents and textures. Each one scraped against the chains on his instincts, and it was with an iron will that he kept them bound.

"We are close," A voice whispered in his mind, making him snarl at the intrusion. It withdrew as quickly as it had come, and he readied himself for a fight.

Kagome blinked blearily, groaning as she did so. Her head felt as if it had been opened and her brain taken out, only to be replaced with wads of wool or cotton. Her throat hurt, and her hands went to it, moving over it gingerly. Moving them down to the hard stone she lay on, she realized that it felt like some sort of rough stone altar.

"So you are awake," Someone observed, startling her. "The hag will pay dearly for marring your flesh."

Kagome turned, eyes widening as she took in the sight of the woman, for her voice was that of a woman, sitting on a throne across from her. But it didn't look like a woman, by all rights, the thing shouldn't even be able to speak.

The skeleton would have been a morbid, but striking statue sitting on the throne. As if made from onyx, they seemed to absorb the light around them, reflecting nothing. However, the effect was ruined by the bits of flesh still clinging to it, and the long stringy hair clinging to the skull in ragged tufts. A dark, swollen tongue peeked from beneath yellowed, twisted teeth. One sightless eye, black and shining like a jewel, reflected light back at Kagome, and she felt sick as her eyes traveled lower of their own volition. A decaying breast clung to the chest, and behind the ribs a heart hung, a shriveled looking thing like a blackened, dehydrated fruit.

She could not bring herself to look any lower.
"How rude," It observed. "But humans always are. It is of little consequence. Soon I will be free of this body."

"Who are you?" Kagome demanded, voice rasping from the abuse her throat had suffered when the thing -hag, she corrected herself- had erupted from the mirror and taken hold of her.

"You don't know?" The skeleton asked, eye twinkling maliciously. Kagome was grateful the thing had no lips to smile with, else she was sure she would go crazy. "Such an ignorant little miko, not recognizing your creator."

Confused, she tried to focus on the strange riddle instead of the rotting flesh smell emanating from the animated corpse.

"I created your home, the islands you call Japan, with my husband."

Fear collided with disbelief, both tangling and fighting for dominance.

"You can't be-" She started, trying to quash her fear. Surely this was an illusion, or the trick of a youkai. Surely a goddess could not, would not look like this rotted, disgusting shell.

"I am, little miko. And I excuse your thoughts only because they are true. It is a disgusting body, isn't it?" The kami asked. For a moment, Kagome was positive the kami was joking, but the seriousness of her tone killed any thought of that.

"Izanami, why am I here?" Kagome whispered.

"Because you were an opportunity too unique to ignore," Izanami answered blithely, standing and walking closer to her. Kagome felt bile rising in her throat as she watched the skeleton coming closer and closer. Horror froze the scream in her throat, and she waited helplessly, unable to move or speak. The kami stopped a foot away from the altar, that single, awful eye too eager for the miko's liking.

"I don't understand," She finally choked out, praying she wouldn't vomit.

"My husband locked me in this world, disgusted by my appearance. I had almost made it. If I had escaped, I would have become beautiful again, I would have lived again. But he could not bear my presence, even though he claimed to love me," The kami spat venomously, her volume increasing with each word.

"I was almost out. But he threw that stone over the entrance. My finger was caught, and he cut the tip off," She explained, voice dripping malice as a hand came up to prove her point. The middle finger, such as it was, was missing the bone from the tip of it, making it almost even with her index finger.

"Do you know what it is like to be left by the one you love?" Izanami demanded. "To be rejected when you are so close to happiness and freedom?"

The question would have raised several unpleasant memories in Kagome's mind had it not been for the overpowering image of the goddess in front of her. As it was, she had trouble thinking at all, and she was far more concerned with the kami's story and how it related to her.

"But why am I here?" Kagome asked, knowing she was pushing her luck. But the kami seemed talkative, as if glad for the audience.

"The House of the Moon was a title created by my husband. A foolish attempt to keep that one little bone safe. He gave it to the strongest youkai he could find and gave them the honor and the castle in
"Just for a bone?" Kagome asked, gaping. What harm could a bone do?

"Oh, plenty of harm, little miko. It could have been my foothold into the world had it fallen into the hands of a human, or one of the other kami could have used it to summon me back. Not to mention the power inherent in the bone of a goddess, especially the one that gave birth to your nation. My husband wanted to make sure nothing could happen."

"But I thought the House-"

"You of all people should know how easily people forget the truth. Five hundred years from now, humans will have forgotten the existence of youkai. It has been millenea since my entombment. Do you not think the youkai guarding that little piece of bone have forgotten? The powers over spirits because of the bone became the reason, and soon an enterprising little youkai decided to use those powers for the betterment of the land. By the time the inu took the title, everyone had forgotten the true purpose behind it," Izanami gloated.

Kagome however, was still lost. What did this have to do with her? Everything that came to mind was so wildly unimaginable and nonsensical that she couldn't begin to believe them.

"The inu, a troublesome clan. Yuugao's compassion and her mate's sword are enough to drive anyone mad, and while Yuugao may be excused, the foolish one that made the Tenseiga may not. None may wield the power to cheat death in such a manner, it is an affront to the natural order. Once he died, I had thought the matter settled. After all, his son was not inclined to use the sword. But then he used it. Again and again. And you-" The goddess bit out, the single dark eye swinging back to her hatefully.

"When you destroyed the jewel, it was more than enough to warrant punishment."

"What?" Kagome snapped hotly. "I was just doing the right thing!"

"That jewel was one of my creations."

"Yours?" Kagome shouted, suddenly angry. "You mean you allowed it to be made? Do you even understand what you did, the suffering you inflicted?"

"That was the point," The kami muttered disdainfully. Kagome was sure if Izanami still had a nose, she would be looking down it at her.

"That was the- You evil bitch!" She snarled, any thoughts of politeness lost to the ire growing and spreading through her. "You mean you intended for it to cause so much pain?"

"It is what the children of my husband deserve!" Fury suddenly swelled in the room, a palpable feeling that stabbed at Kagome's senses, forcing a headache to blossom. "He loves all of you so much, even though you wither and rot. I have aided certain events so that such objects could be created. The jewel was one of the best, and you destroyed it," The goddess accused.

"You're a monster!" Kagome flung at the other woman, completely forgetting that she was talking to a goddess, one of the creator kami. Even the sight of her no longer bothered the miko. But that seething hatred roiling in the black eye that glared hatefully at her, something that should have burned her, scared her, only served the further excite her temper.

"If I am a monster, it is because my husband has left me here to become one," Izanami bit out. "Soon it will not matter. The inu clan will pay for it's transgressions against me, and you will pay for your
insolence." The very thought seemed to calm the rotting goddess, because her tone evened out and sounded almost pleasant.

"I want to go home," Kagome snapped, the fear she had suppressed beginning to grow again at the goddess's sudden change of mood.

"Petulant child. You will never leave."

Kagome tried to jump off of the altar, but was stopped by hands holding her wrists and ankles down. She could see vague outlines of the hands themselves, and only shadows of the people they belonged to.

"Try not to bruise her this time," Izanami commanded airily. "I don't want my new body any more bruised than it already is," She added as she began walking away, completely ignoring Kagome's outraged cries for an explanation.

Sesshoumaru eyed the deformed spirit in front of him with distaste. Not for the obvious flaws in his form, but because the spirit was glaring at him and Harionago with just as much loathing. As solid as the female spirit beside him, Sesshoumaru would have mistaken him for a man had it not been for the strange aura surrounding him.

"What are you doing here?" Shoki demanded.

"We have come to ask for aid," Harionago began when she saw that Sesshoumaru would say nothing. But the sudden, belly shaking laughter of the spirit stopped her. He continued on in that manner for several minutes before quieting down and wiping his eyes.

"Me? Help the get of the bitch you serve? Oh, you should have known better than to come seeking my aid," He chuckled, ignoring the displeased flare of youki coming from the daiyoukai.

"It is for a miko. The priestess that destroyed the shikon no tama. She was taken to hell. Alive," Harionago added. That stopped the spirit, and Sesshoumaru felt as much as saw the dark eyes of the self proclaimed oni king swing to him, searching.

"There have been rumors that one of the eight hags escaped and headed for the west," He observed carefully.

"It took my mate," Sesshoumaru replied evenly, staring the spirit in the eyes. Shoki did not respond, merely gazed evenly back, as if searching Sesshoumaru for an answer. When it seemed he had found something, he nodded once and finally blinked.

"We best be going then," He finally replied. "Although I'm not going to forget your mother's offense," He added as he stood and brushed his pants off as any living man would do.

Sesshoumaru almost asked, but refrained. He was still unsure how the spirit could help.

"The yukki-onna is gathering the others. We will meet them at Gozu and Mezu's gate."

"Any idea why the miko was taken?" Shoki asked as Sesshoumaru began gathering his energy to prepare once more for flight.

"Izanami wants her," Harionago answered evenly. When Sesshoumaru heard sudden, violent cursing he stopped his efforts to look back at the oni king.
"Do you know why?" He asked evenly.

"Did the girl use the bone to access the border?" Shoki demanded angrily, his eyes still on Harionago, ignoring Sesshoumaru completely.

"Yes, but why-" She began, but was stopped by more cursing.

"We've got to hurry. You best be prepared for a fight pup." Shoki snapped, not deigning to answer as he began to shimmer and condense like a thick fog wrapped around a ball of blue fire. Sesshoumaru said nothing, although he wanted to demand an answer. He could not cut the spirit down before he had such, although worry began to mingle with the anger of his mate's kidnapping at Shoki's violent reaction.

Letting his youki surround him, he set off in the direction of the gates, forcing himself to ignore the sudden uneasy feeling coalescing into a leaden brick in his stomach. The loss of the bond hit him again as he wondered if his mate was okay, and what she was doing.
Let Me Steal This Moment From You Now

Running Up That Hill
By: The Hatter Theory
Chapter 39: Let Me Steal This Moment From You Now

Disclaimer: I don't own the rights to Inu Yasha or to anything by Placebo or Kate Bush.

AN: This is a complete, uncensored chapter. That being said, there's a great deal of unpleasantness in it. I'm sorry.

The hands holding her down didn't loosen, but Kagome was grateful that they didn't force her to lay down, and seemed alright with moving with her. She supposed it had something to do with Izanami's strange declaration, one that she didn't want to think about, but couldn't ignore.

'My new body,' The kami had said. What could she mean, and why would she want a human body? The most obvious solution was that Izanami wanted her body for herself. However, it was the least likeable idea of of a plethora of unpleasant answers she had come up with, including being sacrificed, eaten, or worse.

All thought skittered to a halt when Izanami came walking back into the cave-like throne room, the permanent skeletal grin even more macabre for her gait. Despite being mostly skeleton, she was skipping, there was no other word for it. Kagome shuddered, feeling as if she'd been pulled into a horror film.

"Let me go!" She shouted as the kami took her seat on the dark, stone altar.

"No," Izanami replied sweetly, her swollen, purple tongue poking out briefly, sweeping the line of her teeth as if she had been licking her lips. "It's strange. I went to go find that mutt, and he wasn't to be found. I guess we'll just have to settle for the bitch," She added airily.

Before Kagome could shout again, Yuugao was led in by two twisted parodies of human beings. Dimly the miko recognized them as women, but only because of breasts that sagged down like empty sacks over their protruding stomachs. Both were hunched over as if they carried the world on their backs, and impossibly thin legs supported them. Equally twig like arms held chains that hung over their shoulders and led up to a collar around the inu daiyoukai's neck.

Sesshoumaru's mother looked as if she were wasting away. Soft, pale skin had become translucent and clung to bone, giving her a sharp, angled appearance grimy with dirt. Once soft cheeks were hollow, and white hair was dirty and gnarled, stained with blood and filled with bits of debris. The collar on her neck looked heavy enough to break it. Her luxurious silks had been replaced with something that looked like rough linen, baring scarred, thin arms littered with gashes as if she'd been cut repeatedly.

But her gold eyes glittered dangerously, vivid and alive and angry.

"This is your fault, you know," Izanami started conversationally, looking at Kagome. "I liked you at first. Shattering the jewel made it so much more effective. So many died, and I know my husband's heart bled for each life destroyed or lost. And then you joined the daiyoukai." Her words were an
accusation, as if Kagome had somehow betrayed her personally.

"When you completed the jewel and gained his protection, I knew it would be impossible to stop it's destruction. But you were powerful, and the jewel lost it's importance. I made sure the bitch knew that if you were not the next head, I would destroy her line and the house of the moon would fall."

"Why? Why drag everyone else into this?" Kagome demanded angrily, looking back to the inu and growing more incensed when she was only reminded of the kami's cruelty.

"I needed a foothold in you. Yuugao didn't know it then, but by using the bone to access the border of the spirit world, you opened up a pathway into yourself, a way in for me. Once I had that, bringing you here alive was possible. Otherwise, I wouldn't have gotten you until you died, and then you'd be useless to me. There must be a balance, even in hell. If I could not find a soul to inhabit my body it would be useless."

"Why do you need me?" Kagome demanded, still too angry to remember being afraid.

"It is your power that makes you the perfect host for me. Your reiki has made your body strong enough to withstand transferring my soul into it, and you're lucky enough that it will make it easier for you to inhabit mine."

"I will not allow such a thing," Yuugao bit out, voice cold and commanding despite her haggard appearance.

Instead of angering the goddess, the inu's words only seemed to further lighten her mood. Kagome cringed when energy started to dance up the chains and into the collar around Yuugao's neck. The youkai fell to her knees, teeth clamped tightly together as the energy assaulted her. The miko could tell her mate's mother was in pain despite her refusal to do anything but glare hatefully at the monstrous goddess.

The energy stopped, and the two hags yanked on the heavy chains, prompting Yuugao to stand. Kagome could see the female's knees shaking as she pulled herself to her feet, but her shoulders were straight and thrown back, and her chin was held high in the air.

"Don't worry, we have time before the ritual can be carried out. I'll break you before then," Izanami assured the inu. "And I promise, you'll return to your precious son and the one you love. I'll send you back so broken and twisted that they'll be forced to carry you everywhere."

"My son would kill me first, at my request," Yuugao snapped.

"All the better," Izanami crowed, her mouth opening wide enough for Kagome to see the back of the purple black thing her tongue was. The priestess was disturbed to see that it was connected to nothing.

"Why now?" Kagome finally demanded. "Why not after I used the bone?"

Izanami seemed amused by her question.

"I figured I would play by the rules Yuugao's ancestors had put into place. Then there would be no questions, no mess. I didn't expect you to pass the first trial. Compassion and self blame are your besetting sins. But you passed. Then I created the illusion of your portal. It wasn't real," She assured. "Not after I took such great pains to destroy it. But-"

"You made the well vanish?" Kagome interrupted shrilly. "Why-"
"I didn't want you to escape. If you had gone back to your time, I never would have had a chance to get my foothold in you. And I have wanted to be free of this prison for a long time."

"Why don't you just walk out?" The miko countered, but was shocked by Yuugao's bitter, barking laughter.

"Gozu and Mezu aren't just there to keep others out," She declared maliciously, gold eyes glittering hatefully. "They are there to keep everyone, but especially her, in."

"Enough!" Izanami shouted, and lightning danced up the chains and pulsed unmercifully, sending Yuugao to her knees once again. Unlike last time, the power didn't stop, instead it appeared to increase until the chains and the collar was engulfed in light. Yuugao tensed, back arching and muscles spasming so violently Kagome was afraid she would break in half.

"Stop!" She shrieked. "Just leave her alone!" Tears pricked her eyes as she watched the scene, wanting but unable to look away. Yuugao's eyes closed, but her teeth remained clenched together as she endured.

When the goddess finally ceased the flow of power, Yuugao slumped forward, barely staying upright. She did not move to her feet again. The miko could see her muscles still twitching beneath the skin and small shudders ran down the inu's body.

"Mortal beings are too stupid by half. She even thought she could hold off one of my creatures, foolish bitch," Izanami scoffed as she leaned back into her stone throne. Kagome tried to fight back panic as she took in the sight of the kami. Would that be her? Would she be stuck in that decomposed shell, unable to escape?

"Oh yes, you will be stuck here," Izanami sneered, once again so cheery it bordered on psychopathic. "And after taking your body, I can get back out there."

"It's just a human body," Kagome tried to reason, but was interrupted by the strange sight of Izanami waving her skeletal hand.

"It is not so difficult to transform the flesh and make it eternal."

"Please let us go," She tried again.

"Never."

When they landed, Sesshoumaru was surprised to see several other spirits waiting, including the yukki-onna. He had wondered at her absence, but not so now. He recognized her, but the others were unknown to him.

"We have come to aid our Mistress and the miko," A smoky voice whispered, and Sesshoumaru was surprised to smell woodsmoke. The owner of the voice and scent was a beautiful, dark complexioned woman with long dark hair, wearing a kimono that was caught between red and orange.

"You took in our children and became their true father. We will do what we must," One of the other 'women' said. She and another stood apart from the rest, and Sesshoumaru was surprised at their rather plain appearance. He realized then that they were ubume, and was grateful that they had
decided to help, knowing most human mothers would be appalled that their children were being taken care of by a youkai.

"You took in human children?" Shoki asked, surprised.

"Hnn."

"You're not raising them to eat, are you?"

The look he shot the spirit would have killed a living man. Shoki however, only chuckled darkly.

"Oi, you up there. Wake up. We want in!" The oni king shouted up at the two stone sentinels. For a moment, Sesshoumaru feared nothing would happen, and he would have to force their attentions. But then stone warmed and became soft, and they inhaled deeply.

"The bearer of the Tenseiga has come back," One observed dispassionately.

"And he has brought those who do not belong with the living," The other observed.

"Oi, we come of our own free will," Shoki shouted indignantly. The sentinels both blinked slowly, as if the action was as strange as the spirit's confession. "Just open the damn gate!"

The chains fell from the doors, and Sesshoumaru watched as they opened, light spilling forth. He began walking steadily forward, only to stop when he realized the other spirits were hesitating.

"Will you stay here?" He demanded sharply.

"No," Harionago replied, shaking her head and visibly steeling herself as she began to walk towards the light.

"You are afraid," He observed.

"I am an onryo. I escaped once, I have no wish to go back. I doubt I will make it out again."

"The others?" He questioned.

"All know the risk. Once we enter, the chance of leaving is slim, if it exists at all," She answered evenly as the others began to follow. He nodded in response, a silent acknowledgment of the sacrifice they were going to make.

Once inside, the light dimmed, and the barren landscape of the netherworld greeted them. The doors slammed shut and faded as if they had never existed at all. His notice however, was taken completely by the figure standing before him.

The thick mass of unruly white hair spilled down the spirit's shoulders and obscured most of a white mask. Sesshoumaru could discern the cut outs for eyes and saw that a dark fabric obscured the spirit's eyes from view. To add to the eeriness of the specter's visage, there was no nose or mouth, only a smooth white surface marked by blue lines that swirled around the eyes and down the length of the mask, marking it as a woman's mask, although the wearer was undoubtedly male. The crescent moon, blood red in color, marked the same spot where Sesshoumaru's lay, although it faced the opposite direction. The mass of hair continued down, contrasting with the simple white hakama and kimono. Only a blue sash broke the monotony.

None of these were enough to hold the daiyoukai's attention, which was fixed solely on the sword hanging off of the spirit's hip carelessly.
"Sou'unga," Sesshoumaru murmured, remembering the battle to seal it in Hell. How had it made it from Yomi to the borderlands?

"Follow me," The man behind the mask commanded, turning on his heel and beginning to stride away from the group.

"Now wait just a minute!" Shoki shouted angrily. "What makes you think we trust you?"

The specter turned, and Sesshoumaru was struck by the stranger's posture, half remembered and vague, but commanding nonetheless.

"It is your choice. I can guide you to the priestess and daiyoukai."

With that, he began moving again, not turning to look back. The spirits looked to Sesshoumaru, who nodded once and began following. His eyes locked onto Sou'unga once again, and he tried to discern the identity of the sword's new master.

"Focus on the task at hand," The voice rumbled from behind the mask, not even turning back to look at Sesshoumaru, although he knew the comment was directed at him.

"Why have you not tried to escape? Surely with Sou'unga, you could be free of this place," Harionago stated, her eyes also on the sword.

"I have no wish to wander the earth. I am waiting."

"For what?" One of the ubume asked, eyes wide.

But the spirit was disinclined to answer, ignoring the question completely as he launched himself into the sky. Not bothering to see if the others would follow, Sesshoumaru felt his muscles tense as he readied to make the leap into the air.

"You sure we can trust him? I mean, he could be one of Izanami's creatures," Shoki observed.

Sesshoumaru answered by forcing himself into the air, following close behind the strange ghost.

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The kami had left the throne room, leaving Kagome and the still kneeling Yuugao alone with the hags holding them prisoner.

"Sesshoumaru will come for us," Kagome whispered, trying to gather her courage. Her powers had failed her, her attempts only making the hands on her wrists and ankles tighten like steel bands.

"Your mating mark has been removed. He will not be able to find us," Yuugao stated simply. "It is better that we figure our own way out."

The news startled Kagome, who jerked as if she had been slapped. Desperately she searched for that spark of Sesshoumaru that she had taken in on the night of their mating. Instead of that warmth, she found only an empty space, echoing in it's loneliness.

"How can she do this?" Kagome whimpered, suddenly understanding that strange, hollow feeling she had mistaken for fear. Her heart skipped a beat when she realized that her bond was broken, and if, no when, she corrected herself, they escaped or were rescued, there would be a reckoning before
he gave her the mark again, if he even would. And judging from his earlier comments about emotions being forced on him, she was sure he wouldn't want to.

"She has been trapped here for longer than either of us can guess, and has gone mad," The daiyoukai bit out, bringing her out of her reverie. "Else she would not make a move against myself or you."

"How do we get out? My powers don't work against them," Kagome explained.

"And my strength is under seal," Yuugao growled impatiently. "Damn it. If my son were not so blind, this would not have happened."

"How is this Sesshoumaru's fault?" Kagome snapped, growing defensive on her mate's behalf.

"If he had just lain with you instead of dithering around like a fool, you might have conceived and this could be avoided!" Yuugao snapped back, just as angry and impatient as Kagome. "If pupped, a kami's, but especially Izanami's, hold on you would have been destroyed. She cannot inhabit a body that holds a trace of youkai blood."

"Sesshoumaru was doing the right thing," Kagome started, wanting to throw something, anything, just to hear it crash. "He's honorable and wouldn't force anything."

"And too blind to see you love him," Yuugao growled. "My son is as much of a fool as I. I should have told him, forced him to look." The censure in her voice was meant only for herself, and Kagome wanted to comfort the woman despite the upheaval she had caused.

"It's not your fault," Kagome tried to assure her, but she was stopped by the bitter chuckle that echoed in the cave.

"It is. I was arrogant and foolish to think I could stay her attempts until you had conceived. But there is nothing to be done for it now. We must escape."

"Do you know what kind of ritual she's going to do to transfer my soul from my body?" Kagome asked, forcing herself to think. She was sure Sesshoumaru would come for him. If nothing else, he was her friend, and she had unwavering faith that he would never leave her to rot in the underworld. But thinking helped stave off the fear of her possible future as a corpse and the anguish of her bond's dissolution.

"You will have to be bathed in a purification mixture. Beast she might be, but she is still a divine being. These slatterns will have to release you, even if is just for a moment."

"What about you?" Kagome demanded.

"I have no fear of death or the underworld," Yuugao stated simply, hollowly.

Their journey seemed to stretch into hours, and he felt his temper rising with each passing moment. The strange pale spirit that led them had continued his silence, not deigning to reply when the spirits had asked where they were going.

It wasn't until a familiar scent permeated the air that he turned to glare at the spirit again, suspicions confirmed.
"Why do you bring us here?" He demanded curtly, gold eyes zeroing in on the rapidly approaching tomb that was his father's body. Receiving no reply, he let his youki flare, making his displeasure known to the group, but more specifically the specter. Several minutes passed in tense silence, his companions quiet as they looked from him to the specter to the tomb, questions evident.

It was not until they landed within the skeletal torso of the once great inu daiyoukai that had fathered him that he understood why the spirit had brought him there, although the reasoning was beyond him. Glaring down at the curled, naked form, he felt his lips pull into a sneer that he couldn’t stop.

Inu Yasha was curled into a ball, his hair covering half of his body. Despite that, he could see the disturbing marks where limbs had, in life, been ripped away.

"He will be of use in your quest."

"That thing is of no use to me," Sesshoumaru snarled, pulling his eyes from the sleeping hanyou to the spirit, unwilling to go on.

"He may still use Tessaiga. I wield Sou'unga. You carry Tenseiga and Bakusaiga. Before the sun sets in the mortal world, all will be required."

"And how can a spirit wield Sou'unga, or even Tessaiga?" He snarled impatiently, wanting to rip the mask from the spirit's features, knowing what he would see. "What use can either of you be-"

"Silence, pup," The voice rumbled.

For a moment he was a child again, a whelp, staring up at the giant of a youkai that had raised him. That voice echoed through the remains of the mortal coil and resonated with his memories.

"I do not need you or the half breed," He growled, turning smartly on his heel.

"Sesshoumaru, stop," The voice commanded. Despite the authority backing those words, he continued on, determined to get to an exit and leave the spirit and his half brother behind.

"If you truly care about the woman, you will stop. Izanami is no fool, and has already sought me out. If she were to find that you had arrived in the underworld, she will oust the miko's soul and take the body for her own."

That stopped him. Turning to the deformed male spirit that had accompanied him into the underworld, a growl built in his throat when the information was confirmed with a nod. His father moved closer to him, the mask suddenly eerie in the shadows of the corpse they stood in.

"Do you accept?"

He didn't want to. By all rights he should be able to save his mate on his own. But going against a kami was different than going against another youkai. Especially since he was in her world and not his own. Izanami had the advantage, and he would use every tool at his disposal to even the odds. Nodding his acquiescence, he watched his father, still masked, relax and go back to where the hanyou lay sleeping.

"His spirit is still recovering from his death. He will be violent when he wakes."

Violent was not the word for it. Watching as his father, still masked, touched the hanyou and a shadow like membrane covering the body evaporated, he waited for whatever reaction would occur. It was not long in coming. Gold eyes blinked open groggily, then snapped open at full attention. The hanyou's spirit body still bore the scars of his untimely demise, but he didn't seem to notice as he
stood, hand reaching for a sword that wasn't at his side like it should be.

Gurgles escaped his throat, words half strangled and hoarse beyond all recognition.

"Inu Yasha," Sesshoumaru intoned when their father said nothing. "Calm yourself."

His half brother did not listen, did not seem to understand as he stumbled, calf like, on his legs. A snarl erupted from the garbled mess of the hanyou's words as the clumsy male tried to rush him angrily. Claws came to swipe at him, and he held both wrists in his hands, glaring down at what he had deemed useless.

"He is broken," Sesshoumaru reflected, looking at their father through narrowed gold eyes.

"Inu Yasha," Touga rumbled, his voice authoritative. "Remember Kagome."

The miko's name was a mantra, a healing word to the dead half breed. His face relaxed and awareness entered the half crazed amber eyes. He stopped fighting Sesshoumaru's hold on him and looked up at his half brother curiously, as if beginning to recognize him.

"Sesshoumaru?" He finally asked, head tilting to the side. "What the fuck are you doing here?"

Sesshoumaru reflected that it hadn't taken long for the hanyou's personality to shine through the veil of death. Perhaps some things truly were forever. He released the hanyou's hands and stepped back.

"I am here to save my mate, and he says you can help."

"You have a mate?" Inu Yasha stuttered. "I'm, I-"

"You died," Their father informed him. "It has been over a year."

"She said he was the one to give her the task for her trial," Sesshoumaru bit out.

"No doubt another of Izanami's tricks. I found him shortly after he came here and brought him here so his mind could heal before being reborn."

"What the fuck is going on?" Inu Yasha shouted, casting his gaze between the his sire and sibling, confusion giving way to anger.

"My mate has been stolen by Izanami."

"Mate? What happened to Naraku, and Kagome? What about all of the others?" Inu Yasha snarled angrily, fist bunching the fabric of his kimono as he demanded answers.

"Naraku is dead," He muttered with distaste as he removed the hanyou's hands from his clothing. "The jewel has been wished out of existence."

"And Kagome? What about Miroku and Sango, or Shippou?"

"The monk and taijiya are wed, and the kit is fine."

"What about Kagome?" Inu Yasha's voice broke into a desperate shout, hoarse from his rage.

"She-"

"Is his mate," Inu no Taisho interrupted, coming to stand between his progeny. Inu Yasha's mouth moved silently for several minutes, and Sesshoumaru kept silent, unsure what the hanyou's reaction
would be. Surely their father could wield Tessaiga, and this whole situation was unnecessary.

"You and Kagome-" Inu Yasha finally stuttered.

"Yes," He interrupted, impatient to get out of his father's corpse and to where his mate waited for him.

The hanyou's eyes became startlingly clear, and bore into his own, searching.

"Do you love her?"

Now that was an answer that was nobody's business but his own.

"Answer me," Inu Yasha demanded. "Do you love her?"

"Inu Yasha-" Touga began.

"Answer me your fucking bastard, do you love her!" The hanyou's ragged, hoarse voice echoed through the tomb.

"She is my mate," Sesshoumaru finally replied in a clipped tone.

"That's not-" Inu Yasha rasped.

"Izanami removed the mark," Taisho began.

"It matters not," He snarled, still feeling the loss of his mating mark, the disorienting emptiness where that spark of her should be. Every time it's dissolution was mentioned, he feared more and more that he would never regain it.

"You have you answer, Inu Yasha."

The hanyou stared him down, anger fading.

"Been busy I guess," The half breed muttered. "Where's my sword? And some fucking clothes?"

Touga explained that clothes only required that he think on them, and within seconds his half brother was wearing a replica of his fire rat robes and hakama. Next the hanyou sauntered over to the dais and pulled the sword out.

"You know," He said, looking at the rusted blade. "If you and Kagome have pups, you'll need this."

Sesshoumaru decided he wasn't going to mention that Kagome still had bone deep fears of sex itself. Some things he was not willing to say.

"If he had just pupped her, this wouldn't have been a problem," Harinago muttered.

"Enough," He snarled, at last losing patience. That accusation had been hanging in the air, bothering him as much as Kagome's disappearance itself. "We're wasting time."

A cloud of youki appeared, his father's he assumed, and Inu Yasha got on, eyes still on Sesshoumaru. Taisho guided them out of his corpse and into the ever gray sky of hell.

"Why haven't you pupped her?" Inu Yasha finally asked. Sesshoumaru could feel the gazes of the others upon him, and turned a cold eye to his father's back.
"We were forced into mating. My mother banished Kagome from the pack, then nominated her as a suitor."

"Huh?" Inu Yasha asked dumbly, obviously confused.

"Until I took a mate, my mother still held the position of alpha female. When she ousted Kagome from the pack, the only way to let the miko stay was if she became the new alpha."

"You took Kagome as a mate just to keep her as pack?" Inu Yasha's surprise and disbelief scraped at his already raw nerves.

"I promised to protect her."

"So, what, you're mates in name only?"

"I wouldn't say that," Harionago quipped. "It could have been different if your father wasn't such an ass."

That comment earned a vicious snarl from Inu Yasha, and Touga dropped further back into the group, removing his mask to reveal his face. His expression was one of weariness and regret, gold eyes blank as he remembered something.

"It is nothing less than the truth."

"Why?" Sesshoumaru demanded, having solid confirmation of his father's lie. "Why would you follow through with such a farce?" The rage in his heart grew, burning out his fear of the youkai that had once been his teacher, his lord. The lie itself had been at the root of this mess, had caused him to doubt himself, to feel repulsed by his own natural desires.

"I once thought myself in love with your mother," Taisho sighed. "And she in turn, loved the man I called brother."

The declaration hit Sesshoumaru with the force of a tsunami, the words immediately bringing understanding in their wake.

"Shinzuru."

"Those bastards," Izanami shrieked angrily, her voice echoing through her demesne. Kagome flinched from the fierce rage in the kami's tone, wondering what had happened. Yuugao smirked from her place on the floor, claws going to the collar around her throat.

"My son is near. Apparently he has brought help."

Anything Kagome was going to say was stopped with Izanami stalked into the room, one bone foot clattering angrily while the other, covered in purplish rotting flesh squished with each impact.

"You little bitch. He couldn't just give you up. He had to come and bring those bastard dogs with him," Izanami shouted at her, as if it were all her fault her mate had come.

"Dogs?" Yuugao asked, brow raised.
"You know very well who he fetched. You-" She said, whirling back to Kagome. "I will not let this opportunity pass," She finished in a snarl. Kagome felt herself being lifted into the air, freed from her bonds. Immediately she tried to concentrate her powers and release a burst of reiki, only to feel Izanami's power, like fire, push back and overtake her body.

Her screams echoed through the cave, bouncing off of the walls and turning into the anguished cries of a hundred people as the darkness pushed at her body. Muscles tensed and felt as if they were being stretched thin, ready to snap if pulled any tighter. Her heart slammed in an irregular rhythm in her chest, skipping and halting before beating rapidly.

When the pain stopped, she hung limp in the air, gasping for breath.

"There are many ways I can punish you without damaging the body," Izanami gloated. Kagome felt herself floating behind the woman, and heard Yuugao's angry snarls fade as the distance between them grew ever wider. Barely conscious, when she was dropped into a natural pool of freezing cold water, she sputtered and choked, water invading her nostrils. When the skeletal kami laughed, it was with determination that she drug her power from deep within herself and tried to force it into whatever bonds held her within the pool.

Instead of fire, this time it felt as if she were being electrocuted. Lighting coursed through her veins and scorched her blood, searing her from the inside out. Within seconds the excruciating pain was over, but her body throbbed, reminding her of what the goddess could easily do.

The cold water began numbing the pain, and then it started needling her until it felt as if ice was stabbing into her skin. Every inch tingled against this newest torture, and helpless tears ran down her cheeks.

"I see you've given in to your fate. Wise girl," Izanami gloated. "You wouldn't have had much of a life anyway. A mate you can never touch, children that will never be yours, even your friends will always wonder about you and your unnatural relations with youkai. Eventually, you would have had nothing, and no one."

The kami's voice stabbed at her, the pain from her words shattering her heart.

"Who would ever want the scarred up body of a woman used by a dozen men? Here you will be treated as a goddess."

Her thoughts stilled at the words that came from the goddess's skeletal lips.

"I want it," She pronounced, mind calming as her plan formed. "And I will keep it," She declared proudly.

"How touching." The goddess snarled, obviously angry the miko had lost her fear. "I fear that once I have it, I don't intend to give it up."

A deafening bellow raged through the caverns, and they began to quake, suddenly unstable. Izanami cursed under her breath.

"Watch her!" The goddess shrieked as she fled the cave, bones clattering angrily.

Thanking Yuugao for the distraction, feeling the youkai's ki pulsing through the caverns as she tried to transform, Kagome peered at the blank eyed hags watching her. Cautiously, she let a slim tendril of power unfurl from within her, a wisp of almost nothing. When her efforts produced no reaction, she lengthened it, adding only a slender thread over that to strengthen it. Still noting no reaction, she lengthened it more, letting it glide through the water and stone, seeking her target.
The cold faded, and she drifted along the ephemeral rope. The landscape of hell faded into darkness, until there was only the gentle thrumming of her ki, shimmering blue and pink and purple, lit by its own effervescence.

"He's here. I've never needed the mark to find him. Please, let me in, Sesshoumaru," She whispered into the darkness, casting herself out further, thinning the thread of her power until it was stretched almost to breaking.

Sesshoumaru felt the pulsing, a gentle thrumming against his senses. A wisp of something intangible caressed him gently, a familiar touch. Ignoring the disbelieving sounds of those around him, he opened himself to that touch, allowing it to tangle with his youki. It wound within his own, and he could feel her.

"Mate," He intoned aloud, not caring what the others saw or what they thought.

"Sesshoumaru," She breathed, a whisper in his head that settled his frayed nerves. Her ki swirled within his own, filling the empty place left by the dissolution of their mark.

"We're coming," He promised.

A scream rattled in his head, and the connection was abruptly lost, leaving him feeling as empty as before. An angry snarl erupted, echoing savagely in the air.

"What was that?" Inu Yasha demanded.

"We must hurry," He snapped, pushing himself to fly faster.

"What the fuck is going on?" Inu Yasha demanded angrily.

His father repeated his words as they pushed themselves harder. The spirits surrounding him pulled closer to him, their faces filled with fierce concentration. The pitted landscape of hell passed below them, reminding him too much of the place his mate's mind had once been like. Knowing that if he failed, she would be consigned to stay there for eternity, every instinct within him dropped into free fall. The change was trying to force itself on him, pushing at his physical boundaries with an angry howl.

"Hold it together, son," His father said in a calm voice. "We are not far."

Each second stretched into an indeterminable eternity, each one more agonizing than the last. That emptiness his mate's fire had once occupied begged to be filled, even if it was with the rage his instincts demanded be let loose. The taste of blood filled his mouth, and he heard the sound of a beast echoing in the distance.

"Something's up ahead," Shoki informed them.

"Izanami's women," Harionago bit out, her long hair rising and pushing against the wind.

Two figures in the distance stood on a rising cliff face, the stone beneath them growing taller and taller as garbled words came from their twisted, blackened lips. Sesshoumaru felt the thrill of blood lust sing through him, a release for the fury burning through him.
"Yuki, come with me. All of you go on ahead," Harionago commanded as she and the pale snow woman flew ahead, setting course directly for the two figures. Their sudden burst of speed put them beyond Sesshoumaru's growl of displeasure.

"They will fight as they know how, let them," His father commanded sternly. Not wanting to, Sesshoumaru nodded, eyes on the four figures battling on the sheer wall of volcanic rock. Harionago was tightly tied to one of the withered crones by her own hair, her triumphant cry ringing through the air and laced with madness. The snow maiden was creating a blizzard despite the fire around her, sheets of ice obscuring her form and the hag's from his view in a crystal globe.

"They will keep them at bay. Come, the entrance is this way," Touga commanded, directing them down the other side of the newly created rock wall. The entrance to the caverns was half obscured by the black rock, volcanic glass now that he had a closer look, and they landed on soft feet.

"There'll be more," Shoki warned. "Izanami's wanted freedom for a long time. She won't chance it."

"We are ready," Sesshoumaru bit out, moving to the entrance and letting a burst of his youki lash out at the glass. A perfect circle, the expression of his quickly tightening control, formed in the glass and exposed the rest of the entrance. They stepped in, immediately feeling the difference.

The air was cool, almost cold as they walked further into the darkness. Each being youkai, hanyou or spirit enabled them to move without fear in the dark, eyes quickly adjusting to the utter lack of light.

"Another one is waiting," Shoki announced quietly.

"We will take care of her," The ubumi whispered in quiet voices. "Thank you for taking care of our children." Their voices were sighs as they became little more than wisps of energy and fell to the floor, resembling little more than a fog of smoke. Ahead of them, Sesshoumaru could hear the angry hissing of Izanami's creature followed by two angry cries.

When they came upon where the hag had been attacked, there was nothing but the stench of an unwashed body and motes of quickly fading energy.

"Nothing left of them, not even a whisper of their souls for reincarnation," Shoki sighed as they passed through the residual energy. "They thought it an honor," The deformed spirit added, gaze on Sesshoumaru.

"If they chose to think so, let us not dishonor their sacrifice," Enenra hissed with a warning glance to the spirit. Sesshoumaru noticed none of this as they continued on. Another blast of youki surged through the caves, and he was immediately able to place it as his mother's. The cavern shook, and an angry shriek echoed to them, barely discernible in the boom of power that broke with it.

"Will mother survive?" He finally asked, remembering his father's revelation.

"I will make sure of it," Touga declared in a quiet growl.

The tunnel they walked through ended in an open cave, and he could see the forms of five women blending into the darkness, their edges blurring strangely.

"I hope you still have the powers you used to," The laughing woman said with a glance in Shoki's direction. The malformed spirit laughed his assent as threads of power shot from his fingertips. Fire flared up, blinding the youkai and hanyou for a moment as Enenra turned into an inferno.

Wisps of smoke laced around Sesshoumaru, the scent of woodsmoke reminding him of the first time he had ever kissed his mate.
"The love my husband and I shared sustained me this long, and it is an honor to use that power to save the love between you and the priestess." A voice whispered in his mind, sultry and soft.

Startled by the invasion, he said nothing as the laughing woman's clothing wrapped around one of the hags. Enenera's fire lit the cavern, hiding nothing. Shoki fought two of the hags at once, the tendrils of his power caging them in. Enenra had created a maelstrom to surround another.

"We must go," His father commanded. "There is little time."

Despite the attempts of the spirits to hold the hags back, they still had a difficult time getting to the passage the bent, broken old creatures had been guarding. A hand erupted from the wall of flames surrounding it to grab at his sleeve, acid dripping from broken, yellowed fingernails. With an abrupt snarl he tore the hand from it's wrist and threw it back into the fire, feeling no satisfaction from the bloodshed.

The inferno behind them cast flickering shadows on the wall, the darkness growing as they put more distance behind them. Their feet made barely a sound as they followed the path. The farther in they went, the colder it became, until his breath came out as puffs of steam. Somewhere behind them there was a release of ki, one that almost threw him to his knees.

"Shoki has fallen, his soul is gone," Touga intoned as they ran.

Sesshoumaru had heard stories of the so called youkai hunter, and had not liked him. But he did feel a brief flicker of respect for the spirit that had given himself wholly and completely so that he could save his mate.

"What about the others?" He asked.

"They still fight."

Sparing no further thought to them, he turned the sharp left the path took and slammed into a wall, thrown back by a blast of energy. Standing, he blinked several times, vision swimming.

"A barrier," His father announced. "Izanami's magic."

"I got this," Inu Yasha announced.

He did not like not being able to do anything, did not like having to watch as the hanyou lifted the Tessaiga. When nothing happened, the hanyou made a rude noise.

"What the fuck?" He demanded angrily.

"It needs youki, something you no longer posses," Their father said in a calm voice. "Sesshoumaru must fuel it's power."

"What the- what do you mean?"

"Sesshoumaru, you must feed your youki into the blade to activate it, otherwise it will not transform."

Wondering how the blade was supposed to work for a spirit, he did as his father asked, controlling thread of youki and wrapping it around the blade. Immediately the blade began to resonate with his youki and the spirit holding it.

"Keep your power around it," Touga commanded. "Inu Yasha, break the barrier."
"I know," The hanyou barked, the blade transforming into it's natural state. Immediately it began to glow a burnished crimson. Sesshoumaru continued feeding his power into it, wanting to get through the barrier and closer to his mate. That need drove him, and he strained to keep his youki controlled when the beast within was still throwing itself against the bars caging it in.

"Steady," Touga bit out, gold eyes on his eldest son. Sesshoumaru nodded, beating back his instincts. Inu Yasha brought the sword up and then slashed down, the blade meeting the barrier with an angry burst of red light.

"Keep pushing," Touga shouted over the psychical winds that took physical form. Sesshoumaru fed more of his ki into the blade, determined to break through the barrier itself, even if he was not the one to wield the sword. Tessaiga seemed to scream, it's own war cry echoing his determination. As it had never done before, the sword reached out to him, it's aura wrapping around him, accepting him fully. There was no protest, and he felt no limitations. Stepping forward against the colliding powers, he moved over to his half brother's side and laid his hand higher up on the hilt, his pinky barely brushing the hanyou's thumb.

"What are you doing?" Inu Yasha snapped.

"Tessaiga accepts my will," He intoned, knowing it was true even as he said it. "Let go."

"But-"

"Let go pup!" Their father shouted. Inu Yasha pulled his hand from the hilt as if it had burned him. Sesshoumaru ignored the disbelief radiating from the spirit and opened himself to the sword, allowing it to take what it would from him. The barrier resisted, trying to push him back, to the repel the sword.

"I will not leave until she is safe in my arms," He growled, as if the barrier was the kami he sought. "I will not falter, will not give her up, ever!" His last words came out as a snarl, ignoring the pain of having his youki pulled so roughly from him, the sword understanding his intent and his willingness. Youki swelled and struggled. A crack formed in the barrier, and a mirroring one ran down the length of Tessaiga's blade.

Somehow he knew the sword was willing to sacrifice itself to help him, though he would never know why or how he knew it. Knowing what was to come, he offered his thanks to the sword. Even as he did, the barrier and the sword shattered, the pieces flying apart in a hundred directions.

The winds died down, and he was left holding a hilt with only a few inches of broken, rusted steel protruding from it.

"Tessiaga," Inu Yasha whispered. "What-"

"It was a sword made to protect humans," Their father intoned. "It was created to protect the love of a daiyoukai, and it finished thus."

"Will the shards prove to give anyone power?" Sesshoumaru asked, voice flat. He did not like his father speculating on his feelings, liked the idea of the hanyou doing so even less.

"No, the fang is dead. None could use the pieces now."

"Then we move on," He commanded, walking past where the barrier had stood moments before, as if nothing had been accomplished. Inu Yasha muttered something under his breath, too light for even his delicate hearing to pick up.
"It won't be a problem. Sesshoumaru will just have to give his fangs to Totosai when the woman is pupped," Touga said in an almost cheerful voice, his tone completely out of place and tune with their situation.

"She must be rescued before she can be pupped," He snapped, already at his limit.

Inu Yasha once again muttered something too low for him to hear, and he was grateful he could not.

Kagome felt like a stone was pressing down on her chest, keeping her from breathing as Izanami physically bound her to the naturally formed stone altar with throngs of something that could have been leather, but looked suspiciously like skin.

"It is skin," Izanami said with satisfaction. "It is the skin from my son's dismembered body. Only a god can break through such."

Kagome tried to keep from vomiting, knowing in her position she'd only choke on it. Assured by the brief touch with Sesshoumaru's mind, she chose to go along with the goddess's plan, to a point. Knowing the kami could read her thoughts, she chose not to focus on the idea, and instead thought of her children, all of them, and the friends that waited for her. And of Sesshoumaru. Especially him.

"You'd give yourself to a youkai?" Izanami asked idly as she finished tying the last piece of her son's skin in an intricate knot. "I have never understood those who would cross species. No matter how much he may appear human, he is not. A beast lurks beneath the surface of that veneer, something you will never understand. Although I suppose they are as blind and dumb as you mortals."

"Have you ever loved?" Kagome asked quietly.

"I did, and found it to bear bitter fruit," Izanami bit out.

"It's not always like that," She tried. "Please, if you do this-"

"I will end your pathetic love for that beast? All the better," The goddess ground out. "Prepare yourself."

In the black bones of the kami's hand a knife appeared, coalescing from the darkness around them. It's blade was black and absorbed the dim light just as the kami's bones did. It's pointed tip hovered over her heart.

"It will only hurt for a moment," The goddess assured.

The knife blade came down, and Kagome cast her power out, throwing herself along the threads as she searched for Sesshoumaru, panic driving her faster through the stone walls separating them. In the darkness she saw the bright flare of his youki, reached for it desperately.

Something snapped, and she felt detached, floating freely. The sensation was different than when she normally moved from her own skin, and the effect sent her hurdling into Sesshoumaru, grasping at his still pulsing ki frantically.

"Kagome-" He began.

"Let me in!" She screamed with all of her being, hoping he would hear and understand. His ki pulsed
once, then wrapped around her, pulling her into his own body. Feeling safe for the first time since she had been pulled through the mirror, she allowed herself to relax a fraction.

"What is the meaning of this?" She heard in their now shared body.

In a jumble of pictures and emotions and thoughts, she let him see firsthand her plan, and what had happened to trigger it.

"What's going on?" Inu Yasha demanded. She noticed him with some surprise, but Sesshoumaru's mind was open to her, and at her shock images, like a fast playing movie surrounded her, explaining the half breed's presence.

"My mate found a way to circumvent Izanami's plan."

"She left her body empty?" Touga demanded in a harsh voice, his hand falling onto their shared shoulder heavily.

"Izanami must make a trade," Kagome informed him using Sesshoumaru's voice, and immediately felt his displeasure. The daiyoukai shrugged his father's hand off and began walking forward.

"What do you mean she has to make a trade?" Touga demanded.

"It's why she hasn't taken over the body of a dead priestess. It must be a trade, someone must fill her vacant body. My mate is the first she has been able to pull into the underworld."

"So, this means Kagome is safe, right?" Inu Yasha asked.

"Izanami could choose to destroy the body," Touga muttered angrily.

Kagome urged Sesshoumaru to find his mother first. The very thought of the female brought a plethora of images to the forefront of Sesshoumaru's mind, and she wasn't sure if it was intentional or if the revelations and all that they meant were still too new, too involved for him to ignore.

"She's in love with Shinzuru?" Kagome wondered, feeling Sesshoumaru's own disquiet when she 'voiced' the thought.

Sesshoumaru's own surprise mirrored hers, and she felt herself bleeding into his consciousness as his bled into hers. Brief flashes of anger and fear stabbed at her, and she tried to soothe the strange pain that seemed to radiate from a dark place that was strangely closed to her.

An overwhelming command to be silent rang through his head, and she could feel, knew, that he was trying to find her scent. For the first time she had a first person view of what it felt like to be a youkai, and she tried to keep her thoughts as quiet as possible as she marveled in his heightened senses. Touch was much the same, but his eyes could see easily in the darkness, and every scent in the air had a distinctive flavor multiplied by his nose's sensitivity. While the tastes and smells themselves were awful, she couldn't stop herself from finding it amazing.

She felt his sharpening awareness, the fervor with which he sought her body. When the smell of honeysuckle and clover caught his attention, she was surprised that he latched onto it like a drowning man, following it deeper into the caverns.

"That's my scent?" She asked meekly, afraid of breaking his concentration.

"Hnn," He answered. "Like summer."
If she could have blushed, she would have. As it was, she was unsure if Sesshoumaru was blushing because of that, and prayed he wasn’t.

"I do not blush," He muttered mentally.

"Your mother is just ahead," Touga said in a quiet voice. "You two, stay back and wait. Inu Yasha, you and I will free her. When we have Izanami with us, find the miko's body and make sure Izanami can't inhabit it."

"But-" Inu Yasha began, and Kagome felt a flicker of worry at the spirit's apparent fear. After all, he was a spirit, why would he be afraid unless it meant something bad?

"No time," The elder of the two snapped as he ignored the path and went through a wall. Inu Yasha paused for a moment, gold eyes wide as he stared them down.

"Aw hell, do whatever it takes. Get her out of here alive asshole," He bit out before following his father. Unsure what was going on, she tried to feel out what they were talking about from the clear, precise lines of Sesshoumaru's thoughts, but could find nothing but the same revulsion and fury she had before.

"What's going on?" She demanded, worry quickly morphing into panic.

There was no answer, not even a flicker of a thought to give away what the spirits had been talking about, what Sesshoumaru found so disgusting.

Angry roars echoed from somewhere in the caverns, and Kagome did her best to repress a shudder at the sound. However, the jagged bolt of fear was out and filtering through Sesshoumaru's consciousness before she could stop it. A blast of youki washed through the caverns like water flooding through the tunnels and battered against his body. A wash of energy followed, one she registered as Izanami's.

"Izanami has found them," She told him, forgetting once again to utter it mentally. However there was no reprimand for using his lips to say it, instead he shot forward through the tunnels, following the thread of her scent that had almost disappeared in the surge of divine ki and youki that still pulsed through the stone and saturated the air with their strange scents and tastes.

Dimly she was aware of the battle going on behind her, knew that Yuugao and the two spirits were fighting for time, because Sesshoumaru knew that. However, the closer they got, the more she knew it, not from the strengthening of her scent, but the strange, longing feeling that grew within her. Her spirit knew that inhabiting Sesshoumaru's body was wrong, and the edges of herself blurred as she unwillingly reached out, unconsciously trying to correct the separation.

"Soon," He promised, turning another corner. "We're close."

The closer they got, the more her spirit resisted her thoughts and reached out, the more she felt like a wisp of smoke trying to escape him.

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When he came to the cave holding her body, he rushed over to the altar, feeling her spirit thinning and reaching out for the flesh that should house it.
"Not yet," He bit out, trying to untie one of the bonds. However, the knot resisted and she supplied
him with the information Izanami had given her. A kami's skin.

He'd send up a prayer to his own spirits if the situation wouldn't have made the entire attempt a farce.

He looked down at the unconscious form at the altar and bit back a snarl.

"Sesshoumaru?" Her voice whispered in his mind. The sound only further served to rip at him, a fine
edged knife stabbing into his conscience and shredding his resolve.

"I can't."

"Can't what?"

Did she really not know what he was supposed to do? His father had been more than clear, and she
shared his mind, his body at this point, didn't she?

"I'd say I'm not a mind reader," She muttered sourly. "But some parts of your mind, they're closed
off to me."

"I have to pup you," He snapped, feeling the bile rising in his throat as he stared down at the tied
down body at the altar.

"You have to-" She stopped, and the wave if disbelief that rocked through her almost knocked him
to his knees. As it was, he braced himself on the stone altar, closing his eyes so he didn't have to look
down at the silent form.

"Why?"

"Because she cannot inhabit a body with youkai blood in it."

"You gave me your blood though. The mating mark-"

"That blood is gone within days, it is merely a vessel, a path for the ki. A child-"

"A child stays inside until it's born," She whispered.

"Correct. And it's blood would always be within you, tied to you."

Her despair bore down on him, crushing his lungs in his chest as he tried to figure out what to do.
The choice was as obvious as it was abhorrent. He had promised to keep her safe, to protect her, to
bring her back to the land of the living. But the only way he knew how, the only way he could keep
her safe went against every code, every rule he had ever set for himself.

"If you can bring yourself to do it, I'm- I can deal with it," She finally said, breaking through his own
reverie.

"It would be-"

"Not fun," She interrupted. "But not rape, not really."

"How can you-"

"I consent."

Those words hurt to hear almost as much as her tone.
"Do you consent, Sesshoumaru?"

How could she think otherwise? She was his mate, his pack's matron, his friend.

"I consent," He replied aloud, hating the way his voice cracked as his eyes finally opened and looked down at her pale body. He wasn't sure if he was thankful that she was naked or if it just made him hate the situation all the more.

Knowing how little time they had, he climbed onto the altar and looked down at her face, pale in the dimness of the chamber. For the first time in his life he cursed his keen senses, the eyesight that pierced the darkness and showed her to be sleeping.

Feeling dirty and covered with slime, he undid the knots of his hakama, wishing more than anything her spirit was not in his own body, that she could not see what he was doing to her flesh.

"It's alright," She soothed. "It's alright."

He did not have to say that he found her soothing him to be utterly ridiculous, because he knew she could feel it.

But the guilt and shame persisted. So much so, that when he covered her he could not go through with it, and she immediately understood why.

"I guess no one thought about that," She sighed sadly, although he could feel her relief. Despite needing to find some way to get hard, he found he too was relieved. He wasn't sure if he could handle being able to grow aroused when trying to pup an unconscious body.

"Do you trust me?" She asked.

"Yes," He murmured, his forehead touching the cool flesh of her own.

"Follow me," She commanded, and he could feel her spiraling into him, her own spirit tugging at his consciousness.

Not knowing if they had the time, but unsure if they had any choice, he followed her into himself, down the familiar path into the center of himself.

When he opened his eyes, it was to the feel of a light rain. However his own grove had been juxtaposed with her core. Their tree stood straight and tall in a forest, the ground beneath them soft grass that felt slick and warm beneath their feet.

"Why are we here, we don't have the time," He began, already worried that the goddess had come upon their bodies.

"Trust me," She told him as she came forward. Instead of embracing him, she took his hand and led him to the tree. It's branches were covered in thick foliage, and beneath it grass formed a soft carpet.

"Sit," She commanded.

Unsure of what she was aiming for, he sat, his back braced against the trunk and his legs crossed. When she straddled his legs and settled herself, he looked into her eyes and saw her fear.

"Kagome-"

"No, just, let me do this," She whispered. "Or else I'll never have the courage."
Wondering what that meant, he waited. When she leaned forward to kiss him softly on his lips, he would have jerked back but for the trunk behind him. As it was, her hands wove into his hair and tangled into the thick mass.

She pressed on, giving him no escape, and after a shock filled moment, he gave in. She was trying to help him, to help herself. Knowing that she would never understand what she was doing, that she was trying to save herself, he gave up and brought his arms around her, pulling her closer to him. Months of want and need spilled into the kiss, into his arms as he tried to pull her closer and closer, needing to feel her against him.

It was not a gentle kiss, not when his own instincts took over, slipping through the bars of the cage he kept them in. Needing to focus on her willingness, her own seeming lust, he clung to her mewls, to the feel of her hips shifting and grinding against him. Her hands pushing below his kimono and tracing the bare skin burned away the shame and guilt, leaving a heady need in their wake.

They stayed like that for what felt like hours, but could only have been moments. When she pulled back for breath, surely a reflex, he looked into her dazed blue eyes and promised himself that even if it took a thousand years, he would find a way to heal her and let her experience such pleasure in reality. "Please stay here," He choked out, surging away from her and throwing himself back up the path to reality, almost dizzy when he came to.

And her plan had worked. He was embarrassingly hard, aching to find release. Instead of opening his eyes, he kept them closed as he guided himself into her. He didn't think about what he felt, about being in the cave, about what he was doing while rough stone bit into his skin. Instead he remembered the small noises she made when he pulled her more tightly against him, about her blue eyes blinking almost drunkenly. The memory of their kiss at the wolf's mating ceremony and the heady scent of her arousal lacing the air, mixing with the smoke from the fire and her sweat in the heat.

He remembered the night he marked her, and how her blood had tasted, her careless comment about receiving such a mark during sex. His jaws ached from the force he had to use to keep them closed, to keep himself from marking her again.

He remembered her pressed against him in the woods, his instincts demanding he take her as her arousal filtered through the night air.

When his seed spilled into her, he stayed still, tears coming unbidden from behind his eyes and falling onto her face. He prayed to his ancestors that it would be enough, that he had not dishonored himself and her with what he had just done.

"It's alright," She whispered in his mind, and he had the feeling of being held and soothed. "Thank you."

Her genuine thanks and the feel of her consciousness cradling his own almost broke him as more tears fell from his eyes and dripped onto her face. Never before had he felt so small and insignificant, so tiny and ashamed.

But not alone. No. She cradled him, soothed him as he withdrew from her body and tied his hakama.

"How long before we know?" She finally asked, when he felt he had gained himself.

"Not long. But my-" He stopped, not even able to think the words that he needed to.
"Sesshoumaru?" She ventured cautiously, sensing how fragile he felt.

"My seed should keep you safe for now. It is as blood."

The world around them rocked dangerously.

"Do you want me back in my body?" She asked.

No. No he did not want her back in her body, he did not want to lose the closeness he had with her, because his actions were still bearing down on him, choking him on his own bile. Terror lanced through him. When she left him, would he ever feel that closeness again, that oneness, or had their relationship, however tenuous, been forever altered because of his choice?

"I will never leave you," She promised, finding the threads of coherent thought in the mass of his jumbled anxiety. "I will stay as long as you want me to."

Even as she said the words she was slipping past his guards and settling into her own body. With fiery determination he clamped down on the feeling of betrayal her absence provoked and pushed himself away from the altar. Her blue eyes opened, blinking blearily. She shifted once, forgetting her bonds, and flinched, her face a mask of pain. Immediately guilt washed over him. She had not experienced what he had, but she was dealing with the after effects plainly enough.

The cave rocked again, and a wall shattered.

His mother was lying amid the broken stone and rubble, Sou'unga held in her clenched fist.

His father and half brother followed, slamming into the wall on the far side of the cave.

"Foolish," Izanami admonished as she stepped into the room. Her eyes moved from the inu youkai on the floor to him, then to Kagome.

If she could have an expression, he had the feeling it would be a twisted mask of rage. As it was, her shriek of fury expressed her displeasure well enough.

"You good for nothing slut!" She screamed.

Somehow, he had found his way to the spot where his father and half brother were righting themselves, and with a blinding headache on top of it. Shaking his head to clear his vision, he came to his feet, ignoring his father's concerned glance.

"I'll make sure you don't conceive you bitch," The kami growled, walking towards the altar, a dark knife coalescing from the shadows in her skeletal hand.

A wave of energy hit the walking corpse, and for the first time in an age, he felt a surge of gratitude for his mother's presence. However, any relief was short lived as the kami turned back to the daiyoukai that stood trembling, the giant sword looking almost comical in her hands. With a careless flick of her free hand, energy hit his mother, sending her flying into a wall with a sickening thud. Sou'unga clattered angrily against the stone, but stayed clenched in her fists.

Bakusaiga sang as he pulled it from it's sheath, the blade eager to express his will.

"Tenseiga," His father barked. "Use Tenseiga on her heart!"

What good would that do? The kami was beyond saving, was already in hell.

Tenseiga hummed, demanding to be let go. Bakusaiga's voice interposed with it, until they became a
steady synchronized beat. Unable to ignore their command, however much he wanted to, he pulled Tenseiga free of it's sheath and ran for the kami, only to be stopped mid pace, tugged into place. Looking around him, he snarled, trying to figure out what was holding him in place.

Another wave of Sou'unga's power blasted past him, but the hold didn't loosen. Rage grew and spilled over his control. The kami waved her hand and his family dropped to the floor as if crushed by rocks, their own chorus of angry snarls joining his.

"You see?" Izanami asked, going back to Kagome, knife held carelessly in her hand. "Beasts, all of them. Just as stupid as your race."

"Let them go!" His mate screamed, struggling against her bonds. "Let them go!"

"No," The kami bit out coldly. "I've waited eons for this opportunity, and you have all destroyed any chance I have of gaining freedom."

The knife came up, and he struggled against the bonds. Instincts broke through their cage, obliterating it as threads snapped. Looking down, he saw something dark shattering, and he was free to move again, his voice no longer recognizable as his own. With every intention of destroying the kami, he raised his sword and plunged it through her heart.

Unfortunately, it was Tenseiga.

"You dare use the sword of heaven on me?" The kami shrieked, turning to him. Tenseiga stuck fast in her heart, forcing it from his grip as she spun and came at him, the knife in her hands now aimed for him. Jumping back, he brought up Bakusaiga, readying himself for the final blow when she stumbled, the knife dropping from her hands.

A peculiar, foreign pulse echoed through the caverns, followed by another, and then another. Pinpointing the noise, he stared at the kami's heart, the withered, blackened thing beginning to pulse. With a sense of morbid, frozen fascination he watched it swell. Color returned to it, the organ fading from black into a deep purplish crimson, then a vivid, bright red. Veins began to creep along the bones, then flesh, but not before he saw organs beginning to form out of thin air. The entire scene was as grotesque to watch as it was enthralling.

The single black eye was joined by a mate in the other lidless socket, then eyelids. A nose formed, lips covered teeth that were fading into a pearly white. Skin sheathed the muscle and tissue, so pale it could have been marble. The veins he had just seen exposed were still dim shadows beneath the dermis.

Hair was the final thing to grow, eyelashes dusting her skin and the sparse, stringy strands grew lush and thick, shining darkly in the dim light of the cave.

The naked female before him radiated power and wonder. Tenseiga quieted, it's song fading, and he pulled the blade out, surprised when the reiki pulsing through it ceased. There was no wound to mark where it had been, nothing to betray any wound at all. Izanami stared down at her arms in awe, then her legs, stupefied by her own transformation.

Bakusaiga sang. He stared at it incredulously, wondering how he was supposed to defeat a goddess that had returned to her former glory.

"Do it!" His mate screamed.

Unable to deny her will, he brought the sword up, swinging across the goddess's body just as she brought her arms to her torso in a gesture of defense. However, she had no time to summon power or
even to scream.

Light exploded in the caverns, blinding him as power thrummed over him, through him. For all of it's force, there was nothing malevolent in it, nothing angry. Sent to his knees beneath the strength of it, he shielded his eyes, trying to scent out his mate and find her.

'Blessings,' A voice whispered, distinctly male.

The light vanished, leaving them all kneeling or laying in the empty, echoing cavern.

"What the fuck just happened?" Inu Yasha demanded loudly, standing up. Ignoring his half brother's spirit, he rushed over to the altar where Kagome was pushing herself up, the bonds tying her down disintegrating beneath the pressure of her tugging.

"Izanami has left the underworld. Tenseiga healed the flesh, Bakusaiga freed the spirit of it," His mother intoned as she tried to stand. He pulled his mate into his arms, clutching her tightly to his body. She nodded once, wearily, before her eyes closed. Panicked, he shook her, earning nothing but a breathy sigh.

"Get out, now, all of you. Tenseiga will only protect you, Sesshoumaru. With Izanami's magics gone, your mate and mother will die if you do not hurry," His father's voice rumbled.

"I do not mind," Yuugao sighed, only able to pull herself onto one knee, obviously weary. "I'm tired."

With a muttered curse Touga tore Sou'unga from his once mate's grip and threw it at his eldest son.

"Inu Yasha, carry the woman, Sesshoumaru, destroy the caverns."

"I will-" He snarled, instincts raging at the thought of anyone touching his still sleeping mate.

"Only you can wield it now, and we have no time to navigate the caves. Now," His father snarled back as he scooped up Yuugao, who was trying to fight his grip. "Cease your bitching Yuugao. You will go back to the land of the living, and you will tell Shinzuru your feelings, or so help me I will find a way to come back and thrash you within an inch of your life."

Yuugao stopped fighting, obviously stunned by the spirit's command. Inu Yasha took the still sleeping miko into his arms, rolling his eyes when a growl echoed through the cave.

"I'm dead, there's nothing you can do to me. Now let's go, or do you want her to die?" The spirit snapped, eyes flicking down to the woman in his arms.

Given little choice, Sesshoumaru swung So'unga, glad to have an outlet. The blade, once so powerful and seductive, gave no protest. Instead it stayed silent as he destroyed the roof of the cavern. Rocks showered down on them, but through some magic of their own, both spirits protected the females in their care.

Sesshoumaru forced himself to trust his father and half brother, forced himself to ignore the instincts screaming to take the miko into his arms, to protect her with his own body, and vaulted into the air, swinging Sou'unga again, destroying another ceiling of another chamber.

He remembered doing something similar in Naraku's body. His own body had been tired, weary from the expenditure of power, but now he felt as if he had power to spare. Again and again he destroyed another cavern. Chunks of rock three times his size came down around him, falling into the gaping scars he had left below. Desperation fueled his swings as each second dragged by into an
eternity.

When the dreary sky above finally greeted them, he turned to his father.

"Take this," He commanded, not caring that his father was looking at him as if he had lost his mind.

"I cannot."

"Take it."

"It is yours," His father said instead, shocking him.

"I do not want it."

"Sesshoumaru-" His mother began weakly, stopping when he sailed over to them and shoved it in his father's sash. He then turned to his half brother, who was already beginning to shift the sleeping miko, ready to give her back.

When she was back in his arms, his instincts quieted, although he pushed himself no less, following his father back to the gates he had entered. The way there seemed much shorter, as if the landscape had rearranged itself. Then he remembered that he had detoured on his father's guidance.

"Don't forget what I said, stubborn female," His father muttered, putting his mother on her feet.

"He'll never believe me," Yuugao sighed, looking ready to fall over.

"He will believe our son."

He was more than ready to be out of hell, to go back to the shiro and his family, to see his mate awake, and to replace the mating mark.

"Take care of her, bastard," Inu Yasha said with a strange half smile. "And have lots of little mutts like me."

He was going to say something pithy and cutting, because he'd always imagined strangling the insufferable half breed, however, he stopped. Pups. His and Kagome's pups. Had she conceived? It was still too soon to tell, making him jumpy and warm.

"You've made me proud son," His father said, pushing him closer to the gate.

As if in response to Tenseiga, which began pulsing rhythmically, the gates swung open.

"Now get out, and don't come back for a long fucking time," Inu Yasha barked. Not even needing that much provocation, he began walking past the stone barrier that separated the living world from that of the dead. Yuugao stumbled and, not particularly wanting to but doing it anyway, he moved over to her until she was against him and let her lean into him.

"One living went in, three came out," A voice echoed from somewhere high above them.

"Izanagi's blessing," The other responded. Not even caring what that meant, Sesshoumaru didn't look back as the gates closed. Instead, he formed a cloud of youki and gently laid his mate down on it. His mother got on with only a pointed look in her direction.

The trip home was silent, and he contemplated the sleeping onna carefully. By the time they arrived, night had fallen, and still she slept. He considered it for the best. After all, by now he would know if his actions had resulted in the desired child.
There was nothing there, only the chill certainty that everything he had done, everything he had sacrificed in those moments, had been for nothing.

**AN:** Who hates Hatter? -preens- Okay, so, well, umm, this isn't -quite- the end. By a long shot. Loose ends and all that. I do hope some of the more prevalent questions asked were answered. As for the rest, there's still a bit to go. Review, makes me happy.
Days passed in awkward silence in the shiro. Despite her the presence of her friends, Kagome chose to avoid the castle as often as possible, opting for rides on Boufuu, each time going further and further afield.

Since her return, it felt as if the world had turned upside down, and she was still trying to find her footing. A particularly long stride of Boufuu's sent the necklace against her chest thumping, and with another growl she urged him on faster, needing to put more space between herself and the castle, and the people within it.

Yuugao had given her the necklace with the statement that she was the new head. Never mind that the fingertip inside of it had belonged to Izanami, and that she hadn't wanted the damned thing anywhere near her, or that she wasn't -technically- Sesshoumaru's mate anymore. Unable to refuse, she had accepted. And then Yuugao had fled, ignoring Kagome's pleas to stay, to tell Shinzuru, to try and be happy.

Briefly, she wished she could follow. After all, Yuugao had spent the whole of her mating in the sky fortress. Surely she could too? And the daiyoukai wasn't so bad, now that she had a better understanding of what had happened, why the youkai had done what she had done.

However, any rushing off had to be held off long enough to receive her mating mark a second time, and to get married.

"Three days," She growled, unsure if she anticipated the events or dreaded them. One thing that had changed since waking in her own bed was finding out that Sesshoumaru was in the eastern lands, helping Kouga better understand what being a ruler meant. No one had said a word, except Yuugao, who had, in the quietest, most gentle voice she'd ever heard, told her that she had not conceived, and that her son was still trying to handle the effects of what he'd done.

Which left her standing alone in the shiro. Oh, not truly alone. The twins and Shinzuru and Resshin refused to leave her side. She'd had to resort to sneaking around like a thief just to get time alone. Her friends were acting no better, and she didn't have the heart to tell them what had happened, or that the coming festivities were less something to be celebrated and more something to be endured. More
and more of them were arriving for the festivities, and more and more she just needed to get away, to get out.

Boufuu whickered angrily, stopping short and stamping his feet against the cold earth.

"After everything you have endured, you're running away?" A voice asked.

There was no one in front of her, and no one behind her. Turning the horse several times, she looked around the wood, trying to figure out who had spoken while she let her power rise above the skin, crackling it's warning.

"There is no need for that, miko. I have merely come to collect what is necessary to complete my wife's resurrection."

The man coalesced from thin air, vivid golds and silvers and reds decorating his body. Blinking against the light that emanated from him, she shook her head, immediately understanding who the man was, and that he was not a man at all.

"Izanagi," She breathed, her heart beating madly. Fear sent shocks of adrenaline through her, making her want to move, to run, to get as far from the god as she could. She even squeezed her knees, trying to urge Boufuu into a gallop, but the horse stood still, refusing to move.

"You have nothing to be afraid of. The process was almost fully complete, but the pendant keeps her from completing the cycle. It must be destroyed so that she maybe be reborn."

"Why should I trust you?" She bit out, hand going to the necklace and squeezing it in her palm. "Yuugao told me I was supposed to protect it."

The kami watched her with wise, knowing eyes for several minutes, and she knew he was shifting through her, peering into her innermost thoughts and weighing them. Not liking the intrusion in the least, she tried to imagine a wall slamming up to keep him out.

The image must have amused him, because he smiled and a small chuckle breathed into the clearing, the noise itself unearthly.

"You have no reason to trust the gods," He acknowledged. "Your path has been a hard one, but it was necessary."

"Necessary?" She snapped. Ignoring good sense and sound judgment, she slid from Boufuu and stalked over to him, blue eyes blazing furiously. He watched her, the small smile never fading, saying nothing.

"How was this all necessary?" She demanded, feeling very small in the face of his knowing smile. It made her angry, made her want to erase it. It was borderline condescending, as if he could read her thoughts even then and understand.

"Child, I love each and every one of your brethren, you, every living thing that is within my domain," He told her in that quiet voice. "Human, youkai, hanyou, they are my children. And those that decide the fates of so many of my children are of especial importance to me."

"What the hell does that even mean?" She snapped angrily.

"You and Sesshoumaru have both sacrificed and given beyond your own limitations, have borne the weight of thousands willingly. You alone saved countless lives by sacrificing your own needs and wants in the face of war. And then again, when you both made the sacrifice on that altar, you saved
even more. If Izanami had escaped hell as she was, she would have caused more destruction, done more harm to my children than Naraku could have ever dreamed of doing."

"So? It's your fault she was there anyway," She muttered, remembering Izanami's angry words.

"She gave birth to a child that ripped her body apart. When I found her, she had eaten the food of the underworld. I could not have saved her. Not then. Only the swords of death and heaven could have done so."

"Death?" She asked dumbly, earning another small chuckle.

"The daiyoukai's sword offers nothing less than utter obliteration. And it is a necessary thing," He added. "Cycles must be respected. He now wields life and death, and understands the balance between them."

"Wonderful. What does this have to do with giving you the bone?"

"Nothing, just musing aloud, I suppose," He offered. "I would not see your tale end in you running away."

"I'm not running away, I was just riding-"

"As you have every day since your return. Each day the ride grows longer, and you further distance yourself from those that love you."

"It's none of your business," She muttered.

"After everything you have given, perhaps I have taken a personal interest in your happiness."

"We'll sort it out," She snapped, growing impatient with the kami.

"I'm sure you will," He sighed, finally losing the smile and looking at her with sad eyes. "Child, you have grown and aged so in the past years. So much was taken from you. Allow yourself to take. He will freely give whatever you ask."

"It's wrong," She snapped.

"Oh so?" He asked, looking surprised.

"He's my friend, I can't-I won't-" Here she stopped, the wounds of their venture into hell still too fresh, too vivid and raw to think of. The kami had not been wrong. They had made a sacrifice on the altar, one that she felt the effects of more every day. Even if it had saved lives, even if it had been the right thing to do, it had destroyed the fragile bond they had formed, had been the breaking point of a relationship that had been constantly tested.

"Child, what makes you think asking for his heart is wrong?"

"Because he'd pretend out of a sense of duty. He's already given so much for his word, I won't ask him to give even more," She said, hugging her sides. "Because if I have to settle for friendship, I'd rather have that than nothing."

Warm arms encompassed her, and for a moment she felt like Shinzuru was hugging her again, his strength seeping into her and cocooning her in a layer of protection. That a god was hugging her, the father of gods no less, completely escaped her at the moment. It was enough that someone was hugging her without reserve, without fear.
"Little one, he has always taken the first step," He murmured. "It is time you bridge the gap. If asking him for his love is too demanding and goes against your heart, then offer your own. Perhaps it will soothe his own wounds."

"But-"

"Shh," He whispered, pulling back and looking down at her with loving eyes that seemed to shine with the warmth of the sun. "I have but a single request, miko of the Moon House."

"Huh?"

"On the eve of your wedding, no later, you must destroy the bone. It will not be as simple as it was in hell. Bokusenou will aid you. I will consider the process complete, and you may keep safe the knowledge that a kami did not take it. But it must be done before the longest night."

His abrupt change of topic left her mentally listing as he cupped her face gently and smiled at her. Instead of flying away or shooting up into the sky in a burst of light, he gently faded, the heat of his palm lingering even after his image had disappeared completely. The warmth suffused her being, felt like a small sun in the face of the cold winter day.

"Boufuu," She murmured, then straightened and looked at the horse, who stepped next to her, waiting for her to mount him. In one smooth motion, she was in the saddle and squeezing her knees tightly, determination suffusing her whole being.

For the first time since her return she had a purpose. After floating adrift, unsure if she had lost her place even as she was supposed to assume it, it felt good to have a goal, a distraction. Boufuu seemed to fly over the ground, lunging through the wood until she was turning him, trying to get to Bokusenou. Already questions about the bone were revolving in her head. Worried that they would have to deal with more kami, or worse, go back to hell, she tried to rationalize it in her own head. Feudal magic was beyond her, something she had never studied. But Tenka and maybe even Kaede might know something about it as well.

Already compiling a list in her head of the youkai and humans that had used magic, she almost passed the koboku no kai altogether. Slowing her mount down, she slipped off of the saddle, unsurprised to see the old tree already awake, as it were, his face emerging from the bark even as she stepped closer.

"I've heard many stories of the Lady riding through the wood as of late. What brings her to me today?" The youkai asked kindly, if a little surprised, as if he had not expected her to visit his part of the forest.

"I was visited by Izanagi."

"Unsurprising," Bokusenou conceded as she sat down at his roots, eyes fastened on his face.

"He told me I had to get rid of the bone so that Izanami could be reborn, that you would know how to do it."

Bokusenou was silent, the bark of his face still, almost blending in with the rest of his trunk as his eyes narrowed in concentration, perhaps remembrance. Kagome waited patiently, or as patiently as she was able, while he considered her words and searched for an answer, expression only giving away that he was thinking, and nothing else.

"The destruction of Izanami's body in hell was one thing," Bokusenou said thoughtfully, deliberately, after a long period of silence. "It could absorb the energy, as it was created as a place for
such to walk. However, destroying something even as small as that bone could do a great deal of damage on this plain."

Kagome looked down at the pendant, which she held in her hand. Blue eyes narrowed on the black stone. Despite Izanami's death, the strange white shadow still fluttered inside of it, barely visible even in the best of light, as if it moved to hide in the darkness. Given the nature of the 'stone' it wasn't surprising, but it had worried her that it was still active.

"Do I have to go back to hell?" She asked, desperately hoping against hope that she wouldn't have to.

"You cannot enter hell again, even with the bone. A barrier will have to suffice."

"I can do that,-" She began, halting when the tree made a dismissive sound.

"No, you cannot. It will require more than just you and your kind of power. It will require several people to withstand the backlash. Otherwise the energy will break through and wreak havoc and destruction for miles."

"Has this happened before?" Kagome asked, brow furrowing in thought.

"It did, when gods still walked this land freely. Even to the oldest old ones they are ancient stories, but their marks persist. You must construct a barrier," He repeated in a matter of fact tone.

"How do I do that?"

"You must gather five powerful people. Each will support the pillar of the five basic elements of this earth."

"Five-" Already he was talking over her head, and she ran a hand through her hair, wondering if she could pull off the destruction of the bone. Maybe she should have given it to Izanagi after all.

"Metal, air, earth, fire and water."

"Gogyo," Kagome murmured, remembering that her grandfather had spoken of it on several occasions, comparing it to another set of standard elements.

"You and Sesshoumaru must be in the center. You have to purify the last bit of spirit remaining within that bone after he uses Tenseiga, and then he must destroy it. It must be done quickly, and you must be prepared. You both will be the closest to it."

That didn't sound reassuring in the least. If anything, it made her even more nervous.

"Izanagi said I had to have this done before the longest night. Why?" She asked, hoping that maybe the bone's destruction wasn't important even though she knew it was. Kami did not come to earth to have personal chats with mortals for no reason. And while Izanagi had been kind and even comforting, she had no doubt that if his request, if it was a request at all, went unfulfilled, things would go very badly for her and those she loved.

And she was, quite honestly, miserable enough as it was.

"I don't know," Bokusenou told her. "But if he warned you, then it would be well to heed it."

"But it's only two days away. I don't even know who I would get to help," She murmured, the enormity of the task before her all the more frightening for it's possibilities. Sesshoumaru wasn't even
at the shiro, she wasn't even sure if he was on his way back from the eastern lands with Kouga yet. For all she knew he could still be there instructing Kouga on being a good lord.

"Child, you truly haven't seen it, have you?" Bokusenou chuckled, smiling indulgently, just as Izanagi had. Once again she felt young and very small in the face of that knowing smile, and she groaned, pillaging her brain trying to figure out who he could be referring to.

When it finally hit her, she groaned into her hands while feeling twice the fool for not seeing it sooner.

"I'm an idiot," She muttered into her palms.

"No, you merely have much to do and little time to do it."

"I've got to get to Sesshoumaru."

"I would suggest telling the others of your plans first."

She nodded, agreeing with the sentiment even as she was standing and pulling herself up onto Boufuu's saddle.

"Thank you," She murmured to the tree, who seemed to nod as much as he was able, the bark around his face rippling for a moment before his features were lost in the swirl of indistinct patterns. Turning Boufuu sharply, she dug her knees into his sides, clinging to his mane as he shot forward.

The trip to the shiro was short, and by the time she galloped to the training field near the stables Boufuu had worked up a lather, his sides heaving as she slowed him to a trot. He hadn't even stopped before she was jumping down, her hands moving over his side as she murmured her thanks to him.

Taru came over, taking the reins. She offered a quick thanks before she was running back into the shiro, sliding off her boots and nearly tripping in her haste. Several servants stopped to watch her as she strode purposefully through the shiro and to Sesshoumaru's study. She could feel the auras of the youkai there and quickened her pace.

When she slid the door open, she saw four figures, all of which looked as if she had caught them in a conversation they hadn't wanted her to hear, which was entirely possible given the circumstances of the last few months, but especially the last few weeks. Shaking her head to detour from those possibilities, she tried to school her features into something calm instead of slightly panicked.

"I need help."

And they were all getting up abruptly, as if her words had been a command for them to stand at attention. Once they were all standing, it occurred to her that maybe they needed the distraction as much as she did.

"Dad?"

"Yes, Cat?"

"I need you to go to the air fortress and bring back the Lady Mother."

One of the twins made a choked sound and Kagome gave him a stern look before turning back to Shinzuru, who looked ready to protest.
"She'll listen to you. Tell her that she has to be here the day before the wedding. It's got to do with the title and the last bone."

"Awful lot of mystery," Shinzuru said, eye narrowed in speculation. "Any reason for that?"

"I know the general climate at the moment, and I know everyone's feelings. But Bokusenou was the one to tell me about the barrier, it's based off of the gogyo. I need your help, all of you, and hers. I have to go get Sesshoumaru too. It has to be done before the longest night." The longer she spoke, the more urgency made her voice uneven, almost worried. With each second of inactivity, the more worried, almost paranoid she became, until the words were spilling out, babbling that she knew made no sense to them, given their expressions. Except Resshin, who was regarding her quietly, eyes stilling into bright, spring leaf green, startling in his dark complexion.

"Doesn't give you a lot of time," Kasai observed. "If needs be, one of us can go with you-"

"I can take my cloud, it'll be faster if it's just me," She interrupted. "Besides, I need you guys here making sure my guests don't think I eloped," She joked. Smiles, hesitant and hopeful, began to tilt up the corners of lips and light up eyes.

"I will see you to the border at least," Resshin told her. "Bokusenou is not the only one who knows shortcuts," He added when she began to protest. "And it will help you conserve your energy."

Resshin's words seemed to spur the others into action. Mizu was telling her to go find her travel pack in case she needed it and that he would find her something to take for food. Kasai was following, telling her that he would find what he could on the kind of barrier they were supposed to be creating. Resshin went to inform his mate of his departure, and she was left standing alone with Shinzuru.

"Cat, what's going on?" He asked, walking with her as she made a beeline for the family wing.

"Izanagi asked me to destroy the bone. It's keeping Izanami from being reincarnated."

Shinzuru cursed succinctly, obviously displeased by her confession as they strode down the hall.

"I don't trust gods," He muttered.

"Bokusenou was the one that told me how. Izanagi was the one to tell me it had to be within the next two days. Shinzuru, he initially said he needed to take it. When I refused to give it up he gave me the option of destroying it," She tried to assure him.

"But still-"

"Shinzuru, this needs to be done. I trust Bokusenou." It went without saying that she did not trust the kami. Even if he had felt comforting, even if he had tried to explain something, whatever it was she still wasn't sure, she didn't trust him, and probably never would. It occurred to her that she was doing an exemplary job of being worst miko to ever grace Japan, by taking in youkai children and marrying a daiyoukai, topping it off with a healthy distrust of the kami.

He was quiet after that, following her up the stairs and into the family wing. He waited patiently outside of her suite until she came out, a light travel pack slung over her shoulder.

"No bedroll," He observed as she hurried past him.

"I won't need it."

"Can you even find him without-" And he stopped abruptly. She stopped, the slip stabbing at her
"I've never needed the mark to find him," She said quietly.

"I'm sorry-"

"It's fine," She chirruped brightly, forcing a smile to her face to cover her anxiety. Ever since she had been given the information about the barrier from Bokusenou, she hadn't thought about confronting Sesshoumaru again, and taking one of the twins with her suddenly sounded like a very good idea. But she would be faster on her own, and time was of the essence. It could easily take her two days to get to Kouga's even if she flew all night, and adding another person would only slow her down.

"Are you sure, I can go to get him-"

"Can you find him?" She asked sceptically, and when the moth youkai shook his head, she nodded firmly.

"Go get Yuugao. She has to be here."

"You said you only needed five people for the barrier."

"Sesshoumaru will be in the center with me. She's going to take his place."

Shinzuru nodded, seemingly satisfied with her explanation. She was getting close to the door to the inner gardens when Mizu caught up with them, a leather bag in hand.

"Make sure to eat, the power you use-"

"Consumes energy. I know mother," She huffed playfully. It was as though having a new goal, a new purpose had unified and relaxed them. Even Resshin seemed in better spirits when he finally joined them in the inner garden. Shinzuru gave her another questioning glance, concern evident in his eye.

"I'll be fine. Be safe dad," She told him. He nodded before launching himself into the air, quickly becoming nothing more than a speck of darkness against the blue sky.

Resshin pulled something from one of the few braids scattered in his hair and blew on it gently before palming it and then grabbing her hand, the item cupped between their palms.

"Shall we?" He asked, brow raised. She nodded, stomach tightening with nervousness. He took a step forward and she walked with him. Within three steps the ground beneath them began to lift and move. Kagome recognized it as the same sort of magic Bokusenou had used, giving her his leaves to carry her to him. However, it felt like they were going much faster, the ground beneath them moving so quickly that the world blurred by and her stomach rebelled.

Despite herself her hand squeezed Resshin's in an effort not to vomit, and surprisingly, he squeezed back. Though they'd never been affectionate with each other, she took comfort in the gesture. A part of her wanted to ask him if he could take her all the way to Sesshoumaru and help her explain the situation, but she knew he wanted to get back to Nanmei as much as she wanted to get the meeting over with.

"Thank you for understanding," He murmured quietly.

"Hnn?" She asked, for a moment not grasping what he had been referring to. Until she remember his power. Though she had known him for almost a year, the idea of his gifts still eluded her, usually at
"It's not a problem. You need to be with her," She replied almost as quietly.

It was only twenty minutes later that they stopped, and he stared into the forest around them, his hand slipping from hers. The item he had pressed between their palms stuck to her slick skin, and she looked at it, unsurprised to see a leaf. What did surprise her was that it looked like a leaf from the tree that had sprung from his mating ceremony months before.

"It is," He confided. "It holds little use for magic now, but keep it. Perhaps it will give you luck."

"Thank you," She said, watching him nod before he took a step away and became a blur, gone within seconds.

Summoning her cloud, she sat her pack on it and climbed on, casting out her senses in a search for Sesshoumaru. When she had told Shinzuru she had been able to find him without the mating mark she hadn't been lying, but she had never tried it with much distance between them.

"He's out there," She whispered as she rose higher, finding a clearing in the canopy above her and rising above it into the sky. "He's the only one."

Voices whispered to her, feelings of people she had never known, hadn't even been aware of being nearby. It was nothing she had ever experienced before, and the first moments terrified her, so much so that she blanked completely, stunned by the slight swell of emotions and auras.

Meekly, cautiously, she reached out to them, sorting through the feel of the threads and voices, searching intently for the one she knew to be uniquely Sesshoumaru. It was slow going, but she was able to easily discard aura after aura, dismissing them without doubt or fear. None of them felt like his, but there were so many. Frustrated, she made an angry sound, demanding the voices to cease.

Abrupt silence descended on her mind, the auras faded, and there was only the feel of him brushing against her consciousness. Clinging to it, seeking it out desperately, she directed her cloud, focusing on the sensations. Since she had slipped free of his body and settled back into her own, she had been denied that feeling and, like an addict, she reveled in it's presence, oblivious to anything around her.

The loneliness that had weighted her down, pushed her into fleeing their home just as he had, abated. As she moved faster, feeding more of her energy into the cloud to accelerate flight, the feel of his aura grew stronger. Carelessly she let her own aura reach out to it, unconsciously soothing a pain that she could barely feel thrumming through him.

Hours passed and she found contentment. Free of another's presence, Kagome allowed herself to delight in the sensation of security that descended on her. Almost meditative, she braided the leaf into her hair, smiling softly as she drew closer. The sky dimmed and grew dark, and for the first time in many weeks, she enjoyed the sight of the sun sinking below the treeline and the moon fading into existence.

Even when she grew weary she stayed awake, eyes open on the starry sky as she flew beneath it, mind still tangled up in him. Something spiked his aura unpleasantly now and again, a stabbing pain that occasionally needled her, growing worse as her cloud closed the distance between them.

Not knowing if it made a difference or not, she continued to reach out to him, hoping some shadow of her concern and hope brushed against him despite the distance. It was a silly thought, and she knew it was, but she couldn't stop herself. Even if it did work, he would never know, and if it did work, then maybe it would help him.
When the sky was lightening into morning, she felt an alert snap thrum through the thread she was still clinging to. Anger pulsed angrily, surged through and broke the melancholic stasis. Her meditation shattered as she scrambled to go faster, urging her cloud on, sometimes the command in her head emerging as an actual whisper against the wind. Afraid that something had happened, she was even more determined to reach him quickly, panic overriding sense as she ruthlessly drained her resources.

Half crazed in her worry, she only felt his aura, that distinctive feel of him, getting closer. It wasn’t until she saw a speck in the distance cutting through the air like a bullet that he had obviously felt her somehow, and had been rushing to meet her just as quickly.

And he was unhappy. Exceptionally so, if the angry pulsing of his youki said anything about it.

"What are you doing here?" He demanded, easily closing the distance between them. It was not the greeting she had hoped for, and she was exhausted, already feeling the effects of expending so much energy. Dumbly she stared up at him, surprised by the barely repressed fury that surged out in hot waves over her skin.

"You're alright," She observed, feeling stupid the minute the words left her mouth. For a brief moment she saw the confusion in his eyes at her response before his expression grew shuttered. In that moment she could practically feel the distance between them growing, could feel his aura withdrawing as he employed whatever trick that pulled it beneath his skin before it disappeared completely.

"Sesshoumaru," She sighed, running a hand through her hair. His expression shifted to one of apathy.

"You have no escort."

"There wasn't time. We have to get back to the shiro. It's important."

"You-" He started looking more and more, well, not angry, because his expression was flattening, chilling into that cold mask that she had thought he had discarded. Apparently not. However, she knew when he retreated like that, it was because he didn't want to show something, and she was willing to assume that he was angry.

"I promise I'll explain, but we have to get back there. There's something we have to do," She urged. "I wouldn't have come without one of the pack if it wasn't important," She added, hoping her conviction echoed in her tone.

"What is so important?"

"We need to get moving. I'll explain on the way," She told him, trying to keep her voice steady.

"We will not reach the shiro before nightfall like this," He declared quietly.

"I can't make it go any faster," She muttered sullenly. At least he had met her part of the way, that would cut down on travel time. But she could already feel the loss of her energy, lethargy creeping in despite her best efforts to push it back.

"Come," He ordered gruffly. He didn't move, and for a moment she thought that he was telling her to move faster. But when he jerked his head awkwardly she moved her cloud closer to him. Obviously hesitant to touch her, her hand came out and grabbed her wrist, pulling her closer before letting go as if he found the contact repulsive.
Knowing why but still hurt by the action, she remained silent as his energy wove around them. Easily recognizing his method of travel, she closed her eyes and allowed herself to relax. The weariness she had been fighting crept over her now that it was finally given room in her relaxed state. The tension however, refused to fully ease, what lay ahead teasing at the edges and trying to incite the familiar flash-bolt of fear.

Closing her eyes she allowed herself to drift, reaching out to the swell of power around her and, knowing that it would be a long time before she would feel it again, if ever, she wrapped it around herself, pushing away the future and focusing on the present moments. The comfort she could find, what little could be spared, was only half effective, any peace stained by the knowledge that he was as tense as a spring next to her, as if her touch would shatter him.

But Sesshoumaru was faster, had more power to spare. Most of all, he seemed determined to get them back to the shiro as quickly as possible. Unsure if it was because of her own desperation, which she had projected as well as she could, or the need to get away from her as quickly as possible, she fingered the leaf in her hair, tried to remember that it was supposed to give her luck. It didn't feel like it was working. Not in the least.

"Why did you leave?"

Kagome tried not to blurt out the first thing that came to mind, which was, ironically, the exact same question he had posed.

"We have to destroy the necklace."

"Why?"

"Izanagi-" She paused when his aura flared with displeasure and tried not to flinch as he visibly cooled. "He came to me while I was riding Boufuu. He said it had to be done before the longest night. Bokusenou agreed when I asked him what to do."

"Bokusenou told you?"

"We have to create a barrier of some kind, or else when it's destroyed the backlash of power will decimate the surrounding area. Bokusenou said you have to revive the flesh, and I have to purify it before you destroy it with Bakusaiga," She explained quietly.

"Why meddle with it at all?" He asked, expression stony.

"It's keeping Izanami from being reborn. And I don't really want bits of her hanging around," She muttered, looking down at the ivory disk where the black stone lay embedded. "It's unsettling knowing I'm carrying around a part of her." There was more than just a grain of truth to that. Selfishly, she didn't want the bit of the goddess around her neck, a macabre reminder of that journey and the sacrifices it had entailed. The truth stretched further though, into an idea, at least, of freedom. Freedom for whoever wanted it, freedom for whoever took the title after, if a title remained. Life's little ironies, she realized, weren't funny in the least. Yuugao had tried to save the title and the line, and they were endeavoring to destroy the remaining piece that connected it. Kagome wondered if it would affect the sky fortress at all, or if it all would fade with time, like the idea of the line itself. Maybe the title would continue, and no one would know why it had existed.

Sesshoumaru remained quiet for the rest of the trip, watching as the sun crept along the sky. By the time it was beginning to set she could see the citadel in the distance, the shiro rising above it's line and framed by the last rays of the sun.
When they landed in the inner gardens, she vanished her cloud and walked ahead of Sesshoumaru, still worried by his disapproving silence. Knowing where the others would be, she headed straight for Sesshoumaru's study, surprised that despite its former bustling activity, the shiro seemed quiet, unnaturally still.

"This is eerie," She muttered.

"They're all in the great hall," Sesshoumaru replied, voice quiet. "They are celebrating for tomorrow."

The word sounded almost damning, and she did her best to keep her expression as controlled as her aura so that he wouldn't know how much it had hurt to hear him speak like that. With each step closer to the study she felt her heart speed up as her anxiety returned. Still tired despite resting for the duration of the trip back, she was afraid she didn't have the energy to purify the bone itself.

Five faces looked up, all contemplative, when she stepped in, Sesshoumaru following behind her.

"Hello everyone," She greeted quietly.

Everyone was quiet, making her even more nervous. The serious looks she received were laced with pity as she took a seat next to Yuugao, who sat far away from the others. The youkai's loneliness and awkwardness was a palpable thing, making Kagome feel badly for her.

"Yuugao had a scroll explaining how to construct the barrier," Mizu explained quietly. "It's a simple process, but the steps," he added, trailing off.

"What?" Kagome asked, looking from one face to another.

"We have to blend our ki. It takes time, time that we may not have. And if we fail and you and Sesshoumaru destroy the bone-" Shinzuru added, looking uncomfortable.

"There is no room for error when destroying an artifact such as that," Yuugao finished woodenly. "It would escape the confines of the barrier and destroy anyone within miles, including all of us. No one can hold back."

"But that shouldn't be a problem," Kagome said, blinking obliquely. "We all know that this is important."

"She means we'd all have to trust each other," Resshin pointed out.

"But we do."

There was a long, uncomfortable silence that followed that statement. Tension that had been bad before becoming almost suffocating.

"Don't we?" She asked, looking from face to face.

"No."

Shocked, she turned to look up at Sesshoumaru, who was staring down at her with eyes that weren't looking at her, but beyond her. She realized then how much she hated that almost blank stare. It reminded her too much of the person he had been, the unreachable, untouchable daiyoukai that she had met when she had still been too broken to trust anyone.

"No?" She asked quietly, afraid of the answer she already knew.
"It is impossible."

"Tell me who here don't you trust?" She demanded, getting to her feet. "Because I know you trust your guards, which leaves your mother and me."

"The answer should be obvious," Yuugao sighed, standing. "I do not begrudge him his suspicions. I have more than earned them."

"You nearly killed yourself trying to keep me safe!" Kagome snapped at her, turning back to Sesshoumaru. "Fine. If you can't trust her to stand guard over us, then I can use Tenseiga and Bakusaiga to destroy the bone and you can stand in her place," She added compulsively.

Sesshoumaru scoffed, making his opinion obvious, which only served to further prick at her temper. Even after everything they had gone through, everything he had been told and shown, he still didn't trust his mother's intentions. Letting out a disgusted sound, she stood and darted towards him, ignoring the angry noise issuing from his throat when she wrapped her hands around Bakusaiga's hilt and pulled it free of it's sheathe.

"Kagome-" Shinzuru said, voice pitched with uncertainty.

Sesshoumaru said nothing, eyes narrowed as he stared her down. Refusing to back down, she moved forward and pulled Tenseiga free, ignoring the sudden prickling feeling of being watched. Both swords felt warm in her hands, but unlike that first time she had handled Tenseiga, it did not make a protest, and Bakusaiga accepted her hand easily, almost, strangely, welcoming.

"The swords accept her," Resshin observed quietly. "The Lady mother can use her youki to activate the blades and Kagome's intent will guide them."

"No," Sesshoumaru snapped, turning his gaze on his subordinate. "I do not trust her-

"You have two options Sesshoumaru," Kagome told him in a firm voice, ignoring his furious gaze turning on her, refusing to submit to the anger she felt spiking his aura. "You can help me or hinder me, but this is going to be done. I don't want this curse passing on to everyone in our pack because of us. I won't let it hurt anyone else."

She knew it was another sacrifice, perhaps the biggest one she had made. Even as his gaze was swinging between her and the blades in her hands he was relenting, but not without a price. Not knowing how she managed to stay standing beneath the cold fury that swallowed the room, she locked her knees and tried to remember the face of each child in the pack, and everything that they had already endured. It was worth his anger, worth the ever increasing distance, because they had a chance to stop it and make things better, safer, and she knew she would pay whatever cost was exacted.

It didn't mean it didn't hurt to see him staring at her like that, as if she had personally betrayed him.

"She will construct the barrier, I will wield Tenseiga and Bakusaiga" He said, voice apathetic. Kagome extended her hands, turning the blades away from him and offering the handles. He took both, easily sliding them back into their sheathes.

"The training field," She told him, inwardly flinching when he only nodded stiffly before leaving the room, not even bothering to slide the door shut behind him.

"Cat-" Shinzuru began. She turned to him, mouth set in a firm line and shoulders straight. She refused to let any of them know how afraid she was, how much her heart was hurting in her chest.
"It must be done," Resshin said quietly. "Leading the pack will always require sacrifices."

"I know," She answered quietly, understanding immediately how much her sacrifice had cost her. "We should go."

The others filed out ahead of her, but Yuugao remained close to her as they followed several feet behind them, side by side through the eerie silence of the shiro. Kagome wondered if the youkai could hear the festivities in the great hall, or if they were oblivious to it, lost in their own thoughts.

"When I forced your hand, I did not expect these results," Yuugao admitted as they stepped out into the night. Kagome formed her cloud, big enough for two to sit. Shinzuru launched himself into the sky, Resshin and the twins both blurred and vanished, leaving them alone as they rose into the air.

"I understand why you did it. I don't think anyone would defy the kami."

"It was not just for the kami," Yuugao admitted. "My son felt for you, and you him. I had thought it was enough to build upon. Perhaps by forcing it so quickly, I am responsible for it's current state."

"You were trying to help us," Kagome sighed. "It wasn't the way, but given the circumstances, I can understand."

"You forgive much."

"Someone has to."

"Still, I would not see it end this way," Yuugao sighed.

Kagome clung to the hope that maybe she and Sesshoumaru had a few centuries to fix their broken friendship. If she was lucky, it would only take a few decades. But Sesshoumaru had proven to be stubborn before. She was almost positive she had used up all of her luck pulling the swords free of their sheathes. That they hadn't reacted negatively to her was a surprise, and she still had no idea where the compulsion had come from to begin with.

When they landed, Sesshoumaru and the others were already standing. Shinzuru looked almost angry, his face pulled into a frown and his forehead creased, brows knit together. Both twins were standing with Resshin, who was gazing at Sesshoumaru thoughtfully while Mizu whispered something to his brother.

"Let's get this over with," Kagome sighed.

"We need to create the physical barrier," Yuugao intoned, voice devoid of emotion.

"How?"

"Blood. And to stay within the boundary, both you and Sesshoumaru must consume some."

While it didn't sound appetizing in the least, Kagome only nodded, watching as Yuugao pulled the kanzashi holding her bun in place free. Her hair fell down, curling and waving from it's confining style. The kanzashi itself looked harmless, but Yuugao pulled it free from the sleeve that had, Kagome thought, been the whole of it. An impossibly thin blade, more needle-like than knife was exposed, catching the moonlight and flashing brightly.

"Normally there are cups to receive the blood, but I suppose there was no time to gather the implements," Yuugao sighed, pulling up the sleeves over her kimono and exposing her arm. Kagome gasped when the youkai carelessly slashed the blade down the length of the limb, opening a gash
from the hollow of her elbow all the way to her wrist.

"It doesn't take much," Yuugao told her quietly. Knowing that Yuugao was telling her to drink, she brushed her finger over the female's arm, shuddering when she felt the blood pulsing out of the rupture. Hot and sickeningly slick, she brought her finger to her mouth and quickly sucked the blood off, determined not to think about what it was she was doing.

But the power in the blood, the coppery taste the echoed over her tongue was too strong, too varied in it's tones to completely ignore. For a moment Kagome wondered if youki could be carried in the blood, and if that was the purpose of the physical boundary. Nodding, she walked away, a heaviness pulsing through her own blood. It felt thicker as it ran through her veins, her heart beating harder to pump it through her body.

Sesshoumaru walked past her as she walked over to the others, who were already beginning to spread out in a predetermined circle. Youki flared as blood dripped down onto the grass, glimpses visible to even the naked eye. She imagined that they were creating a perfect, solid circle with it, and when she reached Mizu, she realized that they were in fact, forming a solid line barely discernible in the darkness.

"Be careful," Mizu said, offering his arm. "Sesshoumaru only trusts his mother to have her own machinations, little more."

"Then he will have to trust that she wants this done, for whatever reason," She sighed as she traced her finger over the bleeding wound.

"Will it be enough?" He asked, voice quiet.

"It'll have to be," She murmured just as softly before tasting his blood.

Like Yuugao's there was a tingle that ran through her when she tasted it, but it didn't taste like copper at all. It was surprisingly bland and cool, easily swallowed. Lightheaded from the unexpected chill that ran through her, she said nothing as she walked away.

Shinzuru waited, already having finished creating the line of blood that met with Mizu and Kasai's. She looked up at him, surprised to see that he still looked upset.

"Dad," She murmured quietly. He held his arm up, eye catching the light and flashing eerily in the dark.

"You have to be strong, Cat. Strong enough for the both of you."

"I know," She sighed, tracing her finger across the already healing gash along his arm. His blood was also cool as she tasted it, lighter even than Mizu's and tingling with magic as she swallowed. Static followed it down, shivered through her with each beat of her pulse. Oddly lightheaded and blinking to try and clear the sensation, she gave in when it didn't abate, only seemed to grow stronger.

He looked ready to say something else, but chose not to, moving to embrace her instead. His arms tightened around her, the handle of his naginata pressing uncomfortably into her side. More solid, more reassuring than anything she had ever felt, she soaked up his warmth, needy and afraid.

"Please be safe."

"I will," She promised, returning the embrace before pulling away.
She walked over to Kasai, who was grinning at her, already offering his arm.

"You know, if nothing else you two will provide us with entertainment for the next few centuries," he chuckled as she swiped her finger over the almost healed wound. She gave him a flat look before bringing her finger to her mouth.

His blood burned, weaving an almost uncomfortable path through her body. Lancing through the heaviness and the charged static, it thudded hotly, warming her despite the cool night air.

"Things will work out," he added, reaching to ruffle her hair. Making a face at the gesture, she ignored his chuckle and began walking over to Reshin, running a hand through her mussed locks and pushing them back from her face. The braid hung heavily, the leaf scraping against her cheek lightly, reminding her of the quiet confidence he had tried to give her with it.

Even in the dark Reshin's eyes were visible, shifting through colors no less vivid for the shadows around them. He held out his arm, surprising her by using his nail to make a cut over unmarked flesh. She supposed the first had already healed.

"The spirits favor this," he commented quietly as she collected a smear of his blood on the tip of her finger. "Be careful of the backlash, it will be worse than the initial blast, little sister."

Unsure of what the warning meant, she nodded anyway, quickly sucked the tip of her finger. Reshin's blood was also warm, but not as hot as Kasai's had been. Instead it was thick, almost sluggishly moving down her throat. She clung to the peace in his expression, the sense of duty and strength that helped her stand even though she wanted to run.

Sesshoumaru walked over, repeating her actions wordlessly.

"When the power is freed from it's shell, keep each other safe," Reshin told them, eyes deepening into a deep green, so dark it was almost black. Sesshoumaru seemed to ignore him, walking to the center of the circle, and she gave another grateful nod before following, slipping the necklace over her head as she walked after him. Trepidation created a knot of tangled, abrasive tension in her stomach.

When waves of youki began to rise around her, she spun quickly, surprised to see different colors shimmering in the night air. Though she'd felt their auras before, she had never seen them, not with mundane sight.

"Sesshoumaru," she stuttered as the power grew, washing over them as the colors flashed brilliantly in the night air.

"Perhaps it is the blood we have consumed," he said quietly, eyes on the shimmering barrier as it grew taller, then began to bend, forming a dome over them and meeting in the middle, blending into one another. The others stood outside of it, their forms tinted in red and blues, greens and yellows and oranges. The shield itself shimmered, reminding her of Reshin's eyes in a way, shifting through shades of light.

Beyond them, she thought she could see something else, the outline of someone that had their arms spread. Only vaguely familiar, she blinked once and the outline was gone as if it had never existed. For a brief moment she prayed that if there had been someone, or something, there, that the barrier would keep them out as well as the power in.

"Miko," Sesshoumaru rumbled, bringing her back to the center of the circle, to the feel of the pendant in her hand.
"Bokusenou said we had to be quick," She murmured, holding the pendant out, cupped in both hands. He pulled Tenseiga free, the sword pulsing and thrumming. Bakusaiga hummed in its sheath, vibrating noisily.

"Then we shall be quick," He replied, voice still cold and distant even as he used Tenseiga to cut across the inky blackness in the center of the pendant.

Immediately Kagome could feel the difference, a pulsing echoing in her palms. In a matter of seconds the ivory had broken into several neat pieces and she was, to her horror, holding the tip of a finger in her palms. Grotesque and fascinating, it did not bleed even though it had clearly been severed from a hand. The pulsing grew stronger as the flesh grew.

And almost immediately began to putrefy.

"Now," Sesshoumaru commanded.

She was already wrapping her ki around it, determined to banish the shadow that had started to rise from the fingertip as it had begun to rot. Darkness fought against her light as she pushed at it determinedly.

"So close," She told herself, not caring that she said it aloud. "I just want you gone." It was a growl, the inky, oily blackness resisting her and pushing back at her ki. Frustration tangled her senses until she was diving headfirst into that darkness, feeling it pour into her nostrils and mouth, leaking from her eyes. Pervasive and thick, sludge threatened to suffocate her, fill her veins until she was subject to it, tangled and lost in it forever.

"No!" She shouted, fury dimming frustration and quashing it beneath her determination. The stubborn power invaded her bloodstream, was in turn attacked by the light that pulsed and throbbed through her, pushed out and surrounded until there was nothing but the snapping, crackling energy of her own reiki.

"Drop it," Sesshoumaru snapped, and she did, unable to withstand the now purified aura that was within the small piece of flesh and bone. Sesshoumaru quickly stabbed the tip of Bakusaiga into it, the image almost laughable because it reminded her of someone using a sharp stick to pick up trash.

Except that the image vanished as a flood of power exploded out as the fingertip turned to dust. Like a tiny prison that had been caging a monster, the energy exploded out, knocking them both to the knees as it roared around them, slamming against the shimmering walls of the barrier, fighting against it for a moment as if determined to get out.

She watched it, eyes wide in dazed disbelief as it made shadows and then bare outlines of everyone around them, so bright that even the ground seemed to disappear and fade into the light.

And then it turned, repelled by the youki that surrounded them.

Immediately sensing that the power had easily grown in its travel, swelling and gaining momentum instead of dimming, she grabbed Sesshoumaru and pulled him to the ground, praying that when the circle closed again that they could both withstand it.

Deafening, oppressive, it pushed against her, pressing down until she couldn't breathe, the suffocating weight pouring over her, into her. Pain bore into her skin like thousands of tiny needles, ripping a scream from her throat as hot tears trailed down her skin. Everything she had experienced, everything she had endured was nothing compared to the agony of her blood boiling inside of her body, her flesh spasming, tightening and snapping muscle by muscle as lightning danced beneath her
Light blinded her to everything until there was only white, encompassing and never ending. The world around her vanished, leaving only that unending, static blankness that pulled at the edges of her being, threaded into her with tenacious, pinprick hooks and ripped carelessly, indifferent to her in it's own path. Somewhere in the distance she could hear someone shouting her name, a roar that was lost beneath the bellow of the power rebounding around them, a wave intended to drown them.

The pressure grew until she could only feel the unbearable, breathless agony of her body caving in, her soul and mind and heart crying out their suffering as they shattered into dust.

And then relief. Relief from the pressure, from the fire and lightning and the suffocating white.

_**AN:** If it says anything about the length and planning and overall psychotically winding plot of this story, I have been planning this from the moment Kagome met Shinzuru. Yes, that long ago. Also, cliffy. Because I love making you hate me. And Skyisthelimit pointed out that uh, well, I might have intimated that there were only 41 chapters. And it wasn't a total lie. There _were_ 41 chapters. Now there are more. Heh. Peace.
Inhaling deeply, she opened her eyes and blinked when she felt a drop of rain on her face. Looking up, she saw the foliage of her tree, their tree, blocking out the moon, if there was one. Groaning, she pushed herself up until she was leaning against the giant trunk. It had grown since she had last seen it. Too afraid to visit after the memory she had last created beneath it's leaves, she had stayed away from her core, perhaps more terrified of it than she had been after her attack.

"Am I dead?" She wondered aloud, looking around. No one else was present in the field surrounding her, and pain flashed through her when she realized that unlike last time, Sesshoumaru's forest had not juxtaposed with her own haven.

"Maybe I wasn't strong enough to withstand the blow back," She whispered to herself, elbows on her knees and forehead cradled in her palm as she stared at the ground. She couldn't remember making the journey to her core, or even falling asleep. The sensations she had felt last had been mind numbingly intense, beyond anything she had ever imagined or comprehended.

And then nothing.

Immediately disbelief set in. Getting to her feet, needing to get away from the tree, she began stalking into the tall grass.

"I never got a chance to fix things," She shouted at the sky, not caring if she could be heard or not, or how ridiculous she might have looked. "You didn't tell me it would kill me! I never even got to tell him I'm sorry!"

All of the things she had hoped for, all of the things she had prayed to mend and every moment that was lost to her came crashing down on her, a thousand times worse than the power that had killed her.

"I wasn't ready!" She shouted hoarsely as tears tightened her throat.

Because as much as she had hurt, as bad as everything had gotten, she had hoped that things would get better.

Despair wove around her heart, strangling it in it's clutches. Fury fought it, the angry denial that things were not over despite appearances.

"This isn't heaven!" She shouted as she began walking again, refusing to acknowledge the sky again. Heaven wouldn't be the place where she had become friends with the man she loved, paradise wouldn't be a constant reminder of all that she had lost.

Determined to find someone, something, she continued walking, clinging to purpose knowing only heartbreak waited if she looked away for even a second. Wind pushed against her lightly, making the
tall grass cling to her hakama as she stalked through the field. Even when she tried to imagine a forest or a cliff out of reflex, remembering her core only too vividly, the landscape did not change.

But the rain did grow heavier, releasing the scent of the grass and she crushed it beneath her bare feet, sending it wafting up to her. Despite that, she stayed only slightly damp, reminding her of her first foray into Sesshoumaru's core. Shying away from that memory, she thought about him now.

He would have made it, he was strong enough to withstand anything. He would live on, take care of the children, his lands. He would even find a mate. And without the title hanging over him, he could mate whoever he wanted. The trials were over, and he could be happy. Even though the thought hurt, she found a measure of peace in it. The House of the Moon and all of it's duties would be void, everything done in it's name ended.

A sense of resignation crept in. Her goal had been accomplished after all. Everyone was free.

Resshin's words came back to her. Leading the pack would always require sacrifice. Though it had been an unknowing, ignorant sacrifice, she clung to the conviction that it had been worth it. Maybe heaven wouldn't be so bad. At least she wasn't in hell, and she didn't have to suffer being reincarnated again. She wasn't sure she could handle the idea of going back down to the earth and living again. Even if she couldn't remember her prior lifetimes, she was beginning to grow convinced that her lifetimes would always end unhappily.

"But it was worth it," She told herself, shocked when she looked up from the grass and saw a line of trees not far away.

At least paradise was providing a change of scenery. As much as she loved her field, she needed to get away from it. The forest itself was looked welcoming, nothing menacing or shadowy about it as she got closer.

When she stepped into it however, the feel of the world around her changed. It was subtle, reminding her of something that teased at the edge of her consciousness. She walked the path deeper into the wood, surprised to see trees of varying kinds, some obviously not real, some that she had seen only in the future, and some she had grown used to seeing in the past. The woods had obviously become a forest as she walked deeper into it's depths. The light rain barely penetrated the canopy, only dotting her now and again as she strode barefoot over fallen leaves that crinkled beneath her feet. Nothing ever poked into her flesh or needled her uncomfortably, although the sounds remained the same.

The deeper she went, the more she marveled. The trees grew bigger, somehow kept from overcrowding one another. Everything was spaced perfectly, and the variation in the trees themselves was amazing. Slowly she made her way deeper into the forest, sighing as she lost herself in the different shades of green, all perfectly visible despite the fact that she was sure it had been night when she had stepped into it.

When she saw a clearing ahead, she moved more quickly, curious to look into the sky. Maybe time worked differently, or she had been wandering for hours. Kagome wasn't sure which it could be, and wanted to see the sky for herself.

But when she got closer, she realized that what she had though marked the other side of the clearing was in fact, a very large tree set in the center of it. A tree with branches that grew out and had leaves very much like her own true, in fact, exactly like her own tree's, insofar as foliage and bark. But it had grown, grown so tall and wide that it looked as if it had been there when the world itself was created, a testament to time and history.
And sitting at the roots, eyes closed, was Sesshoumaru, or heaven’s version of him at least.

Walking closer, Kagome observed the image, wondering if, in some misguided attempt to give her peace or happiness, Heaven and the kami had provided her with someone to keep her company. She’d never thought about it before, but if people were supposed to be happy, to have found paradise, how did they find it without their loved ones by their side?

Curious, she knelt next to the vision, more positive than ever that he was a mirage. Not once had he stirred as she moved closer. Eyelids did not flutter, and his chest barely moved with each breath he took. Even when she knelt next to him he didn't seem disturbed by her presence, which cinched it.

Her fingers trailed over his skin, the tears stinging her eyes. She refused to let them fall as she traced a stripe lightly with her fingertip.

It was like being in the jewel again, only this time she knew he wasn’t real. Despite the fact that he looked and felt like Sesshoumaru, he was still a pale shadow, an imitation. Even when his eyes opened, blinking several times, she didn’t move her hand. After all, if it was paradise, at the very least she would be allowed to memorize the features of the person she loved. Intent on locking the image away, she traced one stripe and then the other, followed the path of his jaw to his ear, surprised to see for the first time that the markings he bore swept up and behind it, out of sight.

He watched her, eyes intent as she memorized the angles and curves of his face with her fingertips, brushing lightly, carefully. Even when she traced his lips and felt the warm exhalation of his breath he remained still. Only his eyes followed her, blinking languidly from time to time.

When she had memorized every line and ridge and slope of his face by sight and touch, she smiled softly and cupped his face before standing, hand falling away.

When his clawed hand wrapped around her wrist and pulled her back, she tried to resist, although it was a weak effort. Still too off balance, too lost in the sensations that thrummed through her fingertips, Kagome fell to her knees and watched his other hand come up.

It was even worse to be touched than to touch. Knowing that heaven would reflect the wishes held in the dark corners of her heart, she tried to remember that this was only an illusion, and that no matter how perfect and complete it felt, it would never be him. Maybe other people could be content with illusions and mirages, but she had been fooled too many times, hurt too much by figments and ghosts.

Still, she could, knowing it was an illusion, allow herself to stay, to pretend. Because illusions couldn’t hurt you if you knew they weren’t real, at least that’s what she told herself. Humming quietly, she leaned into his touch, surprised when his claws glanced against her jawline and she felt the strange thrumming of something, a scent that brushed against memory and triggered an image of fields of grass in a summer rain.

"This must be hell," He finally whispered, fingers still lightly brushing over her skin.

"Maybe," She admitted.

His hand was gripping her chin, forcing her closer until she had to use her hands to brace herself and keep upright.

"The gods cannot make me ask forgiveness of an illusion. Whatever creature you are, begone, and do not wear her face ever again. I will cut you down if I see it."

With that he was pushing her away so roughly she fell backwards, unable to control her landing and...
Looking up at him, a dazed, tangled heap of clothes and limbs.

"Wha- This is my face you moron!" She shouted at the retreating form as she stood up. "And you need a better disguise. The Sesshoumaru I know would NEVER ask anyone's forgiveness!"

Turning smartly on her heel she stomped in the opposite direction of the imitation, muttering angrily under her breath. If they had gotten anything right, it had been his brusque form, but she must have been brainless, insane actually, to think for even a minute that she could pretend it was the real Sesshoumaru.

At least it had been right about one thing. She had to be in hell to be dealing with that sort of manipulative illusion.

"I don't care if you're a god or not Izanami, that was uncalled for!" She shouted at the canopy, just wanting to go back to her field and her tree, assuming she could find it. After that wonderfully serene moment had been ruined, she wanted to hide. Maybe if she dug around the roots she could lay down and let them grow over her.

The hand on her shoulder clamping down and spinning her around made her snarl angrily, trying to reach for a dagger that wasn't there. Which didn't matter of course, because she went through the motions and then the hand was clamped almost painfully around her wrist.

Apparently miko powers did not follow a person after death. She told herself that maybe, if she was reincarnated as a human, she wouldn't have to worry about jewels, youkai, or kami ever again. It was an almost heartening thought, except the Not-Sesshoumaru was pulling her arm up until her sleeve was sliding down, exposing the whole length of her limb.

His eyes were fastened on her scar.

"Who is it you dream of?" He demanded quietly.

"None of your business!" She snapped, trying to pull her arm away. "Let go of me!"

"Tell me," He rumbled, eyes narrowing angrily.

"No!" She retorted, flushing hotly.

He dropped her arm, a modicum of warmth entering his expression.

"An illusion would offer a lie, a name. Kagome would not."

"And Sesshoumaru would never ask forgiveness or such a personal question!" She snapped. "So I guess we know which one of us is real!"

Ignoring his almost angry glare she finally pulled her arm free and continued walking away from him.

"I would not ask a personal question of a friend?" He asked. "Just like I would not adopt children, or befriend a miko?"

"The Sesshoumaru I know would know there's nothing to forgive!" She shouted, not even turning to look at him as she said it.

"Then you have obviously not been paying attention," He snapped, grabbing her again. She was about to begin shouting at him, because really, she needed to get away. She needed to find her field
and pretend none of this had happened, because the feel of him was overwhelming, like being in his core. And because even if it was unhappy, even if there were sparks of anger and despair, it still felt like him.

"How do you figure?" She asked, tone apathetic despite the fact that she was desperate to get away.

"In hell-"

"You saved me even though-" And she couldn't continue, because that hurt. Thinking about what had happened was painful beyond bearing.

"Your past-"

"I consented," She sighed. "I'm not sure he did."

"How can you think I did not consent?" He growled.

"Because it was exactly like what happened to me," She whispered, turning back to the illusion and seeing only surprise. "Because I know what it's like to be given a choice that isn't a choice. Coercion is not consent. He was fulfilling his duty as alpha."

"I was fulfilling my duty to my mate," He snapped, expression etched with anger when she said the word alpha.

"I wasn't his mate anymore," She pointed out.

"You are my mate, regardless of the mark," He rumbled, as if the statement were law. "If there was shame in saving you it was because the first time I touched you I didn't want either of us to be forced!"

"He didn't have to!"

"I am right here," He snarled, obviously losing patience. "And obviously you misunderstand me when I say you were my mate, regardless of whether there is a mark or not!"

He was grabbing her face and kissing her, his mouth pressing against hers, an angry breath exhaled through his nose that brushed over her skin. She pressed her lips shut and brought her knee up, striking him where she knew it would hurt. He reeled back and she spat in his face, remembering only too well months and months before, over a year, when she had done something similar.

His shock and surprise were enough for her to get free and begin running, bare feet carrying her through the forest quickly as she looked for a place to either hide or some way to lose him. Even if she couldn't hear him, she could feel him, felt surrounded by him as she fled.

When she saw another white figure close by she turned abruptly, shocked to see that it was, in the span of a blink, right in front of her.

And that she barreled right through it as if it wasn't even there.

"Miko, you might want to stop," It called out. "He's not chasing you any longer!"

She ignored the voice and continued running. But the anger had turned to shock and she hoped maybe the thing, whatever it had been, had been right. Within moments, she stopped, a woman appearing, coalescing from smoke right in front of her.

"There is no time for this!" The woman snapped, voice eerily familiar. "If you do not accept him you
will be trapped in here, and we are trying to prevent that!"

"Listen," Another voice said. Kagome turned and saw the familiar face -and hair- of Harionago. "You don't have much time left, it's almost complete!"

"What-"

"Another jewel is being created. If you don't go to him and escape you will both be trapped here!"

She didn't have time to ask what was going on because two figures in white were coming into the clearing, Sesshoumaru giving the other figure a wide berth.

"They are correct. The backlash of power provoked a natural defense. Your powers combined and you were both trapped. But it is the only thing that saved you," The other figure said, removing the mask. Kagome stepped back, surprised to see the face of the youkai that had helped her in hell. "However, you must escape, or all of our efforts will have been for nothing."

"Your efforts?" Sesshoumaru demanded, eyes narrowing on the youkai.

"It was the only way. Even your body could not withstand the power of a god, however much faith you have in your strength. A human body certainly couldn't," The youkai snorted.

"We haven't the time for this," Another voice snapped. "Get out of this place!"

"How?" Kagome demanded.

"Follow it back. Your bond is the only thing that can save you."

"We aren't mated-" She started again.

"Even a mating mark cannot compare to the fusion of two souls."

"What does that mean?" Sesshoumaru demanded.

"Follow it out pup, and make sure she goes with you!"

"It's beginning to seal!" The woman in the orange and red kimono whispered, voice full of panic.

The youkai next to her turned to her and opened his mouth as if to say something, then paused.

"This is some trick," She started.

"You are the most infuriating human being I have ever known," He snapped impatiently. "I have no proof I can offer that you will not refute. It has been such since I first saved you in your core, and I have no doubt it will continue until we are both truly dead," He added. "But I will not let us be stuck here arguing for eternity!"

It was the most emotional, most angry thing she had ever heard him say, and he finished it by grabbing her and holding her close, the feel of him almost overpowering as it pushed, no, pulled with authoritative insistence.

Memories of being pulled away, out of one world and into the waking world assailed her, and for a moment she allowed herself to hope.

"Go!" The white haired figure bellowed as winds picked up around them.
She was pulled at first, but when she recognized the pull of power, recognized the sensation of following their ki, she let out a breathless, stunned laugh of relief and allowed herself to shoot down the path, the sensation of him surrounding her enough to keep her safe as they encountered a barrier, shattered through it.

And then she was groaning, something heavy on top of her keeping her from fully inhaling.

"Cat, Sesshoumaru!" Voices shouted. Kagome opened her eyes, blinked against the darkness. And then another groan and the weight on her was shifting, falling next to her. Looking over, she saw Sesshoumaru, eyes closed.

"Was that a dream?" She asked, brows furrowing.

"You will desist in your nonsense now that we are on a tangible plain," He commanded, pushing at the ground and sitting up. The grass, dead from a season past, clung to his hair with dirt.

"You're both here!" Shinzuru said, dropping to his knees next to her and gathering her in his arms. "For a moment you were both gone, as if you'd never been here," He whispered into her hair, arms tightening around her. "We'd thought we'd lost you."

"You were enclosed in light, and then the jewel was all there was," Resshin said, voice considering. "The jewel and five shadows."

"Jewel?" She asked, stomach beginning to knot.

"They said there was a jewel," Sesshoumaru said, looking around.

"It seems that the duties of our line are never ending," Yuugao sighed.

"The hell they're not!" Kagome snapped, looking where everyone's gazes rested. "That kami better get back down here right now!"

"He won't be coming," A new voice said. Kagome turned, surprised to see the white figure, mask back in place.

"Why not?" She demanded.

"He is guiding his wife through her rebirth. He will come for no one, not even those he favors."

"How is this favor?" Sesshoumaru demanded.

"It is not another cursed object. It was the only way to save you," The figure said, voice monotone and apathetic, as if saving them had not been important in the least. "The new jewel will replace Izanami's bone as a gateway to the borderlands."

"What?"

"The House of the Moon is a necessary thing," The spirit sighed. "From what I have gathered of your memories, it will be required even more in the future."

"But I wanted it to be done!" Kagome snapped, getting free of Shinzuru's embrace. "I wanted it gone! He was supposed to be free!"

"There is no freedom with power," The spirit said. "There is no life without cost. Be thankful we were able to direct it's purpose during it's creation or you would have been trapped inside, creating a new jewel of souls and another cycle of bloodshed and regret."
"I can't believe you're telling me to be thankful!" She hissed. "He was almost free of all of this, everyone could have been free and you're telling-"

"I am telling you to be thankful my son is alive," The spirit roared angrily, making her step back. "You both have a chance to find your freedom and heal the wounds of the past. It was not without cost, but do not trivialize the gains."

"Son?" She asked stupidly.

The figure removed his mask, eyes narrowed on her.

"Son," He repeated. "And you miko, should learn to trust your heart. Something I would recommend to everyone here," He added, giving a pointed look at someone over her shoulder. He then turned to Sesshoumaru, who was watching him with equally narrow eyes.

"You meddle."

"The past can never be undone, but it can be healed. If any of you ever muster the courage I saw you display in hell that is," He added before vanishing.

Which left all of them sitting or standing in a field staring at the little white orb that glowed lightly in the dead grass.

"It's never going to be over," Kagome sighed, bending to pick up the softly glowing orb. "There's never an end. Just more problems."

"The spirit did not speak falsely," Yuugao tried, obviously avoiding saying it's name or voicing the connection it had shared with the living. "You are alive. If it is the cost, it was worth it."

"I suppose," Kagome replied softly, staring down at the piece of glass in her hand. It was as unlike the bone fragment as anything could have been, save in size. Barely any bigger the the fingertip, it was like a marble, perfectly round. There were no shadows lurking inside of it, no movement to be seen.

"It is not sentient," Resshin noted quietly, eyes shifting through myriad colors as he gazed upon it. How was that supposed to make her feel better?

"It's existence cannot be known," Mizu broke in, voice slightly panicked. "Only those here can know."

"Objects of power never stay secret for long," Kasai muttered, glaring at the orb.

"It can be a rumor," Shinzuru retorted. "Let it stay secret and safe within the pack, given from alpha to alpha."

"Wars have been started on the word of rumor before," Yuugao reflected quietly.

"No more," Kagome whispered, immediately catching everyone's attention. "Not tonight. I've had enough for tonight."

The tears were dangerously close to the surface, and as she stared down at the jewel, another object, another duty, another role to fulfill, she wanted to hurl it into the darkness until it vanished. There was little consolation in the fact that it wasn't sentient, that, so far, there seemed to be no other power than the ability to access the borderlands.
But Sesshoumaru was safe. He was alive. And the words he'd spoken inside of it still lingered, whispers that hid in a corner of her mind, waiting patiently for examination.

Which she was desperately afraid of.

"I would like to sleep."

"Of course," Yuugao said, voice quiet. The others fell in step, nodding silently as she tried to form her cloud and found it only half solid at best, a testament to both her weariness and heaving emotions.

But Sesshoumaru was wrapping his arm around her without permission, was launching into the sky and taking her back to the shiro. Too afraid to speak, especially given what had happened in the jewel, she remained quiet.

They landed on the balcony she dimly recognized as belonging to his, and grateful she would be able to avoid those within the shiro, she stepped away from him, determined to get back to her own rooms.

"Will it always be this way?" His voice asked, quiet even for him. She was almost to the door leading into the outer rooms, could have kept walking. Except she would have to confront it sooner or later. And even though she was tired and afraid, she was also tired of being afraid. Emotionally exhausted, she turned back to him, looking at him, really looking at him for the first time since they had returned from Hell.

"I meant what I said," She declared just as quietly. "If anyone should be asking forgiveness, it's me."

"No," He snapped, surprising her with the vehemence of his tone, the conviction ringing through it. "You did no wrong-"

"And neither did you," She swiftly rebutted. "You fulfilled your duty."

The surge of youki at her words was bewildering, not only in it's strength, but in it's difference. The flavor of it had changed, morphed slightly. It was on the tip of her tongue to point it out when he was walking over to her with long strides, obviously upset at what she had said. His body seemed to hum with tension, ready to spring into action even though he stopped short of her, only inches away.

"I would not break every code I have ever lived by for duty," He declared quietly. "I would not break it for pack. Everything I am, everything I was, was lost the moment I made that choice."

"No," She said, shaking her head. "No!" She added with more force. "That you sacrificed something, that you made the choice to save someone even though the means-"

"The means?" He demanded, trembling with the effort not to move. She looked up to him, startled to see turbulent gold eyes. "Would you have me always say an end justifies the means?"

"She was a goddess," Kagome reminded him. "Sesshoumaru you did nothing wrong," She declared, adamant. "If anyone should ask forgiveness, it should be me for-"

"No," He snapped, voice just a steely as her own. "If you ask forgiveness for-"

"If I hadn't been captured-"

"If I had listened to my mother, taken over the duties-"
"You couldn't have known what would have happened-"

"You almost died!" He finally roared, stunning her into shocked silence. "You almost died and the only thing I could do to save you was to become everything I have ever hated, everything that has ever hurt you."

The sound of knees striking the wooden floor echoed through the quiet room. She stared, stupefied, as he cradled his face in his hands, his tangled hair pooling on the floor around him. It was a moment of weakness, something bared that even in their cores she had never witnessed. Sesshoumaru had always been a pillar of strength, had always been cool and calm and composed. Unfaltering.

Stepping forward to close the distance between them, she touched the top of his head, felt him shudder as her hands threaded through his hair, ignoring the debris of their venture.

"I could never hate you," She admitted into the silence. "You're my alpha and my best friend." He said nothing, but she could feel him leaning into her, his face pressing against her stomach. "You didn't save me for power, or for revenge or for any other reason than that you are you, and would never have let me stay down there."

His arms wrapped around her waist, holding on to her as if she was the only thing keeping him upright. She wondered if, after centuries of strength, he had finally found his own breaking point, had reached a limit he had never considered possessing. His body shook, trembled and jerked, as though he was crying but hadn't tears. Dry sounds rattled in his chest as he struggled to breathe, arms tightening around her and pulling her close, shielding his face with her stomach as he held fast.

They had barely eased when she pulled away, and it hurt that he seemed to slump, even if he barely moved at all.

"Come on," She directed in a quiet, sure voice, tugging him to his feet. His eyes were blank, burnished gold voids that made her fingers tremble with nervousness as she sat on the bed and pulled him down. He didn't protest as she lay next to him, cuddling deeper into his warmth.

"What are you doing?" He asked, voice thick.

"I've missed you," She said in way of explanation as she let her fingers tangle into the thick silver hair resting haphazardly all over his body.

His arms wrapped around her, pulling her closer, tightening to an almost unbearable degree, but she let him hold her, let him clutch her like she'd vanish, because the intangibility of that strange place and the whispers were too surreal, too faint even though they'd happened minutes -hours/days/years maybe- before. She let him hold her because she needed the solid reassurance that he was real, and that she was real, and that hopefully, they would face the morning together.

"What now?" He finally asked, voice hoarse. She wasn't sure the daiyoukai had ever not had a plan, and that in itself told her more than words that he was as lost as she felt, and that whatever did happen next, whatever the morning brought, roles would change, something would shift, or perhaps it already had.

"We'll figure it out together," She answered honestly, if vaguely. She didn't know what to do, to say other than that. The world had changed polarities too many times that day for her to plan ahead, not with any sense of confidence.

"We're getting married tomorrow," He said, voice hollow.

It wasn't the way she had wanted to start a marriage. In fact, she couldn't think of anything she
wanted to do less than get married, except maybe deal with Izanami. But there had been gains, as much as she wanted to curse the spirit - Sesshoumaru and Inu Yasha's father! Something she was still having issues coming to terms with - she knew he'd been right.

And even if she and Sesshoumaru could only seem to come together beneath the weight of responsibility, it was more, was infinitely better, than doing it alone, or separately. The division that had existed, the wall that had been keeping her out and away seemed to have fallen, and she wasn't sure if, or when, he could build it back into place.

"We are."

"I will not lose you again," He sighed, arms tightening just a fraction more.

"I won't lose you," She promised.

It wasn't a declaration of love, which would have been too much, too unlikely and too reminiscent of the dreamlike quality of that other place, inside the jewel, for her to believe it. Just as she knew, emphatically, that telling him anything of the sort would strike too close to home for him, would be just as unbelievable.

She wondered if they had always taken a step forward only to hit a wall and backpedal, emotionally and mentally. For every moment they shared, their closeness seemed further tested until it was close to breaking and shattering, and she wondered how their relationship had survived the tempering process.

But this time, she thought, hoped, that they hadn't stepped back. Even if the world was still shifting, tilting strangely, disorienting and damnably unsteady, it felt like they had found a place side by side, for once, and that instead of going back, they had found a stalemate. At least for that moment.

She didn't say the words, as she fell asleep, even though she felt them in her heart, and felt, maybe even knew, that he did as well. But her mind whispered them, translating through touch as she stroked his hair, exhaustion finally winning out, her mind slowing down too much to keep up with her own thoughts.

However, nothing, not exhaustion or sedatives or even a coma could have kept her from waking an hour later when she felt him tense and spasm, the movement of his body reminding her dangerously of a seizure.

Red eyes opened, teeth bared as she held to him, and it wasn't until she used her own ki to reach out and touch him, to tangle with the quickly rising tide of his own that he calmed. What noises escaped were not words, at least not that she could understand. Growls and snarls mellowed into exhalations of, if not contentment, acceptance. Kagome knew that whatever his dream had been, it was vanishing as he buried his face in her hair and shook, body relaxing but trembling from the tension escaping.

Kagome was almost positive he fell asleep again.

She however, did not.

AN: Oh wow, so there it is, finally, the holding pattern breaks. I never said it would be easy, and it's not supposed to be. That being said, I'm taking a week off. Remember, reviews are soup for the soul.
Sesshoumaru couldn't help but wonder what was waiting for him on the other side of the all too human ceremony they were about to undertake. He had not understood it's intricacies, and when consulting texts, found that his future wife and mate -he still couldn't comprehend how he was supposed to mark her again, when he felt so peculiarly not himself, a stranger in his own skin- had deviated from even normal human ceremonies, leaving him feeling less than certain about the affair.

The air of excitement that had been filling the shiro felt heavy, almost oppressive, and he wished he didn't have to do it suddenly, as much as he knew the ceremony mattered to her. Guilt immediately set in, a wave so thick it nearly choked him. Kagome had more than earned her right to whatever compensations she desired, anything that would disguise the farce they were undertaking. And it was a farce. Though he knew, felt, some surety of her feelings, his own had been dangerously unstable, foreign to him ever since his return from Hell.

He cared for her, loved her. It was a truth he did not try to fight. And he knew, in some strange, disconcerting way, that she loved him, although he couldn't be sure of how he knew it, and whenever his mind strayed too close to the moments they had been ripped apart and forced into the jewel, that dream-like place that had revealed too many secrets and rewarded him with further obscurity, his mind shied away. It was too soon, the events too tumultuous in his own mind to properly examine.

But love was not enough. And even though he respected her, cared for her, counted her as his best friend, he didn't know if he could lay with her, not as he had wanted to before. The very idea of lust made his own senses recoil, disgust sweeping through him. Whatever self loathing he had felt before was little compared to what he felt now. That she might have wanted him before her capture was irrelevant, whenever he thought of laying with her, intimately, he could only feel the rough stone slab and the pervasive chill of that cavern, at least before bile began to choke him.

"It is your wedding day," Resshin told him quietly, knowing his thoughts.

"It is," Sesshoumaru said, voice flat and emotionless. Steady.

"Perhaps this is a new beginning for you both," His general first and friend second advised. "There will always be sacrifices, but perhaps, for now, the time for sacrifice is past."
Sacrifices. He knew all about those, and the sense of bitterness that accompanied that word would have shocked him before. Sacrifice was something he knew, had accepted with his duties. But-

"You have both given. I think it is time for you to both be selfish."

Sesshoumaru knew Resshin could feel the incredulity, could read the frustrated anger that spiraled through him at the statement.

"She can understand, you know," Resshin said at last, after a long and indeterminable silence. "I think more than anyone, she'll understand what you feel."

She was already burdened with too much. How much more could her heart and mind take? Or his for that matter?

"Perhaps, despite your long history of ignoring advice, you would do me the honor of giving this some consideration," Resshin told him quietly. "More than ever you two are united. Never has there been such union, and all paths behind have been shattered. There is nowhere to go but forward, or to stay as you are now. But, as such unions have never occurred, there is no path to follow, except for the one you both decide to carve out for yourselves."

Sesshoumaru, in a moment of near hysterical rage, wanted to ask what his friend meant, but remained impassive, as if untouched by the words themselves. As if glutted with air and then denied, the rage died into nothing more than smoke.

"Tread lightly," Was all Resshin added, before walking from the room to give him time to compose his own thoughts.

Sesshoumaru hated himself for being weak enough to be grateful.

Kagome stared blankly at the wall in front of her. The events of the night before had reached the others, and both Nanmei and Sango, while less than pleased that they hadn't been informed until after the fact, were quiet. Yuugao looked unsure, as if she didn't quite know whether she was welcome, or trust that she was no matter how many times Kagome told her she was. As things stood, Kagome understood the daiyoukai more than she had ever dreamed of understanding her, and while empathy with her imminently to be mother in law wasn't what she had been expecting as a gift, she hoped, needed, Yuugao to be there, to remind her that duty could be survived, if not particularly relished.

It was difficult to smile. Everything that had happened the day before lingered, stubbornly resistant to her attempts to banish it. No matter how hard she tried to force a smile to her face, it came out as a resigned line, something less than happy and a little pinched to boot.

"You're getting married," Sango finally murmured. It didn't sound like a congratulations, or even a lament. Just a gentle reminder of the ceremony that's waiting. Kagome sighed, unsure if she could actually go outside and face down her friends and children, a new jewel on a necklace safely around her neck.

Maybe she would get lucky, and they wouldn't notice.

"Kagome, things- They're not like they should be," Nanmei told her, voice quiet. "But they will get better."

Kagome nodded. She hoped things would get better. But when she had woken in the middle of the night to Sesshoumaru twitching violently, claws digging into her flesh painfully, she had accepted that things would not be getting better soon. However, the pain, the worry, was a reminder that she
was still in the real world, that inside of a jewel, or even the afterlife, she wouldn't feel so raw, and she was willing to find a measure of peace in that. It was really the only thing.

"May I have a moment with Kagome?" Yuugao finally asked quietly. Neither Sango nor Nanmei seemed inclined to give them that moment, but knowing Yuugao would not ask if it was not important, Kagome nodded mutely. Both women filed out of the room, closing the door quietly behind them, dubious looks cast over their shoulders.

"You look very much the same as I did on the day of my mating ceremony," Yuugao told her quietly, getting up and walking over to her. "I had hoped for something more for my son, and for you."

"I don't think life likes to cooperate with me," Kagome sighed.

Claws grazed her face, a warm, smooth palm rested lightly on her cheek. It was the first time she could remember being touched by the daiyoukai since meeting her, and while unfamiliar, it wasn't completely unwelcome. That Yuugao had started the whole mess, had been the lynchpin for where she was now, didn't matter. The daiyoukai had been an unwilling, coerced catalyst. How could Kagome blame her, when she'd been put in the same position not once or even twice, but more times than she could count? Understanding and empathy easily blanketed any lingering resentment. The memory of Souzou came unbidden, and Kagome remembered Sesshoumaru's offhanded comment about how his mother had once, according to many, been just like the overly bright, happy youkai.

Would she become like Yuugao, a creature of duty before all else?

The hand dropped away, the whisper of silks rustling seeming to echo in the room.

"There are no longer any paths ahead. You must have the strength to create one," Yuugao told her softly. "For the both of you."

"What if I can't?"

"Learn from my mistakes," Yuugao told her simply. "There is very little that can't be done, when one tries."

Kagome nodded, knowing what Yuugao meant but not willing to bring that subject up, not when the daiyoukai already looked so tired. As if the last few weeks had been months, she appeared a little older, aged instead of ageless. Dark circles still shadowed her eyes, giving her an almost hollow appearance. Her cheeks still stood out too sharply, her skin was still too white. It seemed as if she had barely recovered from their trial in hell, and the night before had, to all apparent affects, only undone what little she had gained.

Kagome knew she looked little better, and wished she could give the other female some kind of hope, but she didn't know what hope there was, and she couldn't find it in herself to lie, not when the subject was so important, so very, very dear to the daiyoukai.

"It is almost time," Yuugao told her.

"Alright," Kagome told her, following her to the door. She didn't want to be left alone. Alone, she was afraid she might break down, might run away. Alone offered more time to think, and she couldn't, or else she might not be able to go through with the wedding itself, and the last thing she wanted to do was leave Sesshoumaru standing alone.

Shinzuru waited, his single eye glinting red in the light and yet strangely vacant, as if he was thinking of some other, far off thing. Kagome knew he probably was, given the circumstances, and she
couldn't exactly blame him.

It was terrifying, how things could change so quickly.

Yuugao said nothing to Shinzuru as she walked past, instead keeping her head held high, eyes fixed somewhere ahead of her. A hollow gaze, one Kagome recognized, knew intimately, and knew she would have to learn to emulate.

"Try to smile," She told her father. He tried as he took her arm, but Kagome flinched at the attempt and sighed heavily. He gave up and echoed her sigh.

"I suppose it's too much to offer a blessing." Shinzuru said, voice tired as they strode through the shiro, towards the room chosen for the ceremony itself. What passed for a great hall had been picked as the largest, needing to accommodate so many, some of which were also larger than the average youkai.

"I'm not really sure I want the attention of any more gods," Kagome joked weakly as they passed through the almost eerie silence, closer to ceremony.

"Things will work out," He promised.

Kagome didn't know how he could promise such a thing. He hadn't been present for the night before, hadn't seen the breakdown, didn't understand what had followed them back from Hell and how it had changed things.

The doors loomed in front of them, ornate when compared to the rest of the shiro. But they were the doors to the hall were petitioners were heard and Sesshoumaru, however rarely, played Lord of the West in a visual capacity.

And she would have to sit by him and play Lady of the West.

The doors opened, revealing a room full of people that she had known for years, some of which she hadn't seen since meeting. Everyone looked happy, the children especially so as she stepped in with Shinzuru. Forcing a smile to their face for them, she summoned all of her courage, all of her will and did her best not to tighten her arm around Shinzuru's.

The sound of cheering exploded around her, startling her so badly that her ki flared, making Shinzuru twitch and shudder before his arm tightened, supporting her as they continued walking. Flowers began drifting around them, the magic of kitsune and other youkai combining to give her a breathe of spring in winter. The bright colors seemed as out of place as the kimono she wore, layer upon layer of them.

Smiling again, taking a deep breathe, she glanced at her children, all of them on either side lining the path to her future husband, and found it easier to smile, knowing they would be safe and loved, and that she would see them grow and fall in love.

'Do not trivialize the gains.'

She realized it was becoming increasingly important to remember them, to find them against the backdrop of her future. But Resshin's words echoed like a damning prophecy.

'Leading the pack will always require sacrifices.'

She had never thought her wedding would feel like one.
Sesshoumaru could not remember the ceremony, could not remember what his mother said, what the human miko that had trained his wife said, what Keimou said. There were cheers and shouts echoing through the hall, and the only thing he could focus on was reaching into the sleeve of his kimono and pulling out the small bag that held the rings. Kagome looked up at him quizzically, and he wondered if she even remembered the half spoken request.

When he shook the two rings out of the bag, he saw the dark smudges on the metal, flaking off in crusty bits and cursed himself for forgetting that moment, wished he could take back what he had done and unsure if it was trying to destroy them or bringing them to the wedding at all.

But her breath catching in her throat, the wild fluttering of her pulse and the scent of her tears forced submission to circumstance. She carefully took the larger one from his palm and slipped it onto his third finger on his left hand with trembling fingers, sliding it past each knuckle until it rested at the base.

When she held out her left hand, he slid the ring down, wondered briefly how Totosai had gotten the sizes so perfectly, wondered if they really would wear the rings for the rest of their lives. Suddenly it seemed like a very long time, the rest of his life, to be wearing a piece of jewelry.

"If you both would come with me," Keimou told them, his voice gravelly and his milky eyes clouding to the point where the swirling colors were pale shadows and pastel blurs. "There is one more thing to do."

"But-" Kagome started. Resshin only shook his head.

"Perhaps this is best done elsewhere," He told them. Sesshoumaru gave him a sharp glance, but the other youkai's gaze was blank, and Sesshoumaru knew that whatever the old youkai had planned, Resshin knew what it was, had probably known since before the ceremony. But whatever it was, the youkai trusted his elder, and he trusted Resshin.

Not knowing where they were going or what excuses were made, they followed Keimou away from the crowd and through the shiro, alone with the elder as they escaped. Sesshoumaru couldn't say he was ungrateful for the excuse. He had never been one for festivities, though he knew Kagome was, and had been willing to endure. For a moment he considered going back, putting off whatever the youkai had planned so that she could go and see her friends and perhaps find some happiness, except that when he looked over to her, he saw that she looked just as relieved as he felt, shoulders sagging slightly and face pinched slightly in a frown. Unable to stop the thought before it came, he wondered if she was thinking about the blood on the rings.

Dark shadows smudged the areas beneath her eyes, and she looked tired, weary.

When he realized Keimou was leading him to the inner gardens, meant only for the pack, he almost said something, a growl beginning in his throat of it's own volition. But, as strange as it was unexpected, Kagome took his hand, her fingers lacing with his.

"Patience," Keimou told them as he slid open the door and stepped out into the cold afternoon. Sesshoumaru allowed his wife to lead him into the chill, overcast garden. Only a few trees, evergreens planted by his father, kept the garden itself from being nothing but blank black and gray, however, they were in further corners, too far to be of any comfort.

Keimou led them to a bare patch, the place where Kagome often chose to sit and eat with the children in warmer weather. He remained silent, refusing to admit his curiosity even if the older youkai knew it. Kagome however, was not so restrained, as he had expected.
"Why are we here?" She asked quietly.

Despite the clouds covering the sun and the general feeling of dreariness, the knife flashed with its own light, like a star burst in his vision, vivid and dream-like. Immediately the growl that had been suppressed returned as he stepped in front of Kagome, shoving her behind him while the foolish, oblivious old youkai smiled serenely up at them.

"Fear not, daiyoukai. My grandson swore loyalty to you, and that of my clans in support of the miko. Were my intention to harm, I would forsake my own life."

"Then what is your intent?" Sesshoumaru felt himself growl.

"A point, perhaps. And a secret."

Sesshoumaru had endured enough of secrets and points to last a lifetime.

Kagome apparently, damn her eyes, had not.

"What point, and what secret?" She asked quietly, coming from behind him and stepping forward, chin held high. Her fingers laced with his, a quiet request or a reminder, he wasn't sure, but the anger did not abate, nor did the fear for her.

Keimou reached between them with his free hand, took both of theirs and lifted until they were held out. Then, more quickly than such an old being had the right to, slipped the whisper thin blade between their hands and turned it, pulling it back out and cutting both of their palms in the process.

Kagome's gasp mixing with the scent and feel of her blood ripped a snarl from deep in his throat, and his free hand was reaching for the foolish youkai—

That was no longer there.

He tried to search for his scent but couldn't find it beneath the smell of his mate's blood mixing with his own, their palms slick and warm in the chill.

"Sesshoumaru," Kagome whispered, tugging at his hand and forcing his attentions back on her. He was readying to say something, perhaps something he would regret, except that old, decrepit, deceitful youkai had somehow harmed the both of them despite his oath.

Except she was staring at the ground, eyes wide and face so pale he feared she was going to faint. Tears burned her eyes, salt beneath the copper tang of her blood, and her body was tense, rigid, her fingers clutching his and refusing to let go.

He followed her gaze, looked down at the ground where their blood had fallen, plentiful enough that it had become a dark stain on the barren earth.

Something green was unfurling, growing at unnatural speeds. A memory flashed, painful and poignant, like a physical blow to his chest. Seasons before, in another place where the earth had been dark, bare of any life, a seedling had sprouted from the ground, delicate and unusual, just as it was before his very eyes.

Had he not returned from that place, was he still there, caught in a jewel? Was it all illusion?

"Do not doubt your senses, daiyoukai," Keimou's voice rasped as he appeared on the other side of the seedling that had grown to the height of his knees. "You are on the earthly plain."
"How-" Kagome whimpered.

He prayed to his ancestors that she was not remembering what had happened in hell, beneath a tree that had been very much like the seedling that was growing with astonishing speed. He hoped, knowing it was futile, that she would not remember those moments today of all days.

"However distant, however much diluted, you are blood of our blood. Miko you might be, but there is a trace of kinship."

Sesshoumaru felt the world falling from under him, opening into a deep, vast darkness, one that promised an eternity of falling with no end, no bottom to save him.

"What do you mean?"

"Merely that somewhere in your lineage, one of my clan mated a human, and so on and so forth. I hardly think heritage matters so much as what it has given you."

Sesshoumaru felt the despair spiraling up to meet him, coiling around his throat and closing it tightly, dimming the edges of his vision.

"It grows, despite the adversity of winter. It has ever been thus for you both. Perhaps that is something to find joy in, despite the trials you endured today."

With that statement, a clearly understood metaphor, hanging in the air, the old youkai walked past them, spry for his age and able bodied.

Kagome let out a small mewling sound, and it wasn't until that moment he realized he was squeezing her hand tightly, too tightly, and forced himself to release it, to ignore the hot blood still eking out from the wound Keimou had inflicted on the hand that bore her wedding ring, now covered in her own blood as well.

"Sesshoumaru," She whispered, face reflecting her own disquiet. "Sesshoumaru, what's wrong? I know that- that the tree is surprising, but you look like-" She stopped abruptly, and he didn't want to know what she was going to say, what he looked like, because he felt like he was fraying at the edges, coming undone all over again when he least wanted to.

But the truth persisted.

"You bear youkai blood," He whispered harshly. A miracle in and of itself considering her powers, but a damning miracle that mocked everything he had done, everything they had given up.

"So, I mean, it's not a problem is," A pause, and her face, impossibly, paled even more. He wished he had said nothing, but did not know how to keep the truth from spilling out, didn't know how to bear the weight of the bitter realization that threatened to shatter him.

"Izanami couldn't have taken my body, could she?" Kagome whispered, eyes widening darkening until they were pools of midnight, deep and starless and terrifying for her pallor. "That's why we had to do it last night, because we would have known today. Izanagi would have known we wouldn't want anything to do with it if we knew the truth. All of that speech, all of his talk-" She continued, voice taking on a hysterical edge that scraped against his own, rasped and broke bitterly like a brittle blade.

Terror bolted through him as he recognized the signs he had not seen in months, the signs of her withdrawing, of going to that place, where he doubted there would ever be any peace again, for her or himself. Oblivious to the blood that smeared her skin, he cupped her face, forced her to look at
him even as the ground rocked and roiled dangerously beneath his feet.

"Kagome," He growled, fear turning his voice into something darker, more feral than it normally was. "Stay. Stay here," He demanded, except it came out sounding more like a plea, and he hated himself for his weakness, for needing her when her own world was slowly fracturing again, opening up beneath her and sucking her under.

"Why can't they just leave us alone?" She whispered, the darkness in her eyes growing turbulent. "What did we do that was so wrong?"

There was a list of things he had done in his life that, with time, he was less than proud of, and even longer list that he knew others would judge as wrong, but none of them had any bearing on her, and he could think of nothing she had done, could ever do, to have brought such a fate down on herself.

"I don't know," He told her honestly, voice raw as he peered down at her, hands still cupping her face. On side was smeared with blood, the other red from where his hand rested. Claws were hidden by her hair, his ring flashed in the dim light, the swirling energies mixing and glowing against her pale skin, but none of it's light reflecting off of the sharp curve of her cheekbone.

For a moment she looked ready to fall, to break beneath the weight, and he felt selfish for sharing the burden, for forcing her to consider the truth in his thoughtless angst. But as he was pulling his hands away to hold her up, to grab her arms, she was lifting her arms, the layers of delicate silk kimono falling down to reveal her pale arms and her hands were latching onto his wrists, keeping his own in place.

"Please don't go away again."

Don't go away?

"I won't," He promised.

"Good. If you disappear again I'll- I'll find you and chain you in the council chamber," She threatened, body trembling as she glared up at him.

The mood change was bewildering, disconcerting. Most of all it was, strangely, steadying. She wasn't retreating, wasn't running away.

And she wanted him to stay.

"I won't go anywhere," He promised. "Unless you're with me."

"Good," She told him, almost managing to convince him that she was on an even keel, except for the relief that made her voice crack in the middle of the single syllable.

For a moment he wasn't sure what to do, because he had never planned to find out that she had youkai blood, or for that tree to exist anywhere but in their own minds, or wherever that place was, and he had never considered that he would be standing in the gardens with her, her bloody hand clutching one wrist still bleeding slowly while the other held to him as if it was the only thing keeping her from flying away. It had never entered his mind that he would be cupping her face, smearing it with his blood, or that he would promise to never leave her, or that they would be mated, unmated, and then married.

"We should go inside, or you'll fall ill," He finally said, gaze locked with her own.
She surprised him by making a dismissive sound.

"Your mother finally got me in this ridiculous get up. I have as much chance of freezing as you do."

But she slowly lowered her hands, and despite everything, he couldn't help but lament the loss of contact.

"I don't want to go back," He said, the words flying out of his mouth before he even realized that he was considering them.

"Me either," She admitted. "I don't want to have to - to deal with everyone right now."

He didn't know whether he grieved her lack of joy, or was ashamed because he was grateful.

"Perhaps we should wash your face, before they are convinced I am trying to kill you again," He offered, a weak joke at best, but one that earned a tremulous smile and a nod. Ignoring the fact that there were stairs they could make perfectly good use of, and that she was perfectly capable of creating a cloud to fly on, he gathered her to him, craving the assurance of contact, and realized she was right. There was as good a chance of her freezing as he. The multitude of layers was awkward to say the least, and he resisted the urge to tell her it was foolish, except his mother had chosen the outfit, he was sure, and he didn't want to think about his mother yet. Ever.

Kagome made no protest as he took to the air, and he refused to admit, even to himself, that her trust despite the circumstances was a warm wind to combat the winter chill trying to settle in his veins. Quickly he found the door that led to his own rooms and opened it with one hand, quickly stepping onto solid ground.

She clung for a moment longer and he allowed her to cling. Given everything that had happened, he was unsure when it would happen again. Soon enough the implications of everything that had occurred would settle on her, and he doubted her reaction, whatever it was, would be to hold fast to him.

"Do you have water in here?" She asked quietly as she finally stepped away.

He walked over to the small table that held a wide, shallow bowl and a jug of water. She followed, the kimono rustling against one another, suddenly grating on his ears. But he would not, could not, ask her to shed even a single layer for fear of how she would take it. The sacrifice they had made in hell, useless or not, would not allow it. Still the taste of that experience cut his tongue like shards of porcelain, preventing any words that would even stray in that direction.

"Here," She told him, shoving the sleeves up as she grabbed the dry cloth that he used to wash his face most mornings. He poured clean water into the basin and she dipped the rag in it slowly, then reached for his wrist. The blood, already drying in the cold, came away from his skin easily. She dipped the rag back in the water, staining it red, and then made another pass, erasing the traces of her blood on him.

He took the rag from her, wiped her face gently, so much so that it took him several minutes to clear the drying rust brown blood away. Youkai blood. Miko blood.

He wondered if perhaps that was why their powers had accepted one another so readily, if that was why she accepted youkai so easily. Some latent recognition of her own kind, however dim.

Once her face was done, he reached for her hand, saw as much as smelled that it was still slowly bleeding. Mentally he cursed the youkai for his carelessness in making the cut, no matter how important he thought his point had been. Even more gingerly than her face he began to clean her
hand, wiping around the open gash and clearing away the vivid crimson stain.

"I didn't get a chance to tell you," She started slowly, eyes on her hand. "The rings, I didn't think you would do anything, I mean, I knew you would get some, but these are- Actually, what are they?" She asked, words stumbling over one another. He looked at her, eyes on her face, and was reminded of the person she had been years before, when he had come across her in battle after battle.

"I gave one of my fangs to Totosai, as well as our hair."

"That's what the hair was for?" She asked, looking up at him, surprise commingling with something else entirely, a not unpleasant emotion, but one that made him wary because it was the expression that often heralded tears.

"It was," He answered stoically.

"And I thought it was for some weird youkai ritual," She chuckled lightly. "Thank you, for remembering. It means a lot."

"They are important to you," He told her quietly, a wealth of meaning in his words. Instinctively he knew that she understood, just as she had the night before, what he was saying, just as he knew she would push nothing.

"You should go to Tenka," He told her, looking at the now clean wound. The gash was still bleeding lightly, the blood pricking at something he did not want to acknowledge, whether it was anger or something else he didn't want to guess, and the sooner it was bandaged and muffled, the sooner he would feel less on edge.

"He's enjoying the celebration, let him," Kagome sighed. "I can take care of it until tonight, it's not that bad."

An awkward silence settled over them, and Sesshoumaru could think of nothing to say. The night before was becoming more and more painfully apparent, and embarrassed by his own display of emotions, he wasn't sure how to act around her.

However, she seemed content to save him, however ignorantly, from that silence with a small yawn.

"You're tired."

"I didn't sleep well," She sighed.

He hadn't either, and he wondered if she knew.

"You should get some sleep. I doubt they will miss our presence overmuch."

"Funny, considering it was our wedding," She said with a sort of half smile. "But you're probably right. They'll assume we, nevermind. A nap is a good idea," She mumbled, turning for the door.

Despite his own feelings, despite the fact that he felt weak and foolish and did not want her to go, he was letting her walk away, letting her go sleep somewhere else, because he could not break, could not ask for more. And when she closed the door behind her, he felt the lethargy creeping up on him, the exhaustion from the night before seeming to double beneath the weight of the new information granted to him, the revelations he had not asked for and did not want.

Carefully removing the ceremonial robes Shinzuru had found for him somewhere, and where he did not care to know, he laid them on the table, not bothering to fold them. Walking over to a chest, he
donned a simple yukata and walked over to his futon. When he laid down, it still smelled of her and him, of tears and sweat and lingering power. Psychic scents steeped the fabric, and he allowed himself a moment to revel in them, closing his eyes and soaking in the feel of her, all while trying to tell himself that she would need space after the secret of her lineage had been sprung on her, after the understanding had descended. It did not make it any easier to accept, and though he was loathe to think of any sort of intimacy of a sexual nature, he craved the solid reassurance of her presence. In that moment he hated how dependent he felt on it, how much he devoted to the woman.

His wife. He was a husband, a title he had never thought to hold, had never wanted to hold. Even now he was unsure of it. Mate seemed more solid, more steady, and yet he had no idea how he would give her the mating mark when he couldn't bring himself to hurt her, to chance that side of himself rising again.

The pattern of his thoughts, the ceaseless whorl was so consuming that he didn't notice the door opening, didn't feel her until she was kneeling next to his futon, blue eyes already hazed with the first stages of sleep.

"Sorry it took me so long. That thing took forever to get out of," She sighed, pulling a blanket back and slipping under it, settling next to him. "And I think I owe your mother an obi. The knot was impossible."

He couldn't help it, couldn't stop his flabbergasted confusion.

"Are you alright?"

He nodded mutely, knowing if he tried to speak, something foolish would come out, and he was unwilling to give away his ignorance. Instead, he settled closer to her and threw an arm over her waist as she reached up with her unwounded, non ringed hand and ran her fingers through his loose hair.

"Thank you," She finally whispered.

He waited patiently, unsure of what she would be thanking him for.

"I need you," She admitted quietly. "I don't want to go to sleep and not be near you. I'm scared I'll wake up-"

She didn't continue, and he didn't force her. Instead, he tightened his arm around her ever so slightly, a reassuring squeeze, and silently returned her thanks with one of his own. Exhaustion crept over them, but he forced himself to stay awake long enough to watch her fall asleep, to make sure that she was real and next to him, and that maybe she was as weak as he, and that in giving in, they would find some strength.

AN: I hinted at Kagome's heritage forever ago in chapter 13. A few people asked about it, and I was intentionally vague for this reason. Because I cannot answer questions here, I would like to direct them to my tumblr (since I've decided my LJ is for more personal stuff), which is linked on my profile. Go ask them there. As for what chapters are censored, I will make a note when they are, otherwise I won't say anything. Deal? Deal.

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