# Benten's Lesson

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**Summary**

Sesshoumaru angers and offends a goddess. In retribution she decides he is in need in a lesson of humility and decides on Kagome's knowledge of unusual foreign literature as the means of exacting an education on the both of them.
A beginning of sorts

Chapter Notes

I have some 50+ chapters written so far: they are all up over at fanfiction but I'll be transferring them bit by bit here too - the stuff here has had further tweaking and spelling corrections.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

~ Chapter 1 - A Goddess Scorned ~

Sesshoumaru was not in a pleasant mood.

He had been passing through one of the smaller forests with the intent of settling some small boundary dispute with another youkai that had foolishly infringed on his territory, what should have been a brief task.

A short way into the forest he had encountered an old human lady in patched kimonos kneeling at the base of two intertwined pine trees. A battered koto* placed before her on an equally shabby square of fabric. Her gnarled fingers and plectrum coaxed a delicate, sweet folk-song from the frayed strings, the tones only slightly hindered by the arthritic stiffness of her hands.

As he had approached she had lifted a chipped lacquer begging-bowl beseechingly.

Sesshoumaru had swept past ignoring her, intent on his path. He had heard finer musicians in his fathers halls, had finer musicians in his own service, though he rarely cared to listen now, had, as a child, produce better music by his own hands. His thoughts were not on music but the task at hand. He would not be swayed.

Or so he had thought.

What should have been a quick passage through the forest had stretched to hours. The area covered by these trees shouldn't have been more than a ri* in distance. Less than that and beyond lay fields and mountains. Yet he had entered the trees in the early morning and now the sun was high overhead and he had yet to find the forest's edge.

Flying had made no difference. Sesshoumaru had launched himself beyond the canopy several hours ago only to find that the forest now extended as far as the eye could see.

The faint sound of plucked strings drew him back down to the forest floor. There the old lady still sat… no… a different old lady. This one was dressed even more beggarly than the first and held a shamisen made of poorly stained paulownia wood. The smell of old fish and seaweed clung to her clothing and Sesshoumaru wrinked his nose.

Yet the shamisen was skillfully played, the music a piece worthy of a nobles entertainment, despite the quality of the instrument and the appearance of the musician.

The old lady paused in her playing, as if only just realising his presence and scrabbled for her wooden begging bowl, the shamisen forgotten in her lap.
"Kind sir. Kind sir. Mon or Rice? A blessing on you... Mon or Rice?" Her face split into a blackened, snag-toothed grin as she held up her bowl rocking it hopefully. Her cracked fingernails were ingrained with dirt and the Taiyoukai could see lice skittering through the folds of her clothing.

Disgusted Sesshoumaru had launching himself swiftly into the air once more, leaving the parasite riddled human behind. Unwilling to back down on his quest.

Night was now drawing in and Sesshoumaru was seething inside. The sun sat low in the sky and the forest still did not end. There any sign of life now: not yokai, human, animal or bird. A fierce wind began sweeping across the tree tops, ruffling them like an ocean's waves and the Taiyoukai allowed himself a small frown.

From below, once again, he heard the sound of a stringed instrument being plucked as an elegant ballad was played. A taunting, jeering noise it seemed to Sesshoumaru. His jaw tightened and he dropped like a falcon from the sky towards it.

A third old lady, this one wearing only tatters, her hair a birds-nest of tangles sat playing a crude biwa: the music as delicate as a nightingale's song. Sesshoumaru did not pause in his descent but landed at her feet, grabbing her by the throat and lifted her in one smooth motion.

"What enchantment is this crone?" He growled, shaking her. "Old women don't beg for coin in the middle of a deserted forest where there are no roads, no people, no life. Who are you?"

The old woman dangled for a brief moment then began to laugh. Not the cackle of an old woman – but a deep, mirthful rich laugh and, though he squeezed at her throat, he could not silence her.... Her laugh sent a jolt of unease down his spine– it held anger, spite, challenge, purpose and most disturbingly, humor.

"Ah Child. You have just granted me the permission that Bishamonten would have withheld. Ah such shame! What warrior would strike at a harmless old woman? He shall not try to stay my hand now."

The old woman looked directly into his eyes and they glowed with a pale light, the irises bright grey. The old woman's age fell away as her hunched body stretched. "You are a fool to dismiss the elderly Sesshoumaru. You are fool to dismiss my music." Her feet met the ground and she straightened.

"And you are thrice a fool to forget there are beings far greater than yourself."

The woman now stood a good head taller again than Sesshoumaru. No longer dangling from his grasp, the lady casually peeled his hand from her throat and the Taiyoukai found himself powerless to stop her. This was no youkai nor human that held him powerless. There was no reiki or youki around her yet the air around her crackled with power.

The tattered rags had disintegrated as the woman changed, replaced by russet kimonos that were embroidered with dragon scales and wave patterns. Her hair now reached down to the ground and a live white snake coiled through the ornate loops of her hair. It flicked its tongue at him distainfully.

Then She Looked at him and he felt her gaze pierce his very being, sifting and judging all he had done. Outrage bubbled up within him but he could do nothing to free his hand from her grasp. The very air seemed to gel around him and he could not draw on his Youki. He gritted his teeth and willed himself to calm. Searching for an escape or some way to equalise the situation.
"Hmm." The woman pursed her lips thoughtfully, as if she had seen something in his thoughts to make her reconsider whatever she had intended. She studied his hand next, turning it still firmly gripped in her own, tracing a fingernail across his palm.

"A long life-line. Though you make waste of it now. Your father showed proper respect. He, and his father before, remembered the rituals. I have waited two hundred years for you, Sesshoumaru, to remember the tributes due. Waited without avail. And now I find you are…” She curled a lip. "...uneducated in appreciation of what I have bestowed upon your family. Ignorant of the duties held by those blessed with true power, stagnant of heart. And worst! You have ceased entirely to think of my tribute, and after showing such promise as a child."

She looked up from his hand again and her eyes were fierce, joyous and determined.

"I do believe you are in need of a lesson… It will be most… illuminating."

And as she let go of his hand the world went dark around him and Sesshoumaru knew no more.

~o0o~

Chapter End Notes

*箏 Koto: a large box shaped stringed instrument that is played resting on the ground with finger picks.
*里 Ri: Traditional measurement of distance that measures to roughly 3.9 kilometers.
*文 Mon: One of the smaller valued coins cast in copper or Iron and used as currency in Japan from 1336 to 1870.
*毘沙門天 Bishamonten: Armor-clad god of warfare or warriors and one of the seven gods of fortune. Originally from India, where he was Vaiśravaṇa, one of the four heavenly kings in Buddhist mythology.
The evening had been pleasant. Mild. The crickets and frogs had sung their courtship songs from the surrounding darkness and there had been a complacent sense of peace surrounding the party.

Supper was done and Inuyasha had sprawled himself across the ground near their token fire picking at his teeth. Sango hummed quietly as she tended her weapons. Miroku mended a sandal, Shippo was absorbed in arranged leaves in some quiet game of patterns and Kagome just sat enjoyed the tranquility and the nearly full-moon.

For once there was no rush to be anywhere, do anything. Tomorrow their search for shards would continue. But for now…

A ripple of sound came from the darkness from one side of the campsite – like the strings of a musical instrument being plucked quickly. A breeze laden with the smell of seawater whipped through the glade, making the fire gutter and then the air seemed to still. Everything seemed to still.

Inuyasha had launched himself to his feet at the unexpected noise but even as he did so time seemed to slow and stop around them all, trapping him mid-movement. Only their eyes seemed free of constraint and rolled to look as, graceful and poised, a tall figure stepped out into the light.

The Lady did not seem to walk but rather glided forward, the leaves on the ground barely ruffled by her passage. Dew spangled the glossy black hair that trailed down her back and onto the ground behind her like a train of silk. A comb of white ivory carved in the likeness of a snake adorned her ornately arrayed hair and her many layered kimonos shaded from deepest indigo through to the palest green-white.

Her eyes were a pale blue-grey, both merry and cold. She looked at each of the party members in turn and just as quickly dismissed them until she came to Kagome. Here she pause and her gaze intensified.

Kagome felt a gentle touch brush across her thoughts, riffling through her memories so fast it was like a picture book being flipped too fast for her to see what the images were. Then the presence was gone and she was left to try to recover her thoughts, all scattered by another's hand.

The lady drew back slightly, her mouth turned up into a slight smile as her gaze swept over Kagome once more. This time looking at her outward appearance.

"Yes. That is what I sought. More than what I sought. Good."

The lady turned, sweeping the trailing fabric of her costume around with her to address Miroku.

"I will borrow your friend for a while… She will return unharmed. And in return you will take this to Enoshima* for me."

She reached into her sleeve and drew out a biwa* that appeared to have been carved from jade. The strings glistened and trembled, catching the firelight like strands of amber.

Tentatively he held out his hands to accept the instrument. The moment he touched it the lady was
gone. As was Kagome – and the spell that held them vanished.

"What th' Hell jus' happened?" Inuyasha barked stumbling forward, claws extended, to the spot where the lady had disappeared, leaving nothing but the lingering fragrance of sea foam.

Miroku dropped to his knees reverently, holding the Biwa as though it were made from eggshell. Carefully he placed it on the ground and bowed his head, clapping loudly.

"It was Benzaiten-Sama… It had to be." Miroku gestured to the ground where the lady had stood. A small spring of fresh water now gushed from the ground, trickling over the grass.

"Who th' F.."

"Benza?—THE Benten-Sama? One of the Seven Gods of Luck?" Shippo gaped, poking at the new spring tentatively with a stick. "Wow. I've heard of her... but why did she take Kagome?"

"What? A God just took Kagome? Why?" Inuyasha spun "We hafta rescue her…"

"Benten-Sama has always been a benevolent god," Sango offered tentatively. "Perhaps we should find the nearest temple and ask her priests what has happened…"

Miroku stood, cradling the biwa and dusting his knees with his other hand.

"She said to go to Enoshima. Perhaps we will find Kagome there…"

"That Benten lady made it sound like a threat – take the lute or Kagome gets it," Inuyasha snarled. " Who th' hell is this Enoshima anyway?"

"Not whom – where. It is an island to the south… I don't think Benzaiten-sama meant it as a threat. Perhaps… it was to give us something to do while we wait for Kagome's return. Our chance of finding shards without her is severely limited you must admit."

Shippo flopped down again, relieved. "If it's Benten-sama the Kagome is sure to be safe. We might even have a bit more luck."

~00o~

Chapter End Notes

* 江の島 Enoshima is a small island set at the mouth of the Katase River. The entire island is dedicated to the goddess Benten who is said to have made it rise from the ocean floor.
* Biwa – a stringed Japanese musical instrument.
...Kagome woke up...

To find herself sitting astride something moving. She blinked and looked down - somehow she had fallen asleep on horseback…

The beast was glossy white and caparisoned in a gorgeous harness of red and gold. Sensing her wake the horse picked up its pace, arching its neck and champing at the bit, causing the bells on the reins to chime sweetly. She herself was now wearing leather gloves, a green velvet jacket over silk doublet, hose and… she tilted sideways enough to look down her leg… Knee length leather boots with silver spurs.

A flash of white at the corner of her eye made her realise she was also hatted. Kagome gripped the front of the saddle with one hand, knowing what the hat would look like even before she pulled it from her head. It was a great floppy velvet affair with two huge white ostrich plumes and she realised with a flush of embarrassment that she was dressed like a character from a very twee children's fairy tale book. And a male character at that.

"Weird dream..." She flicked herself and felt the sting. "I hope it's a dream..."

Looking around for some indicator as to where she was all Kagome could see were trees closely hemming them in. The horse was picking its way along what looked like a game path. There was no sign of human habitation, nor other hoof prints on the ground and the forest didn't look right... The trees leaves and branch shapes were different from any she was familiar with... as if she was in a different country.

Finding no answer in her surrounding Kagome turned her attention back to her mount. She had never ridden a horse in her life. It moved very differently from Kirara and she was vaguely aware that there was more to steering it than just playing with the reins.

She flicked the reins cautiously.

"Hey. I don't suppose you can tell me where I am."

The horse's ears swung back briefly then forward.

"Are you ignoring me?" She poked the horse lightly with her heels trying to get its attention again.

To her dismay the horse took this as a request to go faster. Eagerly it surged forward into a canter, nearly unseating her. Kagome abandoned thought of steering and dropped the reins to cling to the front of the saddle. The horse stretched out, pounding along the trail with gay abandon, heedless of rabbit holes, tree roots and uneven ground.

Some time later, long after Kagome had regained her breath enough to shout all manner of impolite things about the horse's parentage, they slowed back to a walk, the horse snorting and foaming lightly at the mouth but apparently pleased with itself. Kagome patted its shoulder awkwardly.

"Neh: Thankyou for letting me stay on board."
The horse's ears flicked back again but Kagome was pretty sure by now that it was just a horse. Relaxing back into the saddle she tried to ignore the stiffness in her legs and looked around.

They had just stepped out of the forest into what appeared to be an orchard full of apple trees in bloom. The air was fragrant and white petals drifted down like benign snowflakes.

Ahead she could see a small group of... well... small people who stood near a dais in the middle of the orchard as if in discussion. They broke apart as Kagome neared, their eyes shining with gratitude.

One of them, an old woman, clapped her hands happily and turned to call out into the trees behind her. "Hanshin-tachi! Purinsu-Sama has arrived!"

"Uh... Hullo?" Kagome offered, looking down at them uncertainly. "Could you tell me where I am?"

Several more tiny people came trotting in from other parts of the orchard and Kagome counted under her breath. "five... six... seven."

How weird. Sort of like that western kid's story. Only these 'dwarves' were all dressed in traditional garb suited to the Sengoku period she had been whisked from, though all in different cuts of costume. One seemed to be wearing a noodle seller’s apron, others in bright carnival jackets and yet another was wearing a broad straw hat and the clothing of a fisherman.

"Ah! It is Purinsu Sama. Purinsu of the White Horse." Their reverent voices overlapped in an almost religious chant.

"Prince? Um I think there might be a mistake." Kagome looked around. "I'm just Kagome, Higurashi Kagome. This isn't my horse. I just found myself riding it." Even as she spoke she noticed they were using the western word for 'prince', and pronounced it like an unfamiliar name.

"The lady said you would come and break the spell, that we would know you by the white horse you rode."

"And by the fact no one else has come here since O-Hime-sama in the two months we have been here." Remarked another, a little dryly.

"Spell? Please: I don't know anything about a spell... I'm even not sure how to get down from here..."

One of the dwarves finally took the horse’s reins and, with some instruction, she managed to fall off the horse quite gracefully, managing to pretty much land on her feet. She stood a moment, clutching the stirrup leather while the pins and needles faded from her toes and then the old lady took her hand and lead her towards the dais.

Kagome could see there was a glass coffin on top and now she was certain of the fairytale she appeared to be a part of. "Shiroyuki-hime to shichi hanshin"... Snow-white and the seven dwarves.

Curious to see who the princess was Kagome hopped up on the dais and, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, leant over to look at the sleeping woman...

She recoiled hyperventilating in surprise, fell off the dais and had to be both caught and supported by the nearest dwarves.

That was NOT what she had expected to see in the coffin.
Lying there in state on a pristine bed of flowers, in a gorgeous green silk gown, silky hair elegantly arranged around their head, was Inuyasha's half brother Sesshoumaru!

"Purinsu-sama: are you alright?" A hand patted her face and Kagome struggled back to her feet. Clamping down on her erratic breathing and batted away the gentle hands that supported her.

"No. I refuse."

"Pardon?"

Kagome threw the floppy hat on the ground and stomped a foot down on it, drew in a great lungful of air and turned to shout at the horse, the forest, the sky:

"This isn't funny. Not even if it's a dream! I want to wake up now! I'm not kissing Freaking Sesshoumaru. Not now! Not ever!"

There was no answering thunderclap. There was no jolting into wakefulness back in her sleeping bag.

The dwarves stood on looked on bemused as she stood there panting in fury.

The little old lady gently took her hand and patted it, a wry smile on her face. "It seems that you have met our O-Hime-sama before…Would Purinsu-sama care for some tea? Ohime-sama can wait a little longer. She has lain there over a week now with no decay."

"Oh Gods. Yes please!" Kagome said feverently. Anything to escape the face that lay in that coffin and the role that appeared to have been set before her.

All of the 'hanshin-tachi' walked with her through the orchard, one reverently leading her horse along behind, in solemn silence. Until one started whistling... then another muttered something about radish moth to his fellow and suddenly Kagome was surrounded in the soft, chatter of the everyday, all of it murmuring below waist level. She felt somewhat like a pine tree in a wheat field. It was somehow comforting. For all the strangeness of her surroundings she was among real people. Even if none of them was as tall as her hip.

Ahead a small thatched stone building became apparent. In contrast to the traditional clothing of the dwarves the house was a English cottage with a climbing rose scrambling up the front and a white picket fence... and a letterbox? Kagome wasn't given time to dwell on that anachronistic touch as she was ushered up the front steps to the door.

One of the hanshin helped her remove her boots before she stepped over the doorstep into the house and each of the others waited patiently for their turn to enter - the narrow doorway of the western house not designed for the civility of taking off shoes.

However the inside of the cottage was distinctly Japanese. There was even the central hearth with a cauldron in the middle of the room and an alcove with incense and offerings to the gods. The windows were papered and tatami matting carpeted the floor.

"Come. Sit. Sit."

The old lady patted the mat near her. While the others hanshin seemed to hold Kagome in some degree of awe the oldest lady seemed more relaxed in her presence. The rest of the dwarves sat respectfully along the other side of the room as the old lady set to putting tea on, a cauldron of water waiting to be swung out over the coals.
"Might I ask who you are and where you come from? I'm called Kagome, I... ah I come from near Edo*... I am a student there..."

The old lady smiled as she spooned out tea leaves and folded back her sleeves ready to prepare the tea. "I am Mayu, I am from Chikuzen. There I am a weaver."

"Toro, of Nagato province. I am a blacksmith. Though I am small my arm is strong. I can throw a horse!" This from the dwarf who had lead her horse, and he flexed his brawny forearms as he spoke and Kagome stifled a giggle. The little man wriggled his eyebrows at her flirtatiously.

"Shizu, from Jinbo. My fish were sold as far as the markets of Izumo. I do not know if my boat is still there."

"Mu-sama, my noodles are the best in all of Tsushima."

"Jiro, I travel between Bizen and Totomi where I sell herbs."

"This is Mika-chan, my wife, and I am Kougi, we are from Iyo. We are entertainers there."

Kagome was impressed. "You come from many places..."

Mayu chuckled. "The only thing we have in common is our height and that we all play a musical instrument of one sort or another. We have spend many nights discussing why O-Benten-sama brought us here." As the last of the words left her lips the old woman clapped her fingertips over her mouth as if trying to catch and prevent her last sentence.

"O-Benten? The goddess of music?"

"Yes but hush. She asked not to be spoken of. I have slipped in my foolish old age. Would you like to hear us play?"

"Oh. Yes please!" Kagome swallowed here questions. The sudden uneasiness in Mayu's eyes cautioned the girl to hold her tongue. For all the years they had fought and befriended Youkai Kagome and her group had never encountered an actual god. The thought was somewhat unnerving.

Toro ducked out to tend to her horse, but the others all set to tuning their instruments. All of the dwarves had instruments of one form or another and, now that they had tuned them to satisfaction, they launched into a bright folk song, Mika sang and Kagome, encouraged by their glances, clapped time.

The dwarves played well – none were particularly excellent but they enjoyed making their instruments sing and the company of one another. This love infused their music with excellence.

Supper was splendid for all that it was peasant fare. 'Mu-sama' was a master of the pan and as he cooked he regaled Kagome and the rest of the company with stories of improbably events that had happened in his kitchen and in the dining area of his eatery back home.

"Have you been here long?" Kagome asked as seconds were being served. The dwarves exchanged glances. "Only about two months. It has been much quieter since O-Hime Purensessu fell under the curse. The lady..." Shizu here paused and a nodded towards the household shrine where Kagome noted a small carved statue of Benten stood smiling benevolently. "Brought us here to watch over her until the spell is broken. She will then return us home and bless our business from then on."

"I am glad you like our fare Purinsu-sama." Toro-san passed a second bowl of rice to Kagome and
she took it eagerly. "O-Hime did not care for our music, or our fare, she would not try anything we cooked."

"Nor speak a word." Mika-chan piped in. "She would walk around the orchard – once I saw her fall, as if she had tried to leap into the sky and failed. It is shame we could not make her happy. Kougi-san and I are good at making people smile but O-Hime san would not even look at us."

Kagome smiled sadly "I wouldn't worry too much about that. I have met your O-Hime before and nothing much pleases him."

"Him?"

Oh well. The cat was out of the bag. "Your O-Hime-san is a great and powerful Youkai lord… I think he may have angered Ben… The Lady… in some fashion."

"But O-Hime-sama is so beautiful..." Mika gasped.

Kagome pulled a face. "Yes. Life isn't fair."

"No matter who O-Hime is tomorrow morning you shall wake her and we shall be able to go home." Mayu-san was pragmatic. "Come Purinsu-san, we have a futon for you."

~o0o~

Kagome lay under the light quilt and listened in the darkness. Most of the dwarves seemed to have fallen asleep immediately but a soft whispering reached her.

"I will miss you Mayu-san."

"Sleep Mika-chan. We all have families to go back to."

"Oyasumi"

"Oyasumi child."

If this wasn't a dream then these were real people. And they were relying on her to get them back to where they belonged. The thought gave Kagome no comfort. Though it did allow her some degree of resolve.

~o0o~

The morning saw Kagome standing on the dais by the glass coffin again. Toro held her horse and the other six dwarves stood in a line beside him, waiting.

Shizu, Toro, Kougi and Jiro had moments ago lifted aside the lid from the coffin.

It was her turn now.

Taking a deep breath Kagome leant in over the still figure. At least her first kiss was long gone… for all the good it had done her then.

Sesshoumaru's eyes flew open and Kagome recoiled from the rage in them, as she staggered back they glazed and then drifted shut again as if her proximity had allowed him to wake briefly.

She sank to her knees.
"Oh Gods...."

Steeling herself Kagome pulled herself up the side of the glass coffin and to her feet once more. She was terribly aware, not only of the unconscious Taiyoukai but also of her audience. All seven dwarves were arrayed behind her, clutching their hands and waiting for their 'Purinsessu' to wake so they could go home.

Taking a deep breath Kagome leaned in again brushing her hair behind her ears with a hand and trying not to think about what she was about to do. As she did so her eyes fell on the apple placed inside the coffin, on the small bite taken from it. Rational thought kicked in and she straightened abruptly.

She wasn't a prince. He wasn't a princess. Where was the rule that said it had to be a kiss that woke him? She had assumed it. 'Assumptions and donkeys' as one of her English teachers had been fond of stating.

The character in the story choked on a piece of apple. What should a modern girl do for someone choking?

She was not going to follow along with this stupid story if there was another way. Kagome clenched her fists together in a volleyball grip and thumped down with all her might on the Taiyoukai's sternum.

Sesshoumaru exhaled with a bark and the piece of apple shot past Kagome's ear like an arrow. He sucked in a great mouthful of air and sat up. Kagome stumbled backwards as he looked around, taking in her, the dwarves, the surroundings and finally, looking down, the clothing he was wearing.

Kagome cleared her throat, her question addressed, more or less, to the youkai lord. "Uh.. What happened?"

"The spell is broken!" One of the dwarves exalted and the others chimed in, clapping. "The purinsessu is woken. The spell is broken. O-hime-sama has..."

Sesshoumaru lanced them with a glare at the title, youki rolled off him like thunder-clouds and the air smelled of ozone. All of the dwarves flung themselves face down in obeisance.

"Thankyou Purinsu-sama." The Mayu called and then, rapidly and with a musical "Glock!", like that of a Shishi Odoshi, they vanished, leaving Kagome alone with the Taiyoukai lord.

~o0o~

Chapter End Notes

* The city of Edo (now known as Tokyo) didn’t exist until the Tokugawa period some time after the sengoku period

* 鹿威し (しほうし) Shishi Odoshi or deer scarer was originally used by Japanese
farmers to scare deer and boar away from their rice crops.
For Want of a Horse

Kagome thought about running in the same sort of dismissive way a rabbit might think about running as the twin headlights of the truck of destiny bore down upon it. The thought peeped frantically from somewhere at the back of her head but could not muster the volume to regain her attention from the terror before her. Morbid fascination kept her eyes glued to the Taiyoukai as he gracefully rose from the coffin like some frightening combination of a vampire and woodland nymph.

Sesshoumaru's brief glance assessed her and dismissed her just as fast. He ran a claw across the fabric of his skirt as if to slice at it. The fabric rustled slightly but showed no mark he abandoned the attempt and turned his hand to removing the gorgeous strata of jeweled ornaments through his hair, efficiently stripping them off and dropping them contemptuously on the ground. His hair was loose again, though no less silky for it's time in captivity.

All of this was done swiftly, without a sound but for the occasional tinkle as an ornament bounced off the dais. Kagome drew back slightly as she felt his youki gather, but he merely crouched very slightly and jumped. The leap that would have normally sent him skyward and out of sight in seconds merely landed him on the grass a few meters from her. The moment before his feet left the ground Kagome had felt his youki compressed down, as if by a great invisible hand, preventing it from carrying him.

"Hn." Sesshoumaru's brow furrowed slightly as he straightened. He did not bother looking her again but turned and walked away from her and the dais. Kagome knew she should be grateful to be ignored and not flayed alive, but her inner-kindergartener remained resentful.

*Hey! I broke the spell on you! A little gratitude wouldn't kill…*

The rational part of her brain, fortunately, kept a grip on her tongue and she watched in silence as the demon lord, trailing his long green skirts, strode across the clearing and disappeared into the trees.

"Well!" Kagome snorted. "I think I can file this under 'very random'. " She turned and had taken the first step in walking back to the horse when Sesshoumaru stumbled out of the forest again from another direction, briefly tripping on his skirts as if something had pushed him from behind.

‘Eh? I guess I'm not the only one having troubles… really all things considered I'm doing pretty well.’ Kagome thought as she watched the Taiyoukai's expression, which had been so neutral from waking, betrayed a trace of anger and vexation. Turning on his heel he turned and stalked back into the forest and was gone again… for about a minute and a half. Then his youki flared from the other side of the glade and he was back this time approaching from another direction.

Sesshoumaru stopped again when he saw her and his nostrils flared. Kagome decided to take a chance and scooped up the horse's reins, leading it over to the Taiyoukai.

"Uh… Sesshoumaru-sama… I myself arrived on this horse… Perhaps if ridden…" Kagome offered lamely. Sesshoumaru eyed her down his nose then looked at the horse. His youki flared again and Kagome felt goosebumps rise – but the horse did not seem to care. He took the reins from her hand and in one smooth motion Sesshoumaru had set foot in the stirrup and gracefully swung up into the saddle, contemptuous of the skirts. They settled fetchingly over the horse's rump and Kagome averted her eyes briefly to avoid the stony dignity of the demon-lord in lace petticoats.
"I… I kind of hoped I might come….” Kagome trailed off at the Taiyoukai, with the additional height of the horse cast a withering glance down at her.

He flicked the reins and… the horse didn't move. Its four feet planted as firm as if it were a statue. A warning growl resonated from Sesshoumaru but the horse for all intents and purposes stood as if frozen. Sesshoumaru's attempt to slash at its flank with his talons but made no impression. Not mark on the glossy white rump of the animal, the sharp edges of his claws just glanced off.

Kagome took a step forward and poked the horse in the neck with a finger, fully expecting it to feel cold and hard as marble. The animal bent its head down to lip at her hand and nickered softly.

Sesshoumaru let at tight breath out through his nose and collared Kagome, slinging her over the saddle in front of him in one smooth motion. She squeaked with alarm and the moment her weight settled, sack-like across its shoulders, the horse willingly stepped forward.

~00o~

The forest seemed to be changing again. They were on a distinct track and had been for some time. It had become evident that the horse now wouldn't move without the both of them on their back. Sesshoumaru had nudged Kagome off again as soon has the horse had begun moving and the beast had frozen again before she had even finished slithering to the ground. She hoped it was some kindness on his part that had prompted to push her feet first rather than face first off the horse’s shoulder.

He had relented then and allowed her to sit astride behind him rather than across the horse's neck like a dead animal. They had been travelling a few hours now and it certainly wasn't comfortable. Kagome sat in behind the saddle and, not daring to touch the august figure before her, had to settle for trying to grip the raised back of the saddle through the voluminous fabric of Sesshoumaru's skirt.

She was beginning to wonder if they would still be riding when it got dark when there was a scuttling ahead and a strange, cat-bird like growl from beneath their mount's front feet. With a squeal of surprise the horse bucked then launched itself forward, pig-rooting for all it was worth. Kagome, who had moments before been relaxed enough to release her grip from the saddle cantle, tumbled sideways and downhill into a stand of ferns as the horse bolted off with its elegantly dressed rider hauling uselessly on the reins.

Kagome lay stunned in the undergrowth for some minutes, concentrating on breathing and moving her toes and fingers. Finally convinced she wasn't broken anywhere she untangled herself from the fronds spitting leaves and curses with alternating breaths. Her jacket was torn and her elbow ached with the ferocity that promised a beautiful bruise later. Scrambling back up the bank to the road she found no sign of the horse beyond hoof prints. Whatever had prevented it from letting Sesshoumaru ride off with it before evidently didn't hold true now.

No… something else had been left behind.

A single glass sequined slipper lay in the middle of the path, far to big for Kagome or any woman she knew personally. There was no need to guess from whom's foot it had fallen.

Kagome snorted wryly as she picked up the shoe with two fingers. It twinkled fetchingly at her. She recognized the reference straight away and now had some inkling of what the strange lady had been rummaging for in her head. Neither of these stories would be known in the feudal era. It sort of made sense that gaps in her memory regarding details, of say western architecture, would be filled in with Japanese equivalents. It made for a weird pantomime mix of costumes and location.
The reason why it was happening was a different kettle of fish all together.

"This really isn't funny you know!" Kagome announced to the air as she looked around. There wasn't an iota of an aura to indicate someone was watching but she was certain that all this wasn't going unobserved.

"If the gods truly do have a sense of humor its not a nice one nor a very comprehensible one." Kagome muttered, weighing the shoe in her hand thoughtfully. "How anyone could expect Sesshoumaru to tolerate being a Cinderella… At least as Snow White he was unconscious."

She turned the shoe over in her hands. I don't know where I am… I don't know why I'm here. I don't even know if Sesshoumaru knows what is going on… I don't know what to do… except I know these stories and he doesn't… Maybe he won't kill me if I can help find us a way home…

"No point in standing around waiting to be rescued… looks like I'm the rescuee again… somehow.” Her vocal perambulations trailed off… briefly.

“Maybe Karma is calling for payback. I get rescued a lot by Inuyasha and the others. I suppose it's my turn to rescue someone else..." Though Sesshoumaru was the last person she would expect to needing rescuing.

The trail was easy enough to follow and Kagome did, setting a brisk pace along the road. At each in the road or curve in the path, that she sped up a little, hoping she would see Sesshoumaru or the horse. Optimism waned after the eighth bend and she settled into a dependable plod. Within the first two hours Kagome realised she was wearing footwear far more suited to riding than walking and by the end of the third hour she had at least one blister. The boots looked beautiful but they were excruciatingly uncomfortable.

The sky began darkening, at first Kagome thought it was night approaching, then fat raindrops began to spatter on the dust of the road. She briefly contemplated seeking shelter under a tree until the rain passed but paranoid of falling further behind she decided to press on. The rain was quite warm, almost tropical… though her clothing didn't seem to like being wet. As the rain got heavier her jacket really began to sag and lengthen. At first she thought it was just to do with the weight of the water but as she watched her clothing began to melt in the rain, changing from a prince's lavish costume into a woman's road worn travelling dress.

Kagome now wore skirts that were plain and a little patched but serviceable and, mercifully her footwear had changed too and, for all the scuffs, was sound and comfortable. The blister on her heel remained but at least the sharp seams that had been rubbing were gone.

As her costume settled into its new form the rain let up and true night darkened the sky. Ahead lights began to twinkle: human habitation, and nearby. Kagome looked ruefully at the skirts, she still had the slipper… maybe she was expected to be Cinderella… though she'd need another shoe if that were to be the case. A sudden cold wind whipped up behind her, making her wet skirt plaster itself against her legs, as if to hasten her on the way. Chilled Kagome obliged, wishing she had some idea of what was expected of her.

~o0o~

A thoroughly wet and frozen Kagome knocked on the door of the inn and tried to wring some of the water out of her sleeves as she waited.

There was no answer... though she could hear voices inside.

She knocked louder, barking her knuckles on the solid wood of the door. There was the sound of a
chair scraping back and footsteps then the door opened, revealing the common room of the inn and three or so other people watching her in curiosity. Kagome blushed with embarrassment: The door hadn't been locked and most would have just let themselves in rather than knock and expect to be escorted. She felt her cheeks glow and looked at the floor.

"I'm very sorry. I wasn't sure if you were open..." Stupid stupid stupid... "I am lost and can't find my friends..." The words and tone of her own voice sounded dreadfully childish to Kagome even as she said the words. She sounded so pathetic, she could almost hear the underspoken tone of 'I am just a little girl. Please look after me.' and it appalled her.

"What sort of inn would be closed on a night like this? Come in Little Miss. There's a blaze in the fireplace. Can I get you anything?"

Kagome's stomach growled and she dropped her gaze again surprised by the loudness of the noise. Her fingers, fiddling with the fabric of her skirts found she had a small bag of coins half hidden in the folds. It had been some time since the breakfast with the dwarves. If she hadn't been so intent on catching up with Sesshoumaru she would have noticed how hungry she had become. At least now she had the opportunity to get food.

"Please – Would you have hot soup? Or a stew? I am very hungry..." Kagome trailed off, horrified at how meek and feeble she was sounding. She couldn't meet anyone in the room's eyes. Where the hell was her usual confidence. She felt shabby. Perhaps that was it. For some reason she felt like she should be in better array than she was. For some reason it had made her self-conscious. Which was stupid. She'd faced all manner of people in a tattered school uniform without this mortification.

Self consciously she shuffled over to the fireplace, avoiding eye contact and staring at the floor. The place was amazingly clean. The stones were freshly scoured and Kagome swore she could see the gleam of youki across the cobbled floor – as if their surface had been scalded clean by sheer demonic force. The thought made her uncomfortable, as did the fact she was dripping muddy water all over them.

The few glances she had snuck told her that this inn also had the same strange jumble of Japanese and Western furniture as the dwarves cottage –as if someone had seen an illustration of a European inn and filled in all the blank areas with familiar objects. The effect was slightly disorientating. Trying to block out the sympathetic glances of the other customers Kagome stood as close to the fire as she could stand and surreptitiously checked what sort of money she had and how much.

~00o~

The demure young woman stood by the fire. Her comely manners set her apart from any other traveler that had visited the inn before. As the innkeeper watched her dripping at the hearth he noted the twinkle of the firelight off the slipper the girl had tucked her arm. The high quality cut and fabric of her dress under the patches and road grime. Highborn if not related to royalty by her carriage... Strange that she be out alone at night though.

His wife in the kitchen too had seen the glister of diamond on the shoe. She accosted him when he came to the kitchen to fetch the girl's meal.

"Husband! She may be a princess in disguise. Think of the wealth we could gain if we returned her to her family, or better yet married her to one of our sons..." She ladled a large serving of stew out, her voice shrill with excitement. Her husband was not so convinced.
"How can we be sure she's a princess. She could be a servant in cast-offs that has stolen one of her mistress's shoes. Strange shoes those. Do you think they are Chinese?"

"Oh there's one sure fire way to find out if she is of royal birth… that lady said so…"

Behind them, half hidden in the shadows and still scrubbing the floors despite the lateness of the hour, their new scullery maid listening in sullen silence, all but forgotten by the innkeeper and his wife.
Kagome had been ushered up the stairs to the largest bedroom. The inn-keeper’s wife had refused to take her coins and had insisted that Kagome accept their hospitality for the night. Kagome had found this a little unnerving. The woman was just a little too friendly, a little too subservient, a little too eager to please. Surreptitiously Kagome shifted the hiding place of her purse and tried to tuck the sparkling shoe a little deeper into the shadowy folds of her skirt.

After what had been a glorious (plain but filling and moreover warm!) meal the woman had ushered Kagome upstairs, past many other doors—this one with an actual door handle and even a key. Even as Kagome stepped into the best bedroom of the establishment the inn-wife bowed, stepped backwards, quietly closed the door and, from the receding sounds, disappeared downstairs again. Kagome was left alone gazing up at the main feature of the room.

A broad wooden base, carved with sweet pea blossoms on the tailboard was set in the middle of the room. Where a single mattress would have normally rested on the bed base there was a tall stack of Japanese futons instead. A thick quilt was draped over the top and bank of pillows was just visible from where she stood. A small ladder stood nearby, just tall enough for a person to scramble up on top of the pile of bedding.

"That bed seriously has too many mattresses to not be some sort of plot device…" Kagome eyed the structure. The concept was familiar but fatigue muddled her memory. Casting about the room Kagome decided on compromise.

Digging her heels into the floor boards she dragged a heavy wooden chest in front of the door. Satisfied that she'd at least some warning of intrusion Kagome stripping out of her wet dress and, in the white undergown she found herself to be wearing underneath, Kagome scaled the ladder and flopped onto the bed, fully ready to sleep…

And found she couldn't.

No matter how she rolled and twisted on the stack of futons she couldn't get comfortable. It was like something was poking her in the ribs with a sharp finger. She would sit up and run her hands over the mattress where she had been lying and it was as smooth and soft as it should be. But as soon as she lay down again there would be a lump. Not just a lump – but A Lump.

"Fine! I won't sleep up here. Japanese people have got it right. One futon and a bit of tatami* is best!" With a growl of defiance Kagome ignored the ladder and jumped to the ground, hauling the top futon and a quilt down with her to remake it on the floor. There she slept fine.

~00o~

It was the combination of the strident crowing of a rooster beneath her open window, and the savory smell of cooking rice, that eventually rouse the sleeping girl. Kagome took one glance at the pre-dawn sky out the window and attempted to burrow deeper under the covers. The insistent growl of her stomach finally convinced her to roll out of bed and don her damp clothing again. Halfway through pulling her shoes she on noticed that the chest she had used to block the door had returned it's the original position. The scuff marks remained from where she had pulled it across the floor but there were none in the other direction.

"I'm sure you're trying to infer something. But I refuse to play whatever the game is." Kagome muttered, reaching to open the door and find breakfast… only to find the door locked.

The day was still very early and perhaps the innkeeper’s wife had locked the door from the outside to keep her safe from the other patrons… But Kagome was suddenly uncomfortable with being
trapped in the room. The window was wide open and a glance out showed she was two storey's up from the stable yard... feeling like a clichéd character in a detective novel she set to collecting her bed linens.

Tying the blankets together Kagome decided to err on the side of caution and threw a few futon out the window before she attempted to clamber down the makeshift rope. Her knots held until she was about a metre off the ground. About then her inexpertly attempted knots slithered open and she descended with more haste and less grace to the ground. Kagome bouncing off the mattress to tumble across the dusty packed earth of the courtyard and almost to the feet of the kitchen-hand that was drawing water from the well.

Kagome self consciously coiffed a mote of dust from her lungs and began to rise, dusting herself off, but froze.

It wasn't some grubby kitchen skivvy standing before her but Sesshoumaru, stony faced. He was wearing the rags of a serving girl and his glorious long hair was tied back out of the way with a scrap of cloth. Even as she watched he mechanically lifted a bucket of water from the well and, in a strangely robotic fashion, stiffly turned and walked back towards the kitchen, his eyes the only thing he seemed able to control – and they shot daggers at Kagome. She hesitated then, looking around the empty courtyard and seeing no one else she hastened to follow him inside.

The kitchen, like the rest of the inn had the stones scrubbed raw. Glittering pots and kettles in brass and tin shone on the walls. A great vat of porridge glugged quietly in a ceramic pot on the cinders. In the middle of the floor, the bucket of water by his side, Sesshoumaru was already scrubbing the floor. A small pile of ruined scouring brushes lay abandoned in a corner. Most of them were worn down to the wood - a couple had the indents of claw marks and at least two were partially melted, as if by acid.

"Human you hound me." Sesshoumaru hissed between gritted teeth, not looking up. "Is it not enough that I am forced to perform menial tasks without an audience also." His brush whisked across the cobbles with unhuman force, youki raged around him like a fire to Kagome's senses. "Please… please stop that." Kagome stuttered. "Stop scrubbing.. please."

Sesshoumaru froze then straightened as if a weight had been lifted from him and flung the scrubbing brush away as hard as he could. The small piece of wood and bristles struck the wall with a sharp crack and was reduced to a splintered bundle that tumbled to the floor.

Kagome could almost feel the compulsion to clean up the new mess tugging at Sesshoumaru even before the last of the fragments of the brush had fluttered to the cobbles. Hastily she stooped and picked up the pieces.

"Could… would you like me to make some tea?" She brushed the pieces from her hands into the fireplace, avoiding looking at the Taiyoukai.

"On the table. It is already made." Sesshoumaru's voice was flat. "As is the breakfast for the Inn."

"Oh… would you like some?" As carefully as she could Kagome edged around Sesshoumaru to the well scrubbed kitchen table and the teapot.

Not waiting for an answer she poured two cups out, trying not to spill more than necessary. Tea leaves tumbled out of the spout on the second cup. Morosely Kagome placed the cup of tea near the Taiyoukai and took the cup of leaves for herself, sipping around the vegetation.

"Um… Do you still have the shoe? Um the silvery one? I think I know how to get us out of... well out of where we are."

The taiyoukai looked distainfully at the cup and wrinkled his nose very slightly. Kagome took another sip of her own and resisted pulling a face. It was bitter and tepid, not worth drinking. She pushed it away and tried again.

"Sesshoumaru-sama I believe this place, and where we were before are based stories..." Kagome took a deep breath and pressed on, emboldened by the fact Sesshoumaru appeared to be listening. "Stories that come from a land far further away than China. There are certain things that come to pass before those stories end... like the person in the coffin waking up. I believe the two silver shoes need to be reunited before..." 'they live happily ever after' was a bit nebulous. "...before either of us can escape this place."
Sesshoumaru stood silent a moment then turned and reached up on top of one of the cupboards and withdrew a slipper.

Even as Kagome began to breathe a sigh of relief at seeing it she realized that she had forgotten to bring its twin with her.

"Ah No! The other slipper! I left it up in the room!" She stood, turning with haste and kicking over his bucket, splashing the soapy water across the floor.

There was a sharp intake of breath, then a growl of irritation from Sesshoumaru and he grabbed her wrist, swiftly dragging her from the room and up a small servants stairs.

Held in a vice like Kagome bumbled along behind Sesshoumaru, tripping on every third step as he hastened up the stairway. While his feet made no sound on the wooden steps Kagome's tread coaxed every single squeak, squeal and creak from the timber. She yelped as the taiyoukai almost lifted her the last few steps up and out into the hallway.

Kagome tried to prise his fingers from her wrist as they barreled towards her room.

"The door is lock.." Without loosing momentum Sesshoumaru's barefoot connected solidly with the door and it bounced open and he strode through, towing her behind him. The taiyoukai was nearly panting with the effort of fighting the compulsion to return to clean the kitchen.

Kagome snatched up her slipper from where it had sat, forgotten, on the side table and passed it to Sesshoumaru.

He stood there a moment, clutching both shoes, then released a slow, relieved breath. Kagome could almost see the cleaning curse lift from the Taiyoukai and his normal mask slip back into place. His grip on the footwear subtly changed into a fastidious pinch and he held them slightly away from himself. Kagome didn't blame him. In daylight they did look rather garish.

There was an awkward silence as they both waited for something more to happen – Some sort of sparkling noise Kagome thought, like the one that heralded a turning of the page in a children's audio book.

She cleared her throat and noticed Sesshoumaru's gaze sweep over her makeshift bed on the floor.

"There was something weirdly lumpy about the bed." Kagome explained as Sesshoumaru's eyes flick from the mattress to the bed. "I couldn't sleep on it."

"Hnn." The Taiyoukai reached into the pile of mattresses with the same sharp movement Kagome had seen him plunge his hand into the bodies of enemies. When his slender fingers emerged, neatly scissored between them was a small red bean.

"An Azuki* bean?!" Kagome leaned in to look at it. "Is that why I couldn't sleep? That tiny thing?" A suspicion formed. "How did you know it was there?"

Sesshoumaru's glowered slightly and the air around him crackled somewhat with repressed fury. "I was instructed to put it there when they had me bring in the futons."

"Azuki beans are legumes…” Kagome said as pieces began to fall into place regarding the mattresses. "Same as peas..."

Sesshoumaru raised an eyebrow and contemptuously flicked it out the window.

"It is of no importance to me." He thrust the slippers towards her. "Here is the other shoe. You will remove us from this story-place now and return This Sesshoumaru to where he belongs."

Kagome thought frantically through the Cinderella story in her head. Should she try putting the shoes on… or get him to? "I think…"

The ground shivered then bucked beneath their feet. The beams of the roof shuddered, raining down particles of thatch. There were outraged and frightened cries from and Kagome clung on to the side of the bed, narrowly missing being buried in futons as they tumbled down.

An Earthquake?!....

~o0o~

Chapter End Notes
* Tatami - woven rice straw mats used as traditional flooring. Room size is sometimes measured by the number of tatami mats, though the size of the mats varies regionally.

* Azuki beans, Vigna angularis. Commonly eaten as a sweet dish.
By the time Kagome had picked herself up off the floor leafy green fronds were curled about the window. As if watching a time-delay film leaves budded, unfurled and grew. Outside something loomed up, casting a great shadow across the front of the building.

There was no noise but the urgent rustle of vegetation as it made its way upwards. Kagome turned, Sesshoumaru was gone.

There was the bang of a sliding door being thrown open downstairs and the slap of feet hurrying across the floorboards.

"Where is that wretched scullery maid!? The O-kyaku* has burned to the bottom of the pot and there is no sign of her!"

"What is this fuss?" Another voice responded, muzzy as if just woken. "She cannot have gone far. That lady who sold her to me her said she had a Kyousai* cast on her that would keep her tied to cleaning the inn until someone gave her clothing. There is no one here that would make that mistake. No one except perhaps..."

There was a pause and Kagome drew back from the doorway. The light glittered off the pair of slippers where they had fallen amidst the remains of her bedroom door. Shoes were a sort of clothing…. Kagome wondered if this wasn't Cinderella after all....

"The princess? She wouldn't stir downstairs would she?" Kagome froze at the innkeepers remark.

Another voice joined in this one coarse in his language. "I think your 'princess' may have done a runner. I found futons and a rope of blankets down under the window just moments before that happened."

"What?! She's gone? And "that" is?" There was a shuffle of feet and the sound of of a door being flung open.

"That is THAT!"

"Aizen Myoo* keep us safe!"

"What witchery is that?!" The voices decended into a frightened babble and Kagome to looked out the window, leaning out to look up. Outside a giant vine rose up into the sky, its broad leaves a vibrant green.

"There she is! The princess is still here."

Kagome glanced down. The innkeeper, his wife and a rough looking man were all craning their heads up to look at her.

"Is this your doing?" The innkeepers wife shrieked. "Ruining our yard and scaring our patrons. And after we give you the best bed in the house and feed you. Fetch her down Tamino-San!"

The burly man made a noise of consent and ran into the house. Kagome spared a desperate glance back at the smashed door of her room then clambered up onto the windowsill. The sound of heavy
footsteps approaching on the stair made her gather her courage and she leapt for the vine, grabbing at the thick curlique of branches and scrambling up onto the main stem.

There was an angry shout from behind Kagome that seemed to be whipped away by the wind. She risked a quick glance down and, with a unpleasant thrill of vertigo, found she could no longer see the ground. Then she was engulfed in a cloud bank and everything was hazed with fog. There was a wind sweeping downwards around her and Kagome realized that the vine was still growing, whisking her up through the clouds and into the sky with it. At least there was smaller chance of Tamino continuing after her…

Kagome was glad of her lack of shoes as she began climbing up the vine. Her skirts hampered her until she tucked them hems up into her bloomers and knotted the rest of the skirts up behind her. The multiple trunks of the vine were at least twice her girth and coiled around one another with almost ladder like regularity making her ascent almost comfortable.

It seemed a remarkably short amount of time before the vine began to thin and the cloud above her, a long flat plane of white neared. Kagome could almost imagine the vine reshaping itself to suit her. Perhaps it was.

With a wariness that was paired with a strange sense of confidence Kagome clambered from the vine onto the solid 'ground' of the clouds. Fog swirled about her ankles but her fingertips found soil half hidden by the wisps of cloud. Relieved by this at least she straightened up and surveyed her surroundings.

In the distance was a grey stone castle, huge, even at this distance. Kagome straightened her skirts and used a piece of ribbon picked from her bodice to pull back her hair with the grim concentration of a general putting on his war helmet.

She knew this story. Knew it quite well. Less than a month ago she had helped Souta translate it from English for a class progress. Azuki were beans. Giants had castles in the clouds. Now she was looking for a bag of gold, an egg laying hen and a harp.

~o0o~

Sesshoumaru dropped the shoes as the floorboards under his feet bucked and strove to keep his balance through the quake. The talons of his toes sank into the woodwork in an effort to maintain stability.

Around him his own Youki still swirled free, boiling off him, close as his skin and yet as heedless of his command as if he were attempting to harness a wave with a cobweb. And how he raged back and forth between rage and shame for his lack of control over something so inherently his own. Another heave of the floor sent him flying backward, unable to call on his youki to control control his flight Sesshoumaru braced himself for the impact with the far wall, knowing even as he did that he would likely pass through it leaving rubble in it's path with little injury to himself. It was the dust that made him blink, more so than the impact, thrown up by the crumbling of the plaster and stone beneath him. The fine powder caught in his eyes, he blinked and... woke.

There was a bleary sense of disorientation. The scent... no stink of feathers and the strong odour of man. Of stone and metals, burlap and stale ashes. The scent of the inn and the girl were gone. Then there was a forceful jab to his midrift. Sesshoumaru opened his eyes to find himself upright, a huge finger poking him again and a voice rumbled from above.

"Wake and Sing now."
Sesshoumaru's first instinct, to slice off the offending digit which was easily as broad as his own torso, was hampered by his inability to move his arms. Seething he glanced down and saw he was now in a very formal kimono. Each layer of fabric was beaten gold, silver and steel engraved rather than embroidered with patterns. Elaborate, hampering, Women's kimono. Again. Sesshoumaru's eyes burned red and he struggled to free himself from the robes that bound him upright. A soft stirring of strings behind him hummed faintly and musically as the structure he was bound to juddered and shook beneath his struggles.

The huge finger poked at him again.

"Sing Harp. For I want music."

Sesshoumaru snarled and snapped at the finger that was swiftly removed.

"If you will not sing then you'd best sit in the dark until your temper improves." Sesshoumaru found himself lifted and swept across the room. Such was his fury he barely noticed the giant table he was lifted from, nor the huge cupboard until a door was slid open, he was placed inside and the door snapped shut again, leaving him in darkness.

~o0o~

Chapter End Notes

*お粥 (おかゆ) O-kayu is a thin rice gruel or porridge.

*強制 (きょうせい) Kyousei – obligation or compulsion. I can't for the life of me find the Japanese version of 'geas' if there exists such a thing. If anyone knows better I would love to know! There is a doom cast on Sesshoumaru – in the old fashion of the word. Being tied in with fate and destiny.

愛染明王 (あいぜんみょうおう) Aizen Myoo, god of love, worshipped by prostitutes, landlords, singers and musicians. Like most of the gods I touch upon through this tale he was originally an Indian god and comes from the Buddhist pantheon.
Sesshoumaru sat in the darkness and scowled. All his struggles to break free of the metal kimono that bound him to the strange stringed instrument behind him had been in vain. His youki still broiled around him like a mist, no amount of willpower could wrestle it back to where it belonged: held under tight restraint at the core of his self.

Lacking anything else to do with him self Sesshoumaru settled down to brood.

He had first regained consciousness from his encounter with the tall lady to find himself lying sprawled on a finely manicured lawn.

A few deer had been grazing near him and several small songbirds watched with curiosity from nearby bushes. They had barely stirred as Sesshoumaru had launched himself to his feet ready to face whatever enemy had temporarily incapacitated him. But then he had stepped on the hem of his outfit and had to stagger to regain his balance and they had fled. A glance informed him that his customary kimono and hakama gone – instead he was wearing some strange pale grey silken outfit that fitted his torso but flared out into skirts that trailed on the ground. He ran a claw across the fabric, intending to cut it higher so he could move freely. The fabric slid unharmed beneath his talons. He then tried grabbing bunches of it and tearing, the fabric resisted easily. Sesshoumaru was uncertain whether the fabric was enchanted or somehow his strength sapped.

Frowning he had kicked off the ground, intending to take to the sky to find his way home. And he fell. Not since he had been a very young child had he been unable to maintain flight. A surprised noise caused him to turn snarling. A small woman, a very small woman, held a hand over her mouth then bowed hastily before turning and running away.

She had returned with the rest of the dwarves shortly and so had begun the month and a portion of his incarceration in the Orchard. Any time he so much as thought of harming the small people the air around him had thickened and his very youki weighed down on him until he was unable to stir. These fits had distressed the dwarves and they had taken him for spells of fainting, carrying him back to their cottage each time and bathing his wrists and face with floral water.

His fury against them had dissipated within the first few days. They, for their part, had treated him with utmost reverence. At first they had offered him food and music, then had respectfully stopped as quickly when he had showed his disinterest. They left him to himself then and he had found himself at leisure to wander the gladed areas of the Orchard.

As with the endless forest he found could not leave the area. Trees and ground he destroyed by hand would return to their former state as soon as he looked away. He was trapped in illusion. And then one of the ever-blossoming apple trees had fruited. The rich, amber warm fragrance of the apples had tweaked at his nose invitingly. He had not eaten in over a month, youkai of his caliber rarely needed to eat. Sesshoumaru usually drew sustenance from the very wild surrounding him… but he was trapped in a cultivated place and the apples smelled so very appetizing. So at last he had plucked an apple, green and red, and set it to his teeth and taken a bite…

The juice had been tart and sweet, the flesh crisp. But no sooner had he tried to swallow that first small mouthful than he felt it lodge in his throat. He had no chance to draw breath or attempt to cough. Spots had flashed before his eyes then nothing until that candle flicker of consciousness and
a human woman’s face, then her thump of fist dislodging of the apple.

She had guessed the horse was the key to escaping the orchard. Or had she. She had not smelled of deceit. And yet…

After the horse bolted he had, failing in his attempts to rein in the beast, attempted to jump from the saddle. His skirts had again hindered him. Some how they had become caught up beneath him and try as he might he couldn’t free himself.

Then the rain had come. Rain so heavy he could not see the horse’s neck before him, and with those waters the colour washed from his dress, melting it into rags. Even this happened horse seemed to fade under him, sinking with him into the mud of the road, an invisible weight pressing down on him as relentlessly as his own youki had quelled lesser demons in the past.

There had been the hum of voices around him but the strange fatigue of limb had kept Sesshoumaru prone, at first too tired to summon strength from anger. Then the force had lifted and he finally managed to push up himself up onto his hands - only to find himself lying on cobbles in a grubby kitchen, clad in rags. A bucket of soap water steamed next to him and scrubbing brushes were arrayed beside it, awaiting use.

“Haiko!*” A foot had kicked and he snarled in response, had half risen ready to lay open the leg that had touched him. Then a sharp spasm ran through his muscles, making him briefly and painfully rigid before passing, leaving him weak. Even as he began to draw breath to attempt again to rend his foe another spasm ran through him, squeezing the air from his lungs and leaving him trembling and furious. The thickening of the air that had hindered him with the dwarves had been kind in comparison to this.

“Haiko – scrub the floors.” A human woman’s voice commanded. “I want the kitchen done, then the main room, then the bedrooms and taproom. When you are done the beds must all be made, the water drawn for the kitchen and the cellar swept for cobwebs. Get to it.”

A brush had been kicked before Sesshoumaru and, against his will, he had found his hand take the object, dip it in the water and begin scouring. He had had no more control over his actions than he had over his youki. He had fought the compulsion with all the success of a newborn kitten in the hands of a young child. It had not been kind to him. Had he been human he would not have been able to finish the work the woman, an innkeepers wife, had set him.

As it was he was not permitted to rest, to sleep. The woman had even informed Sesshoumaru he would not be permitted to eat nor drink until the tasks were done. This had not mattered to him at the time, when his rage against the compulsion had blinded his attention to anything but his hatred of her.

And the bucket, and brush.

He had no desire for food, nor water, only to rend the base humans who walked around him, tracking in mud and filth as, against his will, he scrubbed floor after floor after floor. He had no pause until the innkeepers wife returned late in the night and told him that could drink from the well bucket when he next fetched water if he liked and then that he must eat the strange stale lump of ”Pan*” she threw before him. Her command meant he was forced to tear into the dry stuff, even as he knelt at her feet, damp and filthy from the cleaning, even though he did not wish to eat it.

The foreign food had dried his mouth and nearly made him cough, the coarse seeds in it catching in his teeth and irritating his tongue. He had been almost grateful when she sent him out to fetch more water for the kitchens for it meant he could finally drink. He had lapped down the stale well water,
sluicing his mouth and the taste of the ‘pan’.

Trapped in the kitchen, as he had been once the Inn’s customers had begun filtering into the common room, Sesshoumaru had almost missed the familiar scent of the girl. It was the innkeeper that carried her spoor it in with him, wet and uncertain but distinctly present, along with the remaining scent of that wretched horse. The same human who had been in the glade with the dwarves.

He had not expected to find her so easily the next morning. The kyousei had kept him scrubbing until all of the inn’s kitchen utensils, blackened and caked from years of use, were chipped and scoured back to their original shine. The grit from his work having covered the kitchen floor in muck once more he had been forced to collect more water – and then she had fallen at his feet almost as if placed there.

Having the human girl find him in the kitchen yard had burned Sesshoumaru with humiliation. Even hatred. None should be permitted to see him so powerless and yet her presence had immediately lead to his escape from the kitchen and from the kyousei. Quietly he admitted that being trapped in the darkness was far preferable to being forced to eat that ‘pan’ substance again. She had said that these traps were all from stories, that she knew them and how to defeat them. Sesshoumaru had known her as a wielder of miko like powers from his encounters with Inuyasha’s party but could she use kotodama* as well?

She had know what to do both times he had encountered her. Had understood what was expected. But why?

And she knew his name… while he could not recall hers. That left him at a disadvantage. Ever more so as he only had a vague knowledge of what a kotodama wielder was reputed to be capable of. If she had the ability to manipulate their circumstances by words alone it stood in his interest to know her name – if only to find some way to defend himself from her.

A noise from somewhere outside the paulownia* wood panels of the cupboard he heard a noise. Muffled but familiar – a female voice, raised in challenge… She had found him again. And he found himself unsurprised

~o0o~

Chapter End Notes

*灰子 (はいねこ) Haineko – Ash Child ^_^ My japanglication of cinderella. Imagine it said with contempt.
*Pan (パン) Bread ^_^ Sesshoumaru would not be familiar with it because it wasn’t, to my knowledge, present in japan at the time. Benten would have had to create it from Kagome’s memory. Kagome obviously isn’t too fond of bread. Probably because her mum cooks good traditional food in my universe.
*言霊 (ことだま) kotodama - refers to the concept of the power in works and names. This is also true for a lot of old western faerie stories where knowing a persons true name gives one control over them.
*桐 kiri or Paulownia tomentosa wood is used in a vast number of Japanese objects, from shoes and instruments to furniture. Traditionally one would plant a Paulownia tree when a baby girl was born to be made into dowry chest as a wedding gift when
she gets married.
Kagome wriggled again, tearing another long strip out of her outer skirts as she braced a foot on the wall inside the hole and pushed the rest of her way through the crack in the wall. There were fragments of lace and fabric littering the jagged little tunnel through the wall behind her but Kagome had managed to make her way into the castle at last, unharmed.

Half an hour before she had stood in front of the entrance to the castle frowning at the great stone steps that lead up to the front door. Each of them was a foot or more taller than she and there were eight in total. She had spent several minutes trying to scale the first step. After landing on her rump for the third time she had decided to scout along the edge of the castle rather than try the frontal assault. Within minutes she'd found a huge split between two stones in the wall and at the far end she could see light.

The hall had been both larger and smaller than she expected given the size of the doors. The tabletop was only as tall as a single story house. Though "only" was still pretty big. Kagome was so focused on looking up and about for the giant that she barely managed to catch herself when she stumbled, first stepping on a shred of her ragged skirt then catching her other foot in the folds. Frantically she clutched at the rough wood of the nearest table leg, a tree trunk as thick as a temple pillar. A sharp splinter shaved along the side of her hand like a wood saw and she barked an expletive.

Kagome pulled her hand back with a hiss and examined the jagged cuts, picking out the fragments of wood and torn skin, breathing a word of relief that she'd had a tetanus shot the last time she'd been home. She'd shallow knicks all along the back of her wrist, a small trickle of blood ran down her arm and a few drops of blood fell before she managed to stop the flow with a tatter of her skirt.

As the flecks of blood hit the floor there were small sparks – like a senkou hanabi* and a faint scent of temple incense. Kagome drew a sharp breath and held it, easily recognizing the plot device.

A great loud rumbling came from above her and she flattened herself against the nearest massive chair leg as a great voice reverberated out. The pronunciation was almost archaic:

"Migi, Hidari,
Te to Ashi.
Ore ga ningen no chi no nioi wo suru..."*

There was a loud sniffing noise.

"Onna da?"*

"Doko ga onna da yo?"

Kagome took a deep breath and pushed herself out from safety of the furniture. Trying to quash her nerves she strode out into the middle of the room and turned towards the Giant's straw-sandaled feet, each the size of a small kayak. Taking a deep breath and hoping she sounded more confident than she felt Kagome drew up every ounce of arrogance she could muster and replied.

"Ore wa O-Kagome-Sama da!"* She put her hands on her hips, head back and stood with legs
akimbo, rolling her R's like a melodramatic movie villain.

"O-Kagome-Sama who shakes the rain from the clouds for my shower and eat giant snakes for breakfast. Who is this little man who stands in my way?"

"Eh?" The giant grunted and there was a shuffling of feet that had Kagome ready to bolt for safety. The floor tremored and the giant knelt to look at her. He was nowhere near as frightening has some of the youkai and oni Kagome had encountered in the past. This giant was just a huge human, and his mildly perplexed expression gave her courage. He did not look like the sort to grind bones or eat bread.

"You tiny woman? What are you?" The giant began to extend a digit to poke at her. Kagome swatted it aside as hard as she could and puffed her chest out, bellowing.

"I am Higurashi Kagome KA-GO-ME! Do not risk my wrath by misnaming me. I have fought giant centipedes and dog demons for less. Lift me onto your table – You make my neck hurt looking at you Kyoujin*."

There was an incredulous noise from the giant and her heart skipped a beat. Then the giant proffered a palm the size of a small car for her to step onto. He carefully lifted her and she stepped down onto the table, noticing a giant daikon* and other vegetables scattered across the table top along with cutting boards and several knives, each longer than she was tall, many with their blades wrapped in paper.

"I have traveled a long way to visit you Kyoujin-kun. You will of course invite me to sup with you." Kagome demanded, inwardly appalled at her rudeness even as she turned to fix the giant with a sharp gaze. "Such a important guest as myself and you have not even offered me tea let alone rice yet. How Rude! I should tear your nose off for the insult."

The giant fixed her with an uncertain look, wary of the ferocity of his little visitor. "Forgive me O-Kagome-sama. You are welcome to eat at my table. I was about to prepare a meal…” The giant paused in thought and then added, “If you are truly as mighty as you say you will think nothing of bringing in some more wood for the fire… A small tree would do."

"Easy!" Kagome lied, mind racing. "Put me on the floor I shall go get wood for your fire."

Cautiously the giant placed her back on the floor and pointed towards the entrance. "There is a dead tree at the edge of my rice field that would do. If you stand by the front door you should be able to see it."

Kagome made a show of hitching up her skirts and strode forwards shouting over her shoulder. "You had best open the door for me Kyoujin-kun. I do not want to knock it off the hinges when I push it. You may end up having to use it for kindling, such is my strength. And you'd best leave it open so I needn't kick it open on my way back."

Hastily the giant opened the door for Kagome as she strode as fast as she could manage without running out of the room. Steeling herself she lowered herself down the eight steps, the balls of her feet stinging with each impact and headed for the rice field, well aware that the giant would likely be watching.

Taking a deep breath Kagome broke into a slow, controlled trot, heading straight past the dead tree the giant had described and and heading for the huge forest she could see in the distance. She counted softly under her breath to the rhythm of her foot fall. She'd made it to forty-five paces when the giant called out to her. "O-Kagome-sama – the tree is not so far."
Full knowing that she wouldn't be able to should loud enough to be heard at this distance she turned and stood with her arms crossed, an irritated expression on her face. The giant took three paces and was before her.

"You waste my time expecting me to pick up such a piffling little stick. Why that would barely start a fire." Kagome jutted her chin and scowled, rather enjoying the uncertainty on the giant's face. She was still afraid but some small part of her reveled in the outrageous farce she was spinning. "I will get us a few trees from the forest – the tall ones in the middle look like they might do."

The giant looked up at the forest with a distressed look. "Kagome-sama my fireplace is not so large as to fit those trees and they will be green and not burn well."

"Fine. You take that little stick back to the kitchen then since you are already here. You still want me to prove my strength though?"

"My herd of cows are fenced just through that door – go kill and carry one in so that I may use it to make supper for us." The giant suggested, pointing out a corral just visible around the side of the castle.

"I shall fetch this meat for us then." Kagome turned as arrogantly as she could and headed in the direction of the fences the giant had indicated. She managed to avoid tripping on anything and as soon as she was out of sight collapsed against the wall and allowed herself a moment's panic. She'd bluff well so far but killing and carrying a whole cow?

She looked across the yard to where the giant kept his cattle. There the animals were only a little larger than normal and seemed placid enough. She poked one of the cows through the fence warily then climbed through. Trying to entice one animal away from the herd proved futile. She knew nothing about the animals, they certainly didn't fear her and there was no way the animal intended to leave its friends. Remembering the version of the giant story Souta had been confused by Kagome pulled out the rope and began to tie all the cows together by their tails. Having done so she sat and waited some time until she heard the giant approach then hastily rose and pretended to be tying the last knot.

"What are you doing?" The giant asked with a hint of worry in his voice.

"Why one or two animals of this size are barely enough to feed my younger brother." Kagome roared back, trying to sound as loud as he did without effort. "And I did not want to make multiple trips. So I thought I would bring them in all in together."

"Ah. Kagome-sama. If you please: I have only these few animals to last me until spring. By your leave I only want to cook one of them"

"Very well. You may pick the one we are to eat. Though I hope there is enough for the both of us." Kagome begrudged, vastly relieved as she untied the cows. The giant selected one of the animals, struck it on the head with his fist and carried the dead animal back to the kitchen in one hand and her in the other.

Kagome stood watching while the giant set to cleaning and gutting the carcass. Left with nothing to do and unable to control her fidgeting she strode forward across the table and addressed the giant.

"Kyoujin-kun I.. this Kagome-sama will cut vegetables for you… if you like." Kagome offered, her own helpful nature briefly over riding the brash persona she had been working so hard at
projecting. She worked on keeping her gaze firm as the giant broke apart the carcass with his hands. "Though I have no knife."

The giant wiped his bloody hands on a cloth and placed a large blade before her and a few carrots that would not be out of place as fence posts. Kagome tied back her sleeves and looked at the blade. Being of a smaller size she could see the edge as if it were magnified and it didn't look very sharp. Its size would also make the knife very awkward to cut with.

"Kyojin-kun. This blade of yours is too blunt for vegetables. Have you another"

The Giant snorted and picked up the knife. Kagome felt her stomach sink as he tested the knife in his thumbnail and her imagination seized on an image of her being split in half by the blade and thrown into the cooking pot with the pieces of cow.

"You are right Kagome-sama. I have not sharpened this in some time. Forgive me… I do have another…"

The giant slid open a door in the huge tansu* chest and rummaged about inside. Kagome heard a soft clucking noise briefly before the panel slid shut again and the giant returned, a sword pinched between finger and thumb. He proffered the blade to her carefully as if wary of her striking him.

"This may be sharper Kagome-sama".

"Tensaiga!" Kagome breathed as she accepted the katana. There was an answering pulse beneath her hand and the tsuka* warmed as if the sword were a living thing. "But Sesshoumaru did not have you the last time I saw him…" Gods but the taiyoukai would have a fit if at the thought of someone using his blade to peel vegetables…

She raised her voice.

"Kyojin-kun I know this sword. Where did you get it?" With the giant still hovering so close Kagome did not need to shout quite so loud.

"A lady visited me with gifts – this fell from her sleeve as she left and she said she had no use for it… is it sharper Kagome-sama? It is so small I could not see its edge clearly."

"I will test it." Kagome picked up a carrot and leant it against the edge of one of the giant bowls on the table. Gripping the sheath in one hand and the hilt in the other she whispered to the sword.

"Okay Tenseiga. You're a blade that gives life*… what's more life giving than good food." Kagome rationalised. "In fact my life may be resting on your ability to skin a carrot… I promise I'll clean you properly as soon as it is done if you will help me…"

There was an answering pulse from the sword and Kagome felt her hand tighten on its own. In one smooth motion Tensaiga used her arm to draw itself from the sheath, flicking out in an arc of silver. Her shoulder drew itself into stance and in a blur of motion Tensaiga leapt forward towards its pointy orange foe.

For half a heartbeat Kagome instinctively fought to regain control. The blade did not dip or slow, but a buzz jarred through the tsuka reminded her she had asked for this help and she hastily surrendered. The blade, given free rein of her body, made her arc gracefully as she flicked the carrot in the air with her toe, the blade whirling along the skin as a translucent thin layer of the carrot fluttered down like crepe paper. Then Tensaiga leapt out again, slicing the carrot into many parts that bounced down around Kagome. Any piece of carrot that fell near enough to strike her were sliced away negligently by the blade.
There was an indrawn breath of appreciation from the giant who now sat fascinated, hands and chin resting on the table to watch as Tensaiga, apparently enjoying the audience, pulled Kagome in to an elegant saluted then attacked the rest of the vegetables. The blade danced Kagome around the table top like a dervish until every piece of vegetable laid out had been prepared. Even the scallions had not escaped and both Kagome and the giant’s eyes watered from the frenzy of cutting. The only thing Tensaiga skirted away from was the lumps of meat still sitting on the giant's cutting board.

Finally released from the sword's control Kagome sank to one knee panting. Tensaiga flicked itself clean and sheathed itself in one smooth motion, leaving Kagome sitting in a Kabuki mie*. Tensaiga, it appeared, had a taste for the dramatic.

"It is a good blade Kyojin-kun" Kagome shouted as soon as she had breath enough to speak again. Still trembling from the exertion she held the sheathed katana up. Tenseiga seemed to purr somewhat smugly in her hand.

"As it is too small to be of use to you will be honoured as to grant it to me. Won't you."

The giant did not hesitate. "Kagome-dono… such skill as yours deserves greater reward than a mere sharpened toothpick… Please take it, it is of no use to me."

~o0o~

Inside the tansu Sesshoumaru strained to listen to the conversation between the girl and the giant that occurred outside the wooden cupboard.

He was amazed at the arrogance and bluster of the woman. He had seen her rescued time and again by his half brother and knew she had none of the abilities she claimed. And then she shouted out her name over and over at the giant. As if it were of no importance to her if the world knew it or not.

*Higurashi Kagome.* He would remember it now.

The conversation drifted away and then, a half hour later, back again. This Higurashi-Kagome still ordering around the giant as if it were a child.

His amazement at the giant’s ready belief in her lies was cut short by the song of Tensaiga as it leapt from its sheath. He had recognised the smell his fathers blade the instant the giant had removed it from the other cupboard compartment. No longer masked by the scent of feathers, his inheritance's familiar metallic tang drifted in through the cracks in the door panel. Sesshoumaru ground his teeth at the thought of someone else laying hands on his inheritance. As useless as he often deemed it to his own plans. It was HIS. Youki roiled off him again and he quelled the urge to struggle against his bonds and kept listening. Instinct told him that the girl would be a part of the escape from this tale as well.

~o0o~

Chapter End Notes

*線香花火 (せんこ はなび) Senko Hanabi or "Incense-stick fireworks" are the little hand held sparklers you commonly see children playing with in anime and manga.*

*I'm not a fluent speaker of Japanese so this may be completely flupped since I made it up with the intention of it rhyming like the original European version.*
Left, right
Hand and foot
I smell the blood of a human…
Woman? “Where is this woman…”

*I am the great Kagome!*
Ore is a masculine form of "I" and less subservient than "boku". Imagine lots of swagger and bluster.

大 人 (きゅうじん) Kyojin – giant. I stole this from the wonderful manga "Lovely Complex" and their Allstar Hanshin-Kyoujin couple.
大根 (だいこん) Daikon – Japanese raddish. Mmmmm
*箏箒 (たんす) Tansu – traditional cupboard. I have a step tansu and it is the love of my life.
*柄 (つか) Tsuka- the handle of a katana.
* Someone rightfully pointed out that Tenseiga means “Blade born of Heaven”.
The sword doesn't bring death though so I like my interpretation.
*歌舞伎 (kabuki) A form of theatre, a 見え (めい) mie is a dramatic and powerful pose struck by an actor. Kabuki actually came into existence after the time period Kagome visits but I like the concept of that punctuation-pose. So does Tensaiga. ^_^
Kagome finished cleaning the blade as best she could. Inuyasha had never bothered to clean Tetsaiga so she did the best she could from memories of Sango cleaning her smaller blades. There was the whisk of a huge cloth around her perch on an upturned bowl as the giant brushed the crumbs from the table-top and set out the supper dishes.

Politely he placed a great bowl of stew before her and a spoon, though he used chopsticks. Finishing up with the piece of paper she was using to wipe down Tensaiga’s blade Kagome resheathed the sword and tucked it into her waistband. Hopping down from her seat she strode across the table to her supper.

Bowing respectfully the giant requested she eat.

“I suppose it must suffice. It is fortunate that I am only a little hungry.” Kagome bellowed back, her mind racing for how to continue to impress the giant without giving the game away. He sat watching, waiting for her to begin the meal so he too could.

“Itadakimasu…” She picked up the giant wooden spoon with both hands and looked glumly at the vat of food in front of her. The giant sat expectantly. Kagome dipped off a portion and, resting the spoon on the side of the bowl sniffed then sipped it. She scalded her tongue and this brought on an epiphany. Throwing the spoon down she kicked it away from herself.

“Ah! You serve me such food?! Why this is far to cold for me to eat! Why it is barely warm!! And after you told me that you did not want more wood!!?”

The giant took a spoonful of his own supper and promptly spat it out, fanning his mouth.

“Neko Jita.” Kagome scorned, though the moment the words were out of her mouth she worried that she had overstepped the mark.

The giant’s two beefy palms, each easily as long as her torso, slammed down on the table top and Kagome jumped as stew slopped over the side of the bowl nearly scalding her leg. When she looked up she realised that the Kyoujin was doubled over the table, bowing apologetically.

“Kagome-sama forgive me for my poor hospitality this day. You are indeed a great person, though I am larger in frame I cannot compare to your strength. Ask any boon of me that I might make amends.”

Kagome’s eyebrows brushed her hairline and she let out a relieved breath that could have also been mistaken for a huff of mollification. Deciding not to push her luck to far she decided to tell something along the lines of the truth - the giant didn’t seem a bad sort after all.

“Kyoujin-kun. You have already proven your worth. In truth this Kagome-sama was sent to test you and steal three of your treasures if you were unworthy. But I have seen you and judge that you do not deserve punishment. You have done your best to provide hospitality to me and I shall not dishonour your kindness.

“The lady you spoke of Kyoujin-kun, gave you the three treasures with the expectation that they
would, one by one, be taken from you, then, as you chased the thief you would fall to your death. She is not a kind lady and I will not be her executor. In return for this sword you have given I give you advice: do not climb down the beanstalk at the edge of the clouds – the world beyond here is not kind.”

“Kagome-sama…” The giant’s voice choked off. “Truly I have one treasure only. If you would leave her with me I would gladly give you all my other wealth…”

“Her?” Kagome asked.

“I will show you my most beautiful treasure.” Rising the giant strode over to the tansu cupboard and slid the door open.

~o0o~

Chapter End Notes

* 猫舌 (ねこじた) Neko Jita – Having a “cat’s tongue” is to be unable to eat hot food.
Kagome waited, certain that, somehow, Sesshoumaru had been mistaken for a woman again.

She was wrong. The giant turned from the cupboard after carefully coaxing out something and at last she could see what it was. Cradled in his arms, with the delicacy afforded to the carrying of a paper-thin porcelain vase, was an enormous black hen.

"Here is my speckled darling. Is she not beautiful?" The giant asked, running a tender hand over the plumed back of the bird that now crouched, with no shortage of contentment, on the tabletop.

The bird was a rich blue-black with fine white flecked feathers and her great beady golden eyes held a degree of intelligence that Kagome would not have associated with a chicken and found slightly disturbing.

The girl also felt relieved that she had decided to be honest with the giant rather than attempt to follow the original story – getting the hen out of the house would have been a nightmare.

"She is a very fine and large hen Kyojin-kun," Kagome allowed, rather amused by the affection the large man showed for his pet.

The giant puffed his chest up with pride and gently rubbed the comb of the hen. She leaned into the scratching like a dog.

"I call her ‘Niwa no Hana*. I am grateful to have her as company. We giants do not live near one another and this place was lonely before she came."

"Uh Kyojin-kun. What were the other treasures?" Kagome was fairly certain she knew but the giant did not seem at all interested in showing the other items.

"Oh useless things. A sack of gold that I cannot empty and a harp that will not play."

"The gold sticks in the bag?" Kagome asked, uncertain. The story she remembered it was just a bag of gold. She had never understood how the character had run off with something so heavy herself.

"No it keeps pouring from it and I cannot put it back in. I have little use for gold. An empty sack is useful, a full one is not."

"May I… this Kagome-sama see these things?" she asked, almost slipping back into her usual language.

"Certainly Kagome-sama. You may take them if you want. I have no use for them."

The giant gave the hen one last pat then returned to the tansu. He slid open a different door and returned with a hessian sack in one hand and an ornate harp in the other. Kagome heard the harp growl and saw a flash of silvery hair before the giant dropped the two object on the table. At least she was certain where the taiyoukai was now.

There was a hiss of anger from Sesshoumaru as he was placed on the table facing away from Kagome and the giant.
"I will have this Kyojin-kun," Kagome offered, gesturing towards the ornate musical instrument then, realising her slip, hastily added. "This Kagome-sama will accept your gifts."

"Take it and be welcome Kagome-sama. I have no use for a harp that will not sing. My speckled darling is far more valuable to me." The hen puffed out her feathers smugly and the giant continued. "I must go and get grain for her. Please excuse me."

With that the giant stood, bowed, scooped up the hen and strode out the door, leaving Kagome alone with the harp and it's prisoner.

Taking a deep breath Kagome walked around the harp.

~o0o~

The miko stepped around the harp and into the Taiyoukai's field of view. She was still wearing the rags she had been wearing back in the kitchen of the Inn. Her deferential posture at completely odds with the conversation he had eavesdropped on from inside the tansu.

Somehow her averted eyes and wary stance made him all the more certain she was somehow to blame for his predicament.

"You…" An angry bark escaped Sesshoumaru's as he saw Tensaiga tucked under Kagome's arm. He bit off the rest of the words on his tongue. Bad enough that he could not control his youki. Would his temper also escape him? No. He would not allow that and so clamped down on his fury compressing it out of existence.

The taiyoukai's stormy expression made Kagome cringe slightly in dismay, she hastily bowed low and holding out Tensaiga with both hands.

"The giant had possession of this Sesshoumaru-sama. I recognized it as yours and bartered it back for you," Kagome embroidered as she spoke, hoping that she had cleaned the blade enough that he would not realise what she had been using it for.

Sesshoumaru hissed with frustration and Kagome glanced up, only then realising that the taiyoukai was unable to free his arms to take his sword back. As she looked it dawned on her that the kimono was a part of the front pillar of the harp, like the figurehead on a ship.

"Ah! Forgive me, Sesshoumaru-sama – Um… I beg your pardon… Perhaps I can help." She tucked Tensaiga under her arm again and eyes averted, studied the intricate fastenings of his kimono. Blushing slightly she untied the obi-jime's* ornate knot, and, tucking her fingers into his obi*, gave it a hard tug. The obi was very stiff and Kagome noted that the heavy clothe-of-gold was inlaid with wood and stone in patterns of marquetry rather than embroidery. The warmth of the fabric beneath her fingers was distinctly at odds with the cold ivory of his skin and the metallic lustre of the kimonos. Kagome pushed the distraction aside as she felt her ears glow and felt rather than heard the impatient growl from the taiyoukai she was attempting to free.

Another sharp tug and the obi was free, revealing another, thinner fabric sash and several more obi-jime. Trying not to fumble any more than she had to Kagome tackled these cords too then peeled back the outer most layer of kimono. It was like bending back a sheet of aluminium. The thin metal almost creaked as she bent it open, like a layer of an onion, to reveal the next kimono.

Sesshoumaru writhed within the cocoon of garments and Kagome twitched her hands back instinctively, taking a step back with half an expectation of him bursting out of the kimono. He did not.
"Would you like me to continue Sesshoumaru-sama? Or can you free yourself now?" As soon as the words were out of her mouth Kagome cringed inside. If he could free himself she doubted he would still be there. By asking him that question, in such a fashion, inferred that he was too weak to undress himself.

"Allow this humble one to assist in removing these garments for you." Worse and worse. Kagome could almost hear Miroku's snigger. Inuyasha's outrage. Sango's quirked eyebrow.

The Taiyoukai had stilled again though and, awkwardly, without waiting for a reply Kagome renewed her attack on the layers. She had bent back some eight layers of kimono, beaten sheets of copper, bronze, steel and black iron, when Sesshoumaru stirred again.

"Enough, human." Sesshoumaru could feel the metal garment had loosened enough to pull his arms free from the sleeves. He did so pressing outwards against the front panels. The kimonos squeaked and grated as they slid over each other.

Like a rumpled moth emerging from a gloriously coloured chrysalis Sesshoumaru pushed again from within, splitting the robes open down the front and stepped from the crumpled layers of kimono, wearing a unornamented but creased deep indigo juban*.

As he stepped away the harp crumbled into dust behind him. No longer confined by the layers of metal Sesshoumaru's youki, roiled though the air.

Kagome's shivered as the hair on the nape of her neck stood on end. She felt the hum of her own powers rise to repel the demonic force that washed around them both. The metal junihitoe* seemed to have blocked or contained his ki.

Kagome bowed again and hastily held out the sword once more.

Less than half an hour ago she had been swaggering and bullying someone many times her size and strength… but then she had not feared Kyoujin. Sesshoumaru, she sensed on the other hand, was a very real threat if she did not treat him with respect. Especially if she wanted to live to get home.

Sesshoumaru resisted the urge to snatch his sword from her woman's hands. Instead he carefully lifted it from her palms. The blade purred smugly under his touch, evidently pleased with itself.

Sesshoumaru regarded the woman for a moment then drew breath and spoke.

"Human."

Kagome jumped at the sound of his voice and glanced up, startled by his, for him, civil tone. She rapidly averted her eyes again, she would not be able to bluff against this one.

When she made no noise of reply Sesshoumaru drew Tenseiga and looked critically at the blade. Kagome felt her heart sink.

"I tried to clean the blade as best I could Sesshoumaru-sama. I was not sure how to do it, I hope it is alright..." Kagome babbled. The rational part of her brain reminded her that Tensaiga couldn't kill while the irrational shouted loudly over the top that Sesshoumaru had never let that stop him before.

"Hnn."

"Hnn." Tenseiga was clean and showed no harm from being in the hands of a miko. In fact the blade seemed a degree keener and brighter than when Sesshoumaru had last drawn it. "You will tell this Sesshoumaru how you know of these...stories."
Kagome rubbed her knuckles. "There was... They are called "Fairy Tales". I learned them as a child. A...a Lady came by our camp... I was with Inuyasha and the others. She um...She looked in my head and found them there."

Sesshoumaru's eyes narrowed and Kagome rushed on, not bold enough to say the word 'Benten' aloud, remembering the dwarf woman's words. "She... She said she wanted to teach a lesson and then I found myself on the horse. Then I found you, Sesshoumaru-sama."

Sesshoumaru digested this a moment.

"Then it would seem you are the source of this curse. If I remove you then this "Lady" will no longer have a source for these fa-ree tai-ru-su." He pronounced the English words with distaste. Kagome froze, her eyes wide as, almost casually, Sesshoumaru reached for her throat with one hand and...

The table beneath their feet suddenly turned to cloud, plummeting them both down...

~o0o~

Chapter End Notes

* 庭の花 [にわのはな] - Flower of the garden. A bit of a pun on my part as Niwatori [鶏] (yard bird) is Japanese for chicken.
* 帯じめ [おびじめ] obijime - a braided cord tied on top of the obi. The color is chosen to compliment or contrast with the obi.
* 帯 [おび] Obi- the main sash that is wound over the waist of a kimono to help keep it in place. The stiff and broad obi as we know them today developed during the Edo and Meiji period. Women's obi are more than twice as wide as men's and are often lavishly decoratively dyed or embroidered. Sesshoumaru's harp costume is a combination of the many layered Heian and the broad-obi'd Edo period styles.
* じゅだん Juban – A light kimono worn to sleep in or as underwear.
* 十二単 「じゅうにひとえ」Junihitoe- Twelve layer garment worn in the Heian period by the aristocratic ladies. These multiple layers indicated rank, season and elegance of personal taste and weighed some thirty to forty kilos or more in entirety.
In which the boots weren't needed... at all

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

...The table beneath their feet suddenly turned to cloud, plummeting them both down...

...plummeting down...
...a whole three feet, onto sand.
Kagome's legs buckled under her and she sat down hard, her soles protesting at the sudden impact, especially since they were still bruised from her descent from the giant's steps. The only sound apart from her rabbiting heartbeat was of surf and gulls... and something large stirring next to her...

For once the girl and the taiyoukai had been dropped into the story together… though not unchanged...
"Gracious Gods!" Kagome exclaimed scrambling to her feet. "This isn't how the story goes!"
Sesshoumaru glared at her from the ground, his torso was spackled with the white sand and his long hair hung limp over him in damp ribbons. Where legs should have been was a long silvery tail.
Quite a lovely tail Kagome thought distractedly. It suited him, the shape reminded her of a… a..... Dog fish! her mind cheerfully supplied and she clamped down on the thought.
She ran her hands distractedly through her hair, leaving a streak of sand particles. She had no doubts about which fairytale had been inflicted upon them this time.
And the tide was retreating, leaving the taiyoukai-ningyo* stranded on the beach.
"I… I think you need to stay wet Sesshoumaru-sama… or at least the scaley bits… until… until we can sort this…" Kagome forgetting in that moment that Sesshoumaru had been attempting to strangle her a moment before.
She tugged off her jacket and hastened to the waters edge, using the garment as a sling to carry water back. Most of the water fell through before she got it back to the taiyoukai so she settled for spreading it over Sesshoumaru's tail where the scales had already begun to dry out. Once again it seemed she was clad in a men's clothes. Sesshoumaru wasn't clad at all. Her mind skittered away from *that* thought. Back to safer things: such as how the jacket seemed remarkably absorbent and… and if she tore out the lining it would have twice as much coverage...
"You know this tale too then Miko?" Sesshoumaru growled, giving her another thought to latch on to.
"The story says there's a sea-witch that grants the mer...mer....merman legs," Kagome fudged. If sheer fury could boil seawater Sesshoumaru would be percolating the ocean. "Its because he wants to meet his… his true love on land. Look I think I help can drag you out deep enough that you could swim. Maybe if you find that person you can find out how we can resolve this tale...." Sesshoumaru pushed his torso up off the ground with his hands and glowered up at her, his tail coiling sinuous but useless on the strand.
"This Sesshoumaru needs no help from a puny human."
"Um. Are you sure..." Kagome didn't see how she could have helped him if he would have accepted her aid. Perhaps if she could find a wheelbarrow...

Kagome watched the muscles ripple across his shoulders.
Oh.... My.
They were beginning to sunburn already and flaking in places but for all that, mesmerising. By sheer arm strength alone the taiyoukai dragged himself down the beach, through the surf and into the sea, disappearing without a backwards glance.
She watched him disappear under the water and then stood there some time more, her mouth opening and closing. Utterly abandoned.
Time caught up and she could hear the seagulls again. She was alone on a beach
So much for thanks or recognition of how she had helped – again.
"Fine!" Kagome shrieked at the surf. "Fine! See if I care. I hope you get eaten by a shark."
Throwing the sodden jacket down she turned to storm up the beach. There at her feet lay Tensaiga.
Kagome thought briefly of kicking it away but decided against it. She picked up the katana and
sniffed, wiping her nose on her other sleeve. She'd been abandoned on a strange beach by a crazed
taiyoukai-fish man who had tried to kill her. Events had finally caught up with Kagome and she
allowed herself to sink to a crouch for a good hard cry.

~o0o~

Half an hour or so later Kagome was walking with purpose along the coast. Better to be heading
somewhere she had decided. As she rounded the corner of the cape, blotting the last of her tears on
the damp white cambric shirt she wore, she heard voices.
There was a small crowd of elderly men tumbling over each other in their haste to reach her.
Behind them, washed up on the sand was the battered remains of a shipwreck. Magnificent
Chinese court robes fluttered and beaded hats of state clattered as the men trotted towards her. The
oldest of them's face was creased with joy and his shout was easily audible over the waves. Behind
them came several retainers carrying blankets and baskets of bandages as if they had expected to
find many greatly injured.
As they got closer Kagome was amazed to see tears of relief trickling down the cheeks of several
of the older men, disappearing into their long white moustaches.
"Kouchi-sama*! Ah! Amaterasu* be praised! The storm spared you! When we heard your ship had
been sunk by wakô* we were desolate."
Kagome found herself enveloped in a thick and warm blankets, the elderly men all bowing before
her and fluttering their hands in happy agitation.
"Send for a kago* – we must take his highness home. Make haste!"
"No. I can walk. I would rather walk." Kagome gently pushed the myriad of supporting hands away
and set her mind to the role she was now playing. "I intend to walk. But you may let me know
what has happened in… ah… in my absence."

~o0o~

Sesshoumaru plunged down through the water in a pallid streak of silver. The relief from the itch
of his scales dry was palatable. He had never been particularly fond of water but now he marvelled
at the grace and manoeuvrability he had been granted in the unfamiliar medium.
The first few moments when he had submerged and found he could breath the water had been
strange. The salt had stung his nose and made his eyes water and then it had all ceased to irritate
and he had found himself in a different world. Around him was silence, but the colours and shapes
of the shoals of fish that shimmered around him created noise by sight. The only thing he missed
was scent… then he opened his mouth and the fragrance of the ocean, with all its nuances, sparkled
on his tongue.
The water was full of life, unaltered by mankind. Energy sparkled through the current, swiftly
satisfying the growing knot of hunger for ki* that had sat in his stomach since waking in the
orchard. His own youki had stopped rupturing off too, no longer draining his resources. The
saltwater created a barrier on his skin, keeping his aura contained, though he found he still could
not control it.
Sesshoumaru swam on into the deeper water, constantly scanning for threats but also fascinated by
the unfamiliar world around him. Now that he had drunk his fill of ki he found himself hungry for
tangible food, and he was surrounded by it, in every colour and size. He had rarely eaten fish on
land – finding it insipid and bland. But here, as he drew a 'breath' of water over his tongue, he
could smell that the succulence of some fish that darted past him that more than rivalled red meat.
Settling on one sort that set his mouth watering in particular Sesshoumaru watched the movements
of the fish, stalking by hanging still in the water. With the flick of his tail he was after it, cutting through the water like a shark to catch with claws and teeth. For a brief moment he nearly lost his prey, the jack-knifing movement and unexpected slipperiness of fish scales allowed it to evade his grasp twice before his claws found true purchase. The meat was satisfying and plentiful. Smaller fish fluttered around him like butterflies as he finished his meal, daringly snatching up the scattered fragments he had discarded.

There was a resonation through the water around him and a giant shadow encompassed him. Looking up Sesshoumaru saw a great whale, patiently ploughing through the water above. It rolled slowly in the water to look at him with one small wise eye. Again the water reverberated and Sesshoumaru sensed a question in the noise. The beast was speaking to him he suspected, but he could not understand.

The whale glided closer, expectantly, and Sesshoumaru lifted a hand, pale and slim, and placed it against the great grey creature's snout. Through palm of his hand his youki brushed another equally, perhaps more powerful aura. It was strange and humbling. This creature did not hold tight control of its aura to cloak it, as he did. The whale's aura was the ocean, shared with others of its kind. The whale spoke again and now it's meaning was translated by their contact.

Kings-Child. You have strayed near the surface lands again. Stay in the below world. It is kinder here. Had the words come from anything else he might have sneered at such concerns, but the thoughts from the great cow whale had come with a memory of dead calves washed up on beaches and water bloodied by the tearing hooks and ropes of hunting vessels. For them the world above held death as much as it did air and life.

Stay in the far waters, sing long, swim deep. The whale turned away from him with a small motion of a fluke, and turned to continue on her way, the resonation clicking out again in a different direction, untranslated now that contact had been lost.

Sesshoumaru floated in the water, rubbing his fingers together thoughtfully, they still tingled slightly. Around him strange fish continued to dart and soar.

He felt a strange temptation, one he had not experienced since being a very young child – he could stay here. It was not running away- if he simply did not return to the surface, if he followed the whales to see where they went. Sesshoumaru could easily dwell in this silence and beauty without returning.

He pushed the thought away savagely. That he even contemplated this temptation, freedom from the responsibilities of his birthright, irritated him. Growling out a string of bubbles he turned to swim deeper into the ocean to find the 'sea-witch' the girl had spoken of. The sooner he escaped this place the better.

~o0o~

Chapter End Notes

* 人魚 Ningyo - Mermaid
* 皇嗣 Kouchi - Crown prince or an imperial heir
* 天照 Amaterasu – Shinto sun goddess, protector and, according to legend, mother of the imperial line of Japan
* 倭寇 wakō – 'japanese bandit', specifically a pirate.
* 駕籠 Kago: An enclosed litter or palaquin, often used to transport nobles, officials and the wealthy.
* 気 (き) ki – is energy, electricity, life force. I am using this in the way sacred places and belief power many of the shinto gods. If people cease to pray or a place becomes
contaminated/corrupted then they lose their power or turn nasty. I like the idea that Sesshoumaru is, like a Neko-mata, so old that his power is a little supernatural (I mean beyond claws and excreting acid) - that he draws part of his power from himself and part from his surroundings.
Sesshoumaru hung almost motionless in the water, the current tugged out his hair to ripple upwards like a sheet of silk as the taiyoukai surveyed the seabed in front of him.

Below were tori* arches, the paper streamers replaced by seaweed, the wood cracked from the water, the red paint algae spattered and flaking. Half concealed by coral and sand the stairs lead upward through the arches.

Tall dark kelp wavered on either side, reminiscent of dense pine forests. Through them at the top of the stairs Sesshoumaru could see lights flickering. Faint pulses of a drum-like sound rolled out through the water and there seemed some sort of matsuri* taking place at the top of the stairs.

The lack of strong youki around suggested it was some other place than the Sea Witch the human had spoken of. Sesshoumaru wasn't certain what other sapient creatures existed beneath the ocean… apart from dragons and their courts.

Warily he considered the path through the arches and kelp. It was far too likely a place for ambush, especially when he was once again freed from the constraints of gravity, and so he sought to swim over them. The water sharply turned chill and a current of water blew him back the way he had come, aggressively tumbling him head over tailfins.

Sesshoumaru righted himself with grim determination and weighed up trying again, remembering his lack of success in the Orchard and Kitchen. Rather than suffer the self-humiliation of being denied his will again Sesshoumaru elegantly rolled over in the water and swam down through the arches as if it had always been his intention, ready to defend himself if need be.

Defense was not entirely unwarranted. As Sesshoumaru reached the top of the stairs there was a flare of light and a cheer as a [celebratory bobble] popped open above him, showering him in bright fragments of shell, coral and coloured sea weed.

A crowd abandoned the drums and array of structures to swarm around him, their voices audible despite the water.

"Happy Birthday Little Brother!" Happy Birthday!" Before he had chance to escape or retaliate eleven youkai swam in dizzy circles around him, each briefly patting his shoulder before darting out of reach. These were not kappa or umibōzu* but human-formed land youkai with tails similar to his own. They ranged in size, species and colour. All of them were larger than himself.

They continued to swim around him in a friendly, loud school, bombarding him with words. Sesshoumaru twisted in the water, unwilling to trust the affection and enthusiasm they were showering on him, waiting for betrayal and attack.

"Welcome back."
"Here you should adorn yourself for the festival."
"Here are abalone shell and pearls, they suit your hair."
"What did you see on the surface little Brother?"
"Yes! What did you see?"
"Were there ships or Thunder storms or the clear sun?"
"Did you see the stars?"

The youkai-mermen hovered in the water around him, as if anxious to hear of some adventure.
Sesshoumaru looked over the gathered faces. They waited eagerly for his reply, like children he realized – there was no malice, no demonic intelligence in these creatures. They did not strive for anything, were not driven to anything, wanted for nothing and had become… tame.

"There was an imbecile, much as there are here." Sesshoumaru said curtly, wishing he had tarried with Higurashi Kagome long enough to learn more of the story. She had not said anything about siblings in the story.

The youkai nodded happily as if, during his silence, they were listening to some fascinating story, their eyes slightly glazed. Sesshoumaru curled a lip, but they did not seem to really be looking at or listening to him at all. He swatted away the hands that were proffering ropes of pearls, barnacles and similar ornaments.

After a moments silence one of the youkai blinked as if remembering something. "Will you sing for us then Little Brother – your voice is the sweetest of all our family and we have not heard it for some time."

Sesshoumaru snorted. "I would hardly consider that a compliment. I will not."

"Oh…" This reply at least seemed to be heard and his cold response recognised. The other youkai's faces became uncertain. "Are…are you sure little brother?" one asked tentatively.

Sesshoumaru drew himself up. "Most certain. I have no wish to be here at all."

"In that case you'd best return to your chambers, you are of no use here at our festival if you won't sing." One of the largest of the youkai brothers gestured brusquely at the building opposing the arches. A palace stood the place where a temple would be expected. Around him the "Brothers" turned absently away, eagerly returning to their festival as if he had ceased to exist.

Sesshoumaru frowned slightly, irked at being dismissed so casually. He had not sought the attention, but to be forgotten so readily was…. Unpleasant. Around him the youkai celebrated their festival, tussling with each other, roaring with mirth and Sesshoumaru felt strangely alone. Shaking off the feeling of abandonment he crossed the courtyard, swimming through the open doors of the palace, leaving the merriment behind.

Long corridors of screens extended in three directions. Sesshoumaru hovered in the water a moment trying to discern which way to go. A soft wash of current directed him to the left. When he swam in a different direction the water became colder but not restrictively so. Evidently he was allowed, but not encouraged, to explore.

Eventually Sesshoumaru found himself before a doorway with his name carved upon the lintel. Traditional screen doors slid open as he approached. Curious he tapped one of the 'paper' panels of a doorway. It was shell, flat and white, cut to replace paper that had long since disintegrated.

The door opened out onto a watery garden, raked gravel that would never be disturbed by a footprint lay between the "flower" beds. The space was laid out like a traditional Japanese garden, right down to a branching russet coral in place of maple trees. Riots of colour swayed gently in the wash of his passing as Sesshoumaru explored. The garden was unnecessarily walled and the Taiyoukai surmised that the entire complex must have once been on land but sunk beneath the waves. Around him variegated fan worms, anemones and corals had been cultivated to form a garden of unsurpassed loveliness. Sesshoumaru's thoughts flicked to his ward.

Rin would appreciate this. Briefly he imagined bringing her and watching over her as she collected more of the living posies he had seen outside the palace. She would be happy here… Perhaps he
too could be content… Sesshoumaru shied away from the thought, remembering the dull faces of the other youkai. What was he if there was nothing to strive for? Nothing to overcome?

Instead he focused his attention on the central garden bed. Carefully set in amidst the vibrant anemones was a white marble statue of a human. Though the features were slightly more masculine, Sesshoumaru recognised it as a representation of the girl, Higurashi Kagome.

He circled it once, briefly contemplating if he would gain satisfaction from maliciously drawing his claws across the stone face. Eventually he decided against it. He had no desire to give her more consequence than he already had. To do so would only infer that he thought her worth the effort of defacing the image.

Sesshoumaru allowed himself to sink to the gravel path, irritated at the circles his thoughts were chasing, and allowed himself a moment of envy for the stone statue. Unfeeling, uncaring, unconcerned. He had not been able to refind his own centre since meeting the Lady. His inability to control and use his youki had been having a greater toll on him than he had realised. Here beneath the waves he was no longer so drained, even if he still could not harness his youki…

He could feel the tranquil hum of the ocean-ki lapping at him, dulling his senses, settling over him like silt. Sesshoumaru shook himself out of the lethargy, he would not submit to this, Glowering up at the statue he pushed away from the ground. The Sea Witch, Higurashi Kagome had said, would tell him what had to be done to escape this place.

Sesshoumaru set that goal firmly in his mind and, returning to the festival whirl. Most of the brothers were engaged in a furious dance around the centre of the courtyard but Sesshoumaru managed to collared one of the smaller 'brothers', a slate black stag* youkai, it's tail patterned like a carpet shark.

"You: Tell me where I might find the Sea Witch."

"Eh why would you want to talk to her? You'll be far happier staying here Little Brother, nothing good comes of associating with her. What more could you want that isn't here in our kingdom?"

Sesshoumaru hissed, pulling away from the friendly arm that had been laid across his shoulder. "Challenge."

"Well I suppose you will have your way.” the mer-youkai replied complacently "If you really want to find her the Sea Witch is deeper."

"Deeper?" Sesshoumaru cocked his head, waiting for clarification.

"Here." The stag-youkai poured a handful of large rounded pearls into Sesshoumaru's palm then, taking one, tossed it on the ground. The pearl bounced then rolled, tumbling across the courtyard and away down the stairs.

"Follow it, when it stops rolling throw another. You'll get there eventually. Though remember there are other ways about going about these things…"

Sesshoumaru paused then, stiffly, bowed to the stag youkai. He had realised in the moment the gnarled fingers had brushed his hand that this being was not a youkai, the ki he had felt in the instant of contact had been divine, like that of the Lady. A god or it's emissary had just offered him aid and he had already enough trouble with the one he had insulted.

The stag smiled, his white moustached upperlip curling slightly. "You are learning Sesshoumaru, Then you never were a hasty one to begin with. Good Luck and hurry. Or that first pearl will be
* 鳥居 (とりい) Torii (literally 'bird perch')—these arches symbolically mark the beginning of a sacred space and are often found at the entrance to Shinto shrines and sacred places.

* 祭り (まつり) Matsuri – festivals, splendid affairs full of lights, noise and spectacle. In this case Sesshoumaru got a whole festival for his birthday, but he brushed it off. The cad.

* 河童 (あっぱ) Kappa – a water creature from Japanese myth, something like a humanoid turtle the kappa has a dish of water on it's head from which it derives it's power. They have a tendancy to drown people but if you bow to them, being incredibly polite creatures, they must bow back and so tip out the water and temporarily lose their power. They are also very fond of cucumbers.

* 海坊主 (うみぼうず) umibozo (sea monk) is a ocean monster, they often wreck boats or drag people into the ocean. There is an excellent write up on both of these monsters and more at www.obakemono.com

* Stags are associated with Fukurokuju (福禄寿) of the seven lucky gods, god of longevity. He is generally depicted as bald with a long forehead, indicating his wisdom. Deer are also associated with longevity, when they attain 1000 years of age they are said to turn black.

The twelve princes, for those interested are, by age/size: Buffalo, bear, horse, lion, tiger, goat, wildcat, deer, weasel, salamander, lizard, dog (Sesshoumaru). And these twelve… uh eleven dancing princes don't need to worry about wearing out their shoes ^_^
In the Mirror, Lies

Kagome was escorted around the bluff to where a stone castle jutted out of the cliff face, like a series of white marble fungi. She allowed herself to be helped into one of the many sedan chairs and carried up the winding stairs through the keep and into the castle. Initially she had protested that she was fit enough to walk but the obstinate statement that if Kouchi-sama would walk so too would all the advisors, many of whom were seventy if not a good deal older, finally settled the argument.

The eldest of the courtiers rode in another chair close behind her. Kagome turned in her seat, looking down onto the pristine beach and the open layout of the town around the keep. Having seen many Japanese fortifications in the Sengoku period Kagome was certain that this place hadn't been designed to be defendable. Even the castle illustrations in the books she remembered had enclosing walls and portcullises of one sort or another. Somehow it felt like there should be more guards… any guards at all in fact. She craned her neck looking for some sign of uniforms or sentries.

"Aren't we at risk from attack from the sea?" Kagome asked.

"Oh no Kouchi-sama the reef protects us from any ships here. You need not fear the Wakō here. Do you not remember sire? That is why there no piers on this side of the coast, and all the fishing villages are on the far side of the island. Besides, The Lady promised no harm will befall any who settle here. Our city may be very young, but we have been greatly blessed by the gods. The other realms, knowing this, desire our good opinion. I fear the hardships you have faced may have affected your memory Kouchi-sama. You must rest and regain your strength."

Within minutes they were at the castle and Kagome was led through opulent halls and antechambers, deep into what she could only assume were her own private quarters. Each time they passed a hallway one or another servant would peel off and hasten away until there were only three courtiers with her. When they finally stopped in antechamber a brief and whispered conversation was held behind her and the three advisors bowed deeply.

"Kouchi-sama if you would wait a few moments your maids will be here to attend to you. We must inform your father of your return. Please: rest on one of these seats in the mean time," with that Kagome alone again. She sank into one of the seats and rubbed her eyes. Trying to figure out what to make of her situation.

It seems Benten had create an entire city as a backdrop to this particular story…

What on earth did Sesshoumaru do to warrant such an expenditure of effort and power? Kagome wondered, her mind boggling as she ran over the past tales in her mind, each increasingly elaborate in location and cast. She could wipe all of us off the face of the planet with less effort than she has put into creating these places. and for what purpose? 'To teach a lesson'? Kagome drew a deep breath in and tapped her fingers on her knees, unable to stop fidgeting.

Well now what?
I'm a prince and Sesshoumaru's a fish... Am I expected wait until he comes back with legs – like the prince in the story did?… Kagome scuffed her feet on the ground as she thought on, turning the story over in her head. She didn't like the idea of having to sit around waiting for the story to happen to her. Being proactive is so much easier.

Unable to sit still any longer Kagome got up, intending to sneak a glance through the nearest door.
In doing so she caught a glimpse of movement out of the corner of her eye. Whirling she found herself being watched by a stranger in a doorway she hadn't noticed before. Startled she hastily bowed, then looked up to find the stranger reflect her action. Warily the girl stepped forward and touched the mirror's surface, then her own cheek. Instead of her familiar face, with it's Asiatic and female bone structure, grey eyes and black hair she looked into the pale blue eyes of a handsome European boy with brownish blonde hair.

Unsettled Kagome pulled a lock of her hair forward to check and saw that it was still black. Curious she returned her attention to the mirror. Patting her front she was relieved to find she still felt herself... though the mirror showed a flat chested, almost broad shouldered, distinctly masculine figure. Illusion! Then how much of this place was real? A tactile check of the floor and drapes seemed to indicate she was the only 'fake' in the place.

She pulled a face at herself in the mirror, wondering if Sesshoumaru would still recognise her. Had she looked like this before on the beach? Or in any of the other places? Perhaps the dwarves hadn't really seen her either...

There was a patter of footsteps approaching and Kagome's musings were interrupted by a footman who deferentially ushered her on thorough yet more rooms. She was then courteously handed over to a phalanx of personal maids where she was stripped, washed, rinsed and redressed in a whirl of silks and spiced possets, all under the clucking supervision of an old matron.

By the time the servants were satisfied with her appearance Kagome was neatly clothed in many layers of embroidered Chinese court dress. The stranger that watched her from the mirror seemed as out of place in the costume, arrayed in finery from lacquered footwear to an elaborate topknot and cap, as she was in her role of prince, again. Her illusionary face seemed more serene than her own at least, which she was certain was bright red from the brisk handling of the maids.

A hew and cry from outside one of the windows gave her welcome distraction and Kagome pushed through the maids to see what it was about. Several people seemed to behaving hysterics in the garden below.

Kagome turned to find one of the old advisors hovering nearby.

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing you need worry about Kouchi-sama. Something has happened in the garden and it's distraught the head-cook somewhat… again."

There was a loud sobbing from outside as someone broke into tears. Kagome drew herself up, glad to have found something she could act on.

"I wish to know what has happened and will be going down there right now." She swept past him.

"Kouchi-sama… As… As you wish." The old man trotted after Kagome as she stormed down the hallways. Glancing back and seeing his unsteady tottering stride as he tried to keep up Kagome relented and slowed down, allowing him to overtake him and lead her down and out into the gardens.

The castle gardens Kagome was lead through were set out in a very formal, symmetrical European style. As they proceeded the ornate display gardens gave way to the practicality of the kitchen gardens containing a small knot of people that hovered around a crouched man who was sobbing into his apron.
Kagome cleared her throat and all but one of the servants hastily bowed.

"What is the matter?" Kagome asked.

One of the servants, encouraged to speak by a gesture from the eldest advisor, apologetically ventured: "Kouchi sama. We are to prepare a feast to celebrate your return… but all of the herbs have been with replaced with these foreign plants… Our head cook is…" the woman gestured helplessly at the distraught individual at Kagome's feet.

"My daikon! My shisho! Where are my komatsuna and mizuna*," the crouched man sobbed, rocking back and forth. "All my herbs are gone! How am I expected to cook with this? This!"

A warm breeze sprang up in the silence. On the ground was one of bushes that the head cook appeared to have ripped out and thrashed against the ground. A rich savoury smell rose up from the foliage carries by the wind. Kagome plucked a sprig and rolled it between her fingers, looking at the other three types of plant that now populated the entire herb garden. The parsley she recognised, but the others were foreign to her. The smell of one in her hand, however, reminded her of roast lamb as she had eaten in a restaurant once or twice, cooked European style.

"Um. Perhaps I can help…" Kagome offered, the head cook looked up at last and, seeing Kagome, yelped and flung himself prostrate on the ground before her.

"Forgive me Kouchi-sama! Forgive this pitiful one for disturbing your rest!"

Kagome was aghast at his reaction. "I did not mean to rebuke you! I swear! Um…Look: this one…" she proffered the parsley. "This one goes well with fish…"And this," the sprig she recognised only by the smell. "This one goes well cooked with the meat of sheep."

"Sheep*?"

"Ah yes, um… or maybe deer too? Uh. Sheep are like goats but…” Kagome made vague shapes with her hands. "fluffier?"

"Does Kouchi-sama desire we find these "Shee-pu" for his table?" The man's voice quavered.

"No! Not at all." Kagome hastily flapped her hand. "I… I was just trying to help you with how to use these herbs. Um. Please don't worry about the sheep."

"Koucha-sama" A cry came from the far end of the garden. "The weavers have finished it Koucha-sama." A few eager men hurried forward – presenting a folded garment made of white fabric. "Just as you ordered."

"Made what?" Kagome asked, wishing she knew what the hell was happening. None of this was relevant to the mermaid story she knew. A wave of dizziness made her sway slightly, blinking hard the tried to focus on the proffered bundle.

Reverently the man carrying the fabric shook it out, revealing a long white shirt, the fabric so fine it shimmered slightly in the sun. "No seams Sire. Not a stitch in the garment. As you requested."

"Ah Kouchi-sama…?"

"Sire?"

The voices were increasingly muffled as Kagome's vision-whirled. While she had forgotten she had not eaten anything, but the sip of the giant's stew, since her supper at the inn, her body had not.
Neither had she rested since then, while adrenaline had kept her going until now, her body decided it no longer had the resources to hold her up and shut down in self defense, leaving the cooks and advisors scrambling to catch her slumping form.

~o0o~

*大根 (だいこん) Daikon – Japanese radish om nom nom. I have it growing in my garden at the moment.

*紫蘇 (ししお) Shisho or Perilla is in the mint family and in Japan is used for salads, accompanying sushi and meat dishes.

*小松菜 (こまつな) Komatsuna is a leaf vegetable related to the turnip. It is used in salads, stirfried, pickled, boiled or added to soups.

*水菜 (みずな) Mizuna is another leafy vegetable from the brassica family, it is used in salads and has a peppery flavour.

*Sheep – I have NO idea when sheep arrived in Japan. I believe that wool didn’t come in until about the Edo period though. In the Chinese zodiac 'sheep' and 'goat' is often used interchangeably which doesn't help me at all. I don't even know if sheep as we and Kagome would know them – the fleecy wool covered Ovid aries (which is only one of multiple species of 'sheep' but are the widest spread and covers most of the domesticated breeds) – are the same as would have been found in mainland China in the sengoku period.
Poor Benten, trying to make sense of all the anachronisms in Kagome's head when even I, the author, can't find information on it.
Lithely twisting in the water Sesshoumaru tasted the water as he followed the rolling pearl. Now and then it would be lost from sight as it bounced beneath coral overhangs but always it reappeared, a pale gleam on the seabed. Sesshoumaru searched for the scent of power or some youki like taint in the water. The sooner he found the 'seawitch' the girl mentioned the sooner he would return to normal, on so many levels of existence.

As if hearing and rebuking his impatience the pearl rolled into a crack in the seabed and vanished. Sesshoumaru circled, prying at the ground with his fingers to see if he could follow it, when he could not he tried dropping another pearl. This one rolled hastily away in the same direction the first had before it fell.

Down. Down. Down. Pearl after pearl rolled and fell, leading the way.

The water became darker and heavier as the Taiyoukai swam on. Around him now the fish were leaner, their eyes larger. Flashes of luminescence beguiled or warned from the spines and sides of long thin eel creatures that eyed him in passing then sank back into their hiding holes.

Ahead the anemone's themselves glowed in pale golds, pinks and blues, forming and lighting a rich garden bed around a dais formed out of coral. Seated there was a woman, her skin as pale and smooth as abalone shell, her eyes pale as a sailor's corpse.

She was tall and elegant, but without a fish tail. Her throne was wrought of giant branches of moro coral*, red as safflower paste. The Sea Witch, for who else could it be, was dressed in silk kimonos that billowed about her in shades of kelp green. Her long black hair rose like smoke and was the hiding place of tiny slate-coloured seahorses and the occasional octopus that coiled in and out of the locks. Foreign gold coins, round and struck with a cross shape, thickly littered the ground around her. As did human bones, picked clean and gleaming pale in the flickering ocean light. The water tasted of power. Godly power, the same as the Lady and, to a lesser extent, the deer Youkai. This aura was heavy with lightning, salt and incense. Sesshoumaru repressed a shiver and warily approached.

The woman turned to focus on him with her dead eyes and a cruel little smile foxed the corners of her mouth.

"You have come slower than I was expecting little hound. Did the delights of the sunken palace turn your head and distract you?"

Sesshoumaru schooled his face to show no expression. "Hardly," he replied. The Sea Witch did not like his casual response. The water around her roiled slightly and Sesshoumaru gasped for air a moment as the water momentarily ceased to be breathable.

"You will address me as O-Toyota Mahime-sama, dog, if you address me at all. I will not be toyed with. You must exchange something of equal value for my assistance, that is the rule here."

Sesshoumaru's eyes widened fractionally in fear at the realization that his ability to breath could be robbed so easily. He nodded fractionally and the water returned to normal. The sea-witch steepled her fingers and gazed at him hungrily over them. Her teeth were very white when she spoke.

"I know what you seek."

Sesshoumaru's lip curled. "Better than I do..."
The woman stiffened, the water darkened slightly and Sesshoumaru stiffly added. "...O-Toyota Mahime-sama"

Toyota Mahime's eyes narrowed and her fingers flexed, displaying her long ivory nails. "You want your freedom little hound. Every movement in this realm shouts your wish louder than any voice could. Would you have me grant that desire?"

Sesshoumaru's brow furrowed. "I do not consider the mindless state of the other Youkai here freedom. O-Toyota Mahime-Sama."

The goddess waved her hand dismissively. "Of course not. Those Lotus-eaters are no freer than any other being who is reliant entirely on another's power for happiness. And the girl O-ka-sama* sent you has barely a part in the key to your freedom from all this." She waved at the watery realm about them.

Sesshoumaru's eyes narrowed as he listened. There was something about how the Sea Witch was being so blatantly dismissive of Higurashi Kagome that sounded false to his ears. But he was also beginning recognise who these beings were, that toyed with him so. Human gods differed from the primal gods of the Youkai, and he was not familiar with them, had never needed to be familiar with them. He had not realised that human gods had become so powerful in the last few decades. He would question the girl when next he saw her who these deities were.

"O-ka? Your mother is the cause of all this?" Sesshoumaru flexed his talons. "What reason has she for..." The water thinned again as the goddess expressed her displeasure and Sesshoumaru gasped despite himself as his lungs were robbed of oxygen.

"Silence dog. Cease your yapping and do not seek to blame others for your failings. I know of your faults and irreverence. Mother is far too generous, for all that you are the end of your line. She has always been excessively sentimental about your family."

Sesshoumaru writhed and coiled in the water like and eel, trying to control himself as a claustrophobic fear seized him along with the spasms as he tried to breath. The water and the darkness was closing in on him and he felt the fear of a child, helpless and unable to save himself.

"Enough of this," O-Toyota Mahime stated sharply. And Sesshoumaru was free again, coughing and shivering still from that primal fear. An angry resentment that any being could do this to him glowed like an ember in his heart, renewing his strength.

"To the bargain, little hound. I will return your legs, that you may walk on land, even grant you the power to return to the ocean, should you chose it, but in return..." The sea-witch leant forward, her words an eager hiss. "I want your voice. That is the original trade, so I have learned."

Sesshoumaru frowned. A voice he barely used for the ability to come and go as he pleased here, on land and water, and so the ability solve the task of this place. "Take it then O-Toyota Mahime-sama."

The witch reached into her sleeve and drew out two lacquer bottles, one a deep blue, the other amber. Pulling the stopper from the blue vial she gestured at Sesshoumaru.

"Speak then little hound, and forfill your part of the exchange."

Sesshoumaru frowned slightly. "What would you have me say...O-Toyo-" Even as the words fell from his lips the sound was drawn away into the vial in the Sea-Witch's hand, his last words were torn from his throat, leaving it raw in the salt water, and his tongue silent.
The water above began to boil.

"Hah. I thought that would get her attention. You may leave now little hound. O-Kaa-sama does not take being crossed lightly. Though you should know that by now." O-Toyota Mahime threw the amber vial to Sesshoumaru. "drink this when you reach the surface. It will restore your legs, step back into salt water to regain the form you wear now. You have until the new moon to solve this… trial. Otherwise…" The Sea-Witch shrugged negligently. "…Well perhaps death would be preferable. Go."

With a dismissing flick of her hand a jet of water hit Sesshoumaru, tumbling him far away from her cave and pelting him with coins and old bones.

~000~

"You would dare thwart me!" Benten's kimonos were alive with embroidered eels and they fluttered around her furiously as she approached the 'Sea Witch'.

Toyota Mahime quit her throne to bow before her mother, polite but unrepentant.

"He would not have used it any way mother. Let him miss it. Perhaps absence will make your little bird's song be the sweeter when it finally returns." Toyota Mahime shrugged, not without some deference. "If it ever returns. You knew the story when you set me this role and that I would choose to follow my part to the word."

Benten remained silent, but the water around her calmed.

"So be it."

~000~

* Boke coral is rose coloured, moro coral is a deep red. Corallium japonicum is a red coral found in the Japanese sea and used in jewelry making. It has become increasingly rare due to over-harvesting.

* Toyota mahime (or Toyo Tama Hime) is a Japanese sea goddess. While Bentzaiten is believed to have fifteen disciples or sixteen daughters but I couldn't find any names or descriptions of the latter. Thus I decided to cast another ocean goddess from the Shinto Parthenon as one of her offspring. Toyota's tale is similar to that of Melusine, one of my favorite lesser known fairytales. However I've made her a little less friendly and a lot more willful than my sources describe her. 
Kagome sat on the battlements in the sunshine, swathed in blankets. It was three days since she had collapsed from hunger and fatigue in the kitchen gardens. Only now had she managed to convince her watchdog like advisors that she was safely recovered enough to be left alone for the afternoon. "For peace and quiet and rest." Kagome had assured her hovering nursemaids. For Sanity's Sake she admitted to herself.

Beside her was the seamless cambric shirt which, for some reason, her advisors insisted she carry with her wherever she went. And the lamb.

Gods! The damned lamb. On the second day of her recovery one of the advisors had shuffled in, all smiles, saying a merchant had heard her plee and had a present for her: a Sheep! And at great expense from over the seas. A footman had stepped forward, proffering a pitiful little white shape. A lamb, soft and fuzzy, it bleated pathetically. And, despite feeding the animal had continued to bleat every moment it wasn't drinking milk or comatose. And to the delight of the courtiers the thing had taken to following Kagome wherever she went.* Making it a even easier for the castle to keep tabs on Kagome's whereabouts. They servants flustered about her like mother hens, intent on protecting her from any want or hardship.

Currently the animal was lying at her feet, little belly distended with milk from the latest meal Mercifully the servants cleaned up after it and fed the animal. Kagome had once thought the animals cute. She now knew them to be noisy, messy and moreover Dumb.

Kagome turned back to studying the ocean, glad of the temporary silence.

The castle wall here overlooked a full acre of broad beach, the long flat tidal flat was beginning to ebb, leaving driftwood and jetsam scattered on the sand. A shape in the distant shallows caught Kagome's attention. She leant out, careful not to disturb the lamb, and squinted against the sun, clinging to the edge of the parapet. There, though distant, she recognised the long pale form as it washed up on beach. Sesshoumaru had returned.

As she watched he pulled himself up to stand on legs, staggered, fell and stood again. Not waiting to see more Kagome snatched up the cambric shirt and her blankets as she ran down the keep steps to the strand. There was a frantic bleat behind her and the scuffle of hooves as the lamb tried to follow but Kagome had hit her stride and she flew down the sandstone cobbled road that lead to the beach.

~o0o~

Sesshoumaru struggled to remain standing, disoriented by the pull of gravity and the pain. The bitter taste of the Sea Witches potion still fresh on his tongue he silently gave thanks that he had decided to swim right into the shallows before he drank it.

Sesshoumaru was a taiyoukai.
It took vast strength and keenness to so much as scratch his skin.

But now... every time his feet rested on the ground it felt as though shards of broken pottery were cutting into his soles, he could barely feel the sand beneath him.
Toyota Mahime had said nothing of this. His youki was also rupturing off him without the salt water holding it place. Far faster than it had before, draining from him as quickly as he could draw energy from the salt shallows at his feet.

The air, too, seemed thin and insipid, He kept trying to drink the air in the way he had breathed the water but all it did was make him feel light headed and queasy.

Sesshoumaru, blinked, trying to clear his vision which fuzzed in the dryness of the air, then he closed his eyes, mustering his self control. The girl was back, he could hear the slap of her footfall across the saturated sand flat and her scent, overlaid with unfamiliar herbs was carried just ahead of her by the breeze.

He did not look up. His previous anger at having to be rescued by her time and time again sapped away with his strength.

~o0o~

The Taiyoukai swayed on his feet, clad in nothing but his dripping hair, the air around him rippling like a heat haze with escaping youki. Kagome's own reiki hummed in a glowing skin around her.

Kagome averted her eyes and held out the shirt and blankets. "Please Sesshoumaru-sama. Here is clothing, and we can get better for you up at the castle. I... I have Tensaiga waiting for you there too...Sesshoumaru-sama?"

She reached out uncertainly, just as the Taiyoukai partially collapsed. Kagome squeaked and caught his arm, steadying him as best she could. Youki crackled against her hand and she drew it back sharply, shaking it to disburse the sting.

"F...forgive me Sesshoumaru-sama. Here..." Kagome slung a blanket over his shoulders, hastily belting it with her own sash as best she could.

"If...if you would consent to lean on me a moment Sesshoumaru-sama..." Kagome concentrated on dispersing her reiki, as much worried about the risk of burning him with the purifying aura as she was of the backlash she might suffer from his responding youki. She tucked the cambric shirt into the sash to free her hands as she did so.

The moment the white fabric garment was within Sesshoumaru's aura, though invisible to Kagome, the flow of youki that had been hemorrhaging away reduced. The Taiyoukai regained some balance and took a deep, shuddering breath in. Kagome hastily let go of his arm and stepped back as Sesshoumaru opened his eyes, looked at her and blinked rapidly. He opened his mouth as if to speak and then paused, silent.

Kagome bobbed a swift, nervous bow.

"Um it's me Kagome, I don't know what I look like to you but the mirrors here make me look different. Please Sesshoumaru-sama: let's get you back up to the keep. The tide will come in soon and..." There was a panicked bleat and the lamb, sodden and covered in tidal silt, blundered into her leg.

"Oh Gods. You're the last thing I need. Clear off." Kagome nudged the lamb out from under her feet. Sesshoumaru's muzzy attention was caught by something behind her and Kagome turned to see the whole retinue of advisors stampeding down the beach. Frantic cries of "Kouchi-sama" growing increasingly louder, like a flock of seagulls.

"Ah! Bother! Sesshoumaru-sama. Please allow us to get you back to... um... well my castle, so that we can find you clothing and you may rest... uh if you wish to." Kagome turned back to wave
to the servants, trying to infer she had not come to harm, in the hope that they would calm down before they were within the taiyoukai's reach. "Sesshoumaru-sama. These people are harmless so please don't kill them, no matter how irritating they may get."

By this time the courtiers had reached them and Kagome spoke loudly over the babbled professions of distress at her sudden absence. "I am fine, you fuss unnecessarily. This Noble helped me escape the pirates. He too has been shipwrecked. Without him I would not be here today," Kagome stated. And wasn't that last statement the truth.

Kagome noticed Sesshoumaru had begun to sway again slightly, his eyes slightly glazed. He really didn't look well. Turning to the younger of the advisors she commanded. "Summon a kago and ready a chamber for him. He is to be my guest,"

"Kouchi-sama..." The advisors looked warily at Sesshoumaru and Kagome wondered whether or not they could see the taiyoukai's pointed ears and markings. Even slightly slumped as he was he was a good foot taller than any of them and despite his condition he still held the air of a predator. "You will help him back to the keep and treat him with as much respect as you have myself." Kagome directed firmly. A hand gripped her arm, youki prickling like nettle stings. Kagome looked down with surprise at Sesshoumaru’s fingers and waited for some word from the taiyoukai, expecting at least a terse 'I will walk' but he barely seemed to realise her existence.

"Sesshoumaru-sama?" Kagome craned to look into his face. The taiyoukai's pupils were dilated and she realised that he was, almost imperceptibly, shivering. "Sesshoumaru-sama? Are you still with us?" Risking them she snapped the fingers of her free hand before his face.

The taiyoukai shook himself and blinked rapidly, trying to focus around him. His ears were still full of water and the voices seemed to be from a long way off. There was a crowd of humans around him now and their combined perfume only added to the disorientation that assaulted his senses. Sesshoumaru's palm felt scalded where he held the miko's arm but he instinctively maintained his grip. He had felt himself been bleeding dry of youki but the strange white fabric and the presence of her reiki both stemmed the flow of ki, allowing him to muster what strength he had remaining.

Kagome's advisors began stepping forward, uncertain of the stranger laying hands on their liege-lord. Kagome waved them away, now very worried by the taiyoukai's behaviour. Sesshoumaru ignored the other hands that hesitantly sought to support him. He kept his grip on the miko's arm and allowed her to escort him painful step by step up the beach to the stone castle.

Chapter End Notes

* Guess a nursery rhyme snuck in there too...
Kagome's servants had only allowed her lead Sesshoumaru as far as one of the guest chambers before they had whisked her away to change her out of her wet things. She then had a devil's time getting away from them again.

She listened with half an ear to the stories the old advisors plied her with, warning of the downfall of nations due to trusting strangers and the onset of plague from castaways washed up on shores. They sounded so much like O-Jii-san that Kagome had no trouble tuning him out altogether as she was washed, dressed, fed and finally, after much cajoling, released by her keepers and to find Sesshoumaru.

The taiyoukai was almost exactly as she had left him.

Either he had dismissed the servants before they had a chance to dress him or they had not attempted it the first place. Many layered garments were laid out on the bed but had not been touched. The blanket and sash lay puddled on the floor. Sesshoumaru sat hunched on the window seat, leaning heavily against one of the windows, pressed against the glass as if trying to get closer to the warm light and looking like a wrung out rag: faded and crumpled. He was only sparsely attired, having made some effort to shrug into the damp cambric shirt and a pair of loose dark grey trousers, but nothing more. The white fabric and his wet hair clung to him and, if he had not look so terribly drained, she could have imagined him on some medieval themed pin up calendar.

Instead of striking a languid pose he was slumped bonelessly on the window-bench. A distortion of the air caught Kagome's eye, in the boundary between the shadows and sunlight around the Taiyoukai she could just pick out the swirl of his youki. Concentrating Kagome squinted at the ripples in the air, trying to pick out why the taiyoukai's aura was so visible when he normally masked it entirely. Unconsciously her reiki rose to assist and she drew in a sharp breath as the glow of Sesshoumaru's aura slid into focus. The air roiled around him, shimmering like hot water being poured into cold*. A great tear in his aura, starting at his chest and running right down his left arm to his fingers, allowed the youki to spill out into the air. He didn't stir as she approached.

Hesitantly Kagome reached for the tear in his aura. Sesshoumaru's hand whipped out and seized her wrist. Kagome yelped and leapt a foot in the air.

"Uh… Is there anything I can do to help you Sesshoumaru-sama?" Kagome asked as the grip of his hand tightened fractionally. The taiyoukai scowled, very slightly, and he sharply casting her hand away, turning to stare out the window. He straightened his back, holding himself upright with painful dignity, too drained to do anything more.

"Then Might….Might I get you anything Sesshoumaru-sama?" Kagome tried. "Food perhaps. Or a drink….Tea or Sake?" Though she had no idea if she might find the latter in the castle given the hassle in the foreign herb garden.

Sesshoumaru ignored her. Kagome bit her lip. Better that, she supposed, than violence. She was greatly worried by how his youki seemed to be bleeding away but wasn't sure how she could bring up the subject with the taiyoukai. Bowing she turned to leave. She would keep an eye on him, give him a day or so to regain some strength,
Near the door Kagome noticed a wall mirror. She snuck a glance in it as she opened the door to see if it distorted the Taiyoukai the way it had altered her appearance. She had expected him to somehow have the seeming of a female to fit in with the original story but he remained unquestionably male. His markings were not visible in the mirror. In fact if anything he seemed handsomer than reality. The fact worried Kagome, though she wasn't entirely sure why.

~o0o~

Three days Kagome visited the taiyoukai, morning and afternoon, to ask if he wanted anything, or if she could help in any way. Three days she may have been talking to the wall. Sesshoumaru did not move from the windowsill, did not even change position from where he sat.

Truth was Sesshoumaru spent the time meditating.

The seamless shirt had, somehow, slowed his loss of youki, even though it did not aid him in recovering any of it, so it pleased him to wear it.

It did not please him to walk. So he did not move from the window-seat.

It did not please him to step when every footfall burned his feet with no mark or relief, so he did not.

It did not please him to feel the silent rasp of breath in his throat when he tried to speak, so he did not attempt to talk.

It did not please him to look upon the girl who held more importance by her roles in these tales than he was willing to allow, so he did not look.

Cowardice! A small voice in the back of his mind hissed. Even walking across the room wearied him and he despised it.

Weakling, Pathetic. He ignored the judgement and continued concentrate on emptying his thoughts – in forgetting his mute tongue, his youki-hollow core, his eggshell brittle feet, Sesshoumaru focused on Mu*, on nothingness and willed himself there.

On the afternoon of the third day, her seventh visit, Kagome had had enough. She had spent an hour after lunch arguing with her advisors about the stranger who kept to his rooms, wouldn't speak, wouldn't eat. She was angry at their mistrust, angry at her need to justify the taiyoukai's presence and angry at Sesshoumaru for his apathy.

Kagome stormed into the room and slapped her hand down on the side table next to the taiyoukai. The violence of her action forcing him to give his attention.

"Sesshoumaru-sama snap out of it," she barked. "I would never have believed you to be one to wallow in self pity to this extent!"

Sess started and looked at her. The sea salt dried in his hair and on the cambric shirt, stiffening them, making them brush over each other with a crisp starchy noise as he moved. Kagome slapped the table again for emphasis, stinging her fingers. "You're certainly not the first person to lose their strength. Hell. It's not like you ever used it that much to begin with. Nor are you the first to temporarily lose your strength. And I'm sure it is only temporary."

Sesshoumaru opened then closed his mouth, momentarily at a loss. She, of course, knew of his weakness of strength... but she also knew of his muteness... The memory of the sea witches words returned to him, 'I want your voice. That is the original trade'. Higurashi Kagome would have
known all along he would lose his voice. The miko, who had been deferentially tiptoeing around him the past two days, now glowering with indignant anger and he was surprised to find himself feeling somewhat chastised.

"Here." With polite fingertips Kagome slid a pad of fine paper across the table towards him. Resting on top of it was a slender stick of charcoal. "You don't have to communicate — that's your choice. But you've no excuse not to if you have something to say."

Sesshoumaru looked at the paper for a moment then tentatively picked up the charcoal and rolled it between his fingers. The scrape of the carbon as it marked the first sheet of paper was loud to both their ears as Kagome held her breath.

"可だ。"*

Kagome could not stop the wide beaming smile at his acknowledgment of her gift. She decided to push her advantage while he still had the writing implement in his hand.

"Will you tell me what has happened beneath the ocean Sesshoumaru-sama? I didn't get a chance to tell you all of the story before — but I would like to know if it has varied much from the original so far."

~o0o~

Chapter End Notes

* 祖父さん (じいさん) Ojii-san. Grandfather. You may remember Kagome was always ignoring her Grandad's stories about the Higurashi's shrine in the early parts of the story. She hasn't increased her respect for waffely old men yet.
* The difference in temperature means the two fluids have different densities and this makes them to be visible: Try it in a clear glass— it's pretty. Or clear cordial or salt water being poured into fresh water.
* 無 (む) Mu — nothingness, void, no meaning, without. A concept often used in Zen Buddhism.
* 可 (か) ka Acceptable or tolerable,
Charcoal smudged the Taiyoukai’s fingers and his cheek, the tip of one of his ears, from where he had brushed back an errant lock of his hair, intent on the task that had stretched out to fill the entire afternoon.

The lamb had come bleating into the room shortly after he had begun writing out his narrative but Sesshoumaru had snarled soundlessly at the creature as it approached. The lamb had vented its bowels and bolted from the room. Kagome laughed, the hastily covered her mouth, too late to smother the sound.

"I should feel bad, but I wish I could have done that days ago."

With his brush had Sesshoumaru bluntly written "憂晴し余計者。"* An unwelcome distraction

Kagome quashed her smile and picked up the most recently filled sheet of paper. She had been reading upside down as Sesshoumaru wrote but scanned the lines again to be certain of what he had written.

In terse, succinct words the Taiyoukai provided a description of the eleven mer-youkai princes, the statue in the sea palace and O-Toyota hime. His meticulous writing listed the points of importance, though he made no mention of how the ground hurt his feet. That weakness he would not dignify with recognition.

Kagome had said nothing in this entire time he wrote, asked no more questions but had just let him record what he would. Once he had finished informing her of the events that had taken place under the ocean Sesshoumaru gritted his teeth and wrote out how his youki had failed him story after story, how the ocean had allowed him to contain his ki but not use it and how leaving the ocean his youki had bled from him faster than ever before. He also, grudgingly admitted that the shirt seemed to help reduce his loss of youki. Kagome read the sheet of paper silently then, to his surprise cast it, and all the other sheets of writing, into the fireplace, stirring the paper with a poker until even the ash had fallen apart.

"Sesshoumaru-sama you probably know it is there, but I can see a tear in your aura from here…," Kagome placed a hand over her heart. " Right along to here," traced a finger down the brachial artery in her arm and down to her left little finger.
"Um…. Your youki…" Kagome hesitated, searching for the words.

Sesshoumaru's finger tightened on the charcoal stick then his marks finished her sentence:

"出血をさせる。" I bleed dry.

Kagome's mouth formed a surprised 'o' at the admission of weakness. She poked the coals a few more times contemplatively. "Um… I didn't notice the hole in your aura before… I mean – I could sense the youki coming off you… a bit at least. But nothing like what you were losing on the beach. If the tear was there before, but too smaller, harder to see, it would stand to reason that if the salt in the ocean water sort of held your ki in… Like purification salt might keep a lesser youkai out of a room." Kagome frowned at the embers, her thoughts trotting only just ahead of her tongue she paused to puzzled out what she meant.
Sesshoumaru waited for her to continue and she pushed on in a rush, hoping that she made sense.

"If you'd been slowly losing more youki than you were creating Sesshoumaru-sama, then the pressure of the youki in your body wouldn't have had put much strain on the tear in your aura." Half forgotten physics lessons about resistors and electrical charge danced just out of reach of Kagome's memory. She battled on with half remembered snippets of science, applying it to youkai power. "It would make sense that, in the ocean, you would have regained something like a normal level of youki – then the pressure of your youki would be pushing out against the water. When you left the ocean then the barrier the salt water provided stopped." Kagome gesticulated as she spoke. "Sort of like a small cut in a full water skin that was then squeezed – the pressure behind inside rushing out making the hole larger."

Sesshoumaru inclined his head. Her reasoning made sense.

Kagome twisted her hands in her lap and finally asked, "Can I help?"

Sesshoumaru looked away and Kagome squirmed in her seat. Ready to be rebuffed or ignored. To her surprise Sesshoumaru turned over the piece of paper and replied.

"知らない。*" I do not know

~o0o~

Chapter End Notes

* 余計者 (よけいもの) yokeimono - a person whose presence is unwelcome, unnecessary or a nuisance;
* 憂晴し (うさばらし) usabarashi - a distraction or diversion
* 出血させる (しゅっけつさせる) I bleed.
* 知らない (しらない) – shiranai - I do not know.
A deferential knock at the door had broken the silence that followed his written admission and Kagome had been whisked away by her advisors. Following her example Sesshomaru burnt the last few pieces of paper of writing and was left with his thoughts. He could see the tear now that she had pointed it out.

The gaping edges of the wound in his aura flapped loose and ragged. Though he tried Sesshoumaru found he still could not touch or influence them. Their presence was like a lifting scab, unsightly and flawed.

Sesshoumaru's nostrils tightened and a muscle in his jaw twitched as he forced himself to look away and accept that, at this very moment, he could not do anything about the ugly slash that marred his aura.

Instead he found his thoughts returning to the way O-Toyota Mahime had brushed off Higurashi Kagome's importance in these stories. To his knowledge the girl's presence had been the lynch pin in every tale so far. That the Sea Witch has been so dismissive made Sesshoumaru reassess what he knew about the girl. The Taiyoukai was struck with the realisation: she was a tool, one close to hand and, if he were honest, potentially powerful if he could just learn to wield her.

Sesshoumaru had a vast knowledge of, but no control over, his own power. Higurashi Kagome had shown little knowledge and no finesse with her own power in the past but she had exhibited some degree of control over her reiki. If he could harness her power in place of his own he might find some way to repair his aura.

A sense of purpose settled over the taiyoukai: he had been provided with a tool and, by the gods who tormented him, He had the strength of Will to make use of it.

~o0o~

Kagome say in a chair before a table piled with documents, three scribes on the far side of the table were frantically sorting, stacking and making notes on the nature of the various papers.

Apparently there was to be a Ball. For her princely birthday or to celebrate her safe return, at least as far as Kagome could discern from the rambling conversations around her. And it was to be very soon.

Kagome's advisors were almost frantically plying her with scroll after scroll that required her signature, asking questions about her preferences of food, music and ornamentation, not that it seemed to matter what her response was.

If she said 'Blue' in response to a question one advisor would reply "But your highness, Yellow is always the tradition."

Another would counter with "But only buttercup and saffron yellow of course."

And a third would state that "It had best be yellow then." The scribes would duly note the decision and they would move on to the next question.
Kagome had, days ago, mentally nicknamed her three most 'attentive' advisors. It was childish but gave her some satisfaction to mentally address them as 'Tonkatsu', 'Takoyaki' and 'Wan-san'. 'Tonkatsu'-san for Tokasu-san, the oldest courtier and Minister of the Libraries and records, 'Takoyaki'-san for balding Tayako-san, who was assistant to the Royal Chamberlain* and 'Wan'-san for Netsubaki–san, the round faced, bland 'Minister for the Education of the Royal Heir'. None of them had offered her bad advice or seemed to have any self-serving interest but they were all so… clingy. They wanted to protect her from any harm or deleterious influence and, it seemed, beautiful, silent, brooding men washed up on the seashore fitted firmly into this category.

They were not pleased that she had spent as much time as she had with the Taiyoukai today. They had barely been satisfied with her looking in on him daily since he had been brought to the castle. Kagome hadn't dared tell them that it was fully her intention to duck back to the taiyoukai's apartments as soon as she could escape the paperwork in front of her.

Kagome returned her attention to the task at hand as a list of unfamiliar names was placed before her.

"All Forty eight guests from the surrounding realms have replied to promise their attendance." Tonkatsu was saying. "Of these sixteen are princesses or high ranking noble ladies representing a total of fourteen different kingdoms…"

"Sesshoumaru-sama must be invited as well." Kagome cut in firmly, noting the absence of the taiyoukai's name on the list. "I doubt he will come but I will not have him ignored in this matter."

"Forty Nine guests*?" The advisor grew pale. "It is most an inauspicious number your highness. If you would but reconsider…"

Kagome slapped her hand down on the table, her irritation flared at this latest attempt by her advisors to edge the taiyoukai out of the picture. They were constantly trying to distract her from Sesshoumaru. The last three days they had been constantly coming up with excuses to keep her busy and away from his presence. She was certain that this ball was somehow a part of the scheme. The taiyoukai had showed no form of threat, no bad influence, nothing but, somehow, his very presence in the castle ruffled feathers.

"Then you will invite another person to make fifty. I will not have you excluding my guest even if he is a little… odd."

"Kou… Kouchi-sama… As…as you wish." The old man bowed and, at his gesture, a scribe hastily made a mark on another piece of paper.

Kagome sank back in her seat, her anger fading. She was well aware that Sesshoumaru automatically separated himself from everyone else, as much by his silence, stillness and aloofness as by the wash of youki around him. Oh he'd not yet left his room since he had arrived, and no one seemed to be able to see his true appearance – but if Kagome had heard the servants unsettled muttering about him then surely everyone in the castle was wary of the pale stranger who stayed, hermit like, in the best guest room.

Kagome stood abruptly. "I am having a break from this. I will return in an hour." Picking up the tea tray that had been so recently and reverently placed by her elbow Kagome swept out of the room, ignoring the protests of her staff.

~o0o~

Kicking the trailing hem out of the way with her feet on every stride Kagome made a beeline to
Sesshoumaru's room with the tea. He looked up as she entered but did not rise.

"Sesshoumaru sama. I apologise for my delay. I was waylaid. There is to be a ball – a dance and feast in two days time." She blushed as she set down the tray. "Apparently to celebrate my return."

Kagome carefully poured tea out into the cups and, with as much grace as she could muster, placed one in front of the taiyoukai.

Sesshoumaru glanced at it and considered ignoring it. The tea did not smell at all unpleasant, perhaps even adequate. He remembered the old adage 'Where there is sugar the ants will come' and delicately picked up the cup.

Kagome's face lit up and Sesshoumaru found himself surprised that such a small action on his part could have such importance to her. Much like Rin, he realised. But the miko had an adult's awareness of the additional layers of meaning in his acceptance of the offering, the second such in the same day.

Kagome was too hasty in raising her own cup, spilling hot tea on herself and the tabletop, spattering it on the papers. Kagome hissed half of an expletive and busied herself mopping the spilt fluid off the tabletop with a sleeve,

Sesshoumaru watched her through lowered lashes as he took a sip of tea. He found it, surprisingly, more than tolerable.

"I did not get a chance to relate all of this story, or at least the version I know. May I now?"

Kagome wrung out her sleeve

Sesshoumaru took another sip of his tea and inclined his head.

~o0o~

"I always thought the 'turning into seafoam' and being rescued by Tennyo* to cry for the sins of man" was a bit of a lame ending." Kagome finished her summary. The tea was almost cold, the hour was up, and she could all but hear the stampede of ministers approaching.

Kagome had seen a gleam in Sesshoumaru's eye when she had related the part about the mermaid sister giving the mermaid the knife. She had glossed over that bit as fast as she could, hoping that he wouldn't seriously consider it and decided to try to further nip it in the bud...as delicately as she could

"Sesshoumaru-sama... um. Before you consider what I think you may be thinking. And first stating that in no way am I assuming that I know what you are thinking.... Um. We were thrown into this story when you attempted to throttle me... Humbly I suggest that killing me isn't going to solve this tale."

Kagome nearly choked as the corner Sesshoumaru's mouth curled very slightly and he leisurely glanced away, taking one last sip of his tea, as if to cover the almost-smile.

The light had faded and no lamps had yet been lit. Sesshoumaru's eyes glowed slightly, reflecting the amber of the sunset outside. Kagome repressed a shiver, suddenly aware of how casually she had been addressing him and how little she knew him. She was grateful for the soft knock at the door and stood abruptly, bowing.

"If you'll excuse me again Sesshoumaru. I promised them I would return to the study. Um. If you need anything you could....um.... Send a note? Otherwise I'll return tomorrow. Excuse me." And
with that Kagome fled the room as quickly as dignity would allow.

~o0o~

Chapter End Notes

* Numerology lesson for today: In Japan the numbers four and nine are considered unlucky numbers due to their pronunciation. Four (四) sounds as 'shi' the same as death (死) while nine (九), when pronounced kyu is a homophone for suffering (苦). 49, being a culmination of both means 'pain until death'.
* 豚カツ (とんかつ) – Tonkatsu - fried pork cutlet
(たこやき) – Takoyaki - octopus balls
椀 (わん) Wan – Soup bowl
* Chamberlain – the individual who manages the household for a monarch or noble
*甘いものに蟻 (あまいものにあり) amai mono ni ari – a proverb: ants go to sweet things; or the English version: you attract more flies with honey than with vinegar
* 天女 (てんにょ) Tennyo are heavenly maidens. Loosely a buddhist equivalent of angels. A Tenkyou's hagoromo (robe of feathers) was one of the key plot elements in the Second Inuyasha movie.
Kagome woke to a presence in her room in the middle of the night. She froze, straining her ears then realised it wasn't a sound that had woken her – but the sharp presence of a familiar aura. She sat up and her heart sank as she recognised the shape of Sesshoumaru standing between her bed and the open window. Kagome's first wild thought was *He's come to kill me after all.* A frantic glance at his hands showed he was carrying something pale and elongated. Kagome scrabbled backwards, her shoulder blades bumping into the headboard of the bed. The taiyoukai did not move from his concentrated scrutiny of her.

"Sess…Sesshoumaru-sama?" Kagome's throat constricted and she took a deep breath, trying to ignore the pelting of her heartbeat. "Is there something wrong?"

Sesshoumaru impatiently proffered his hand and Kagome realised he held a narrow strip of paper, rather than a knife. She could make out something written on it but the light was too poor to make it out.

"Um… I can't read in this light… let me get a lamp…" Kagome fumbled in the dark for the taper she had left on her bedside table, intending to light it in the coals of the room's hearth. Sesshoumaru hissed a warning and gestured at the door. He grabbed her wrist and pulled her out of bed, half dragging her across the room to pull open the curtains, allowing her to read the paper by moonlight.

"*You will use your reiki to remove the harm done to this Sesshomaru's aura.*"

"What? Right now? Sesshoumaru-sama it's the middle of the night."

A shrug. What should he care the time of day? There was a soft rustle as he folded the paper over and Kagome realised that he had made a paper fan with different responses written on each plane.

"*There will be less chance of disturbance.*"

"What if someone checks to see if you're in your room or not. I don't want to imagine what my advisors are going to do if they find you here…" Sesshoumaru's lip curled in distain and he flicked forward through the folds in his fan of answers.

"This Sesshoumaru locked his door from the inside. They will assume occupancy." Kagome didn't know whether to be impressed with the taiyoukai or disappointed with her self that her questions were so predictable. He flicked back to the first fold. And Kagome's heart sank.

"*You will use your reiki to remove the harm done to this Sesshomaru's aura.*"

"Eh? I know I asked what I could do to help Sesshoumaru-sama, but that's impossible! I'd have more luck cutting down a Sansho Tree* with a blade made of leather. I've only ever managed to use my reiki on shards or arrows and even then it fails as much as it works."

Sesshoumaru's teeth clenched as he turned the fan to its very last fold. *This Sesshoumaru cannot make any use his youki. Something prevents his control. You, Miko, will*
Kagome's eyes widened at his admission. She wanted to deny his demand, she'd accepted she had no control over her powers a long time ago, but if Sesshoumaru stated she would then she was capable. The thought frightened her as much as his recognition of her potential complimented her.

She took a deep breath in and released it.

"All right. What do I do?"

Sesshoumaru flipped the fan over, opened it and held it out to her. Neatly written on the back of the paper were her instructions, such as they were.

*Focus ki in your fingertips*

*Draw the edges of this Sesshoumaru's aura together*

*Seal the aura rift.*

Sesshoumaru would have sucked as a teacher, Kagome decided, as he stood there waiting for her to comply.

She stared at her fingers, willing something to happen and trying to remember what she had done any time she had succeeded in calling up her reiki. The white of Sesshoumaru's cambric shirt dappled with moonlight kept catching her eye and distracting her. Here in the silver light she could make out a faint pattern woven into it. You could almost imagine the garment was made up of white peacock feathers. Kagome shook her head, trying to clear her thoughts and Sesshoumaru made an exasperated noise through his nose.

His lips moved soundlessly, irritated. "No. Here This!"

Sesshoumaru snatched her wrist with one hand and, fingertips resting over her pulse, he exerted his will. For half a breath nothing happened then, through sheer strength of intent, the taiyoukai managed to concentrate the barest scrape of youki in his fingertips. Kagome's skin felt prickly beneath his hand, as if touching something slightly acidic. Her own reiki flared and hummed into existence in response.

Kagome held her breath and watched the glow pulse across her skin. She had just begun to tentatively feel for how the power flowed around her when Sesshoumaru released his grip. Her reiki fizzled out as fast as it had manifested. The taiyoukai scowled and twitched an eyebrow. Kagome cringed: if looks could be a slap of anger then his expression was a descending open palm. She held her own hands in front of her and desperately tried to summon her reiki again. Nothing.

Sesshoumaru huffed silently and clicked his teeth together in a canine snap of exasperation as he circled both of her wrists with his hands, barely touching her. His youki billowed around them both but only the faintest hum of it was retained in his hands. Kagome's reiki sprang up again, far more stable than she had ever managed to maintain it on her own.

Her skin smarted where Sesshoumaru's touch rested and Kagome's eyes watered in response. She sniffed and took a deep breath in, unwilling to show weakness before the Taiyoukai. Instead Kagome concentrated on how the energy flowed around her, along her from her heart and out, down her arms and legs and back again. She took a slow breath in and closed her eyes, concentrating on directing her reiki to her hands.
Focused on the positive thought, rather than her fear of inexperience and failure, that Sesshoumaru had asked for help! Had asked for HER help. Around her Kagome's reiki gathered intensity, humming on her skin like static electricity, winding around her like an affectionate cat, arcing across her skin as if eager to have been called. Sesshoumaru had asked HER for help which meant that he knew she could achieve the task.

She opened her eyes. She could see the rent in Sesshoumaru's aura clearer than ever, beyond him she could see the world limned in ki – her hands glowed as if white hot metal. Sesshoumaru was leaning away from her fractionally, his eyes closed, though he still held both of her wrists loosely. Kagome's concentration wavered as she noticed how reddened the taiyoukai's fine white hands had become from their proximity to her purifying ki. He hissed without opening his eyes as her reiki fluctuated. Kagome steeled herself and focused again of pushing her reiki to her fingertips, away from her wrists and the taiyoukai's hands. Her fingers felt fuzzy, as if resting on a small motor – the air around them seemed to hum with energy.

Slowly she reached up with one hand to grasp at the edge of Sesshoumaru's aura. His hand travelled with hers, still loosely clasping her wrist.

Kagome pinched at the air with her fingers. The aura felt a little thicker beneath her fingers, like grasping silken tofu in water, she could almost but not quite get a grip on the edge of the aura tear. It slipped elusive from her fingers several times before she had the spider web edge of the energy caught between her fingers. She rubbed the together the fingers of her other hand as if to roughen their gripping surface then concentrated on catching the other side of the rift. This came easier. Carefully she drew them together, trying to ignore how exertion had drawn wrinkles of exertion from the taiyoukai's brow and her own hands trembled.

Kagome drew together the two sides of the tear, touching the edges in the hope they would seal on contact. No luck.

"What do I do now Sesshoumaru-sama?" Kagome asked. The taiyoukai shook his head, eyes still closed and focusing on mustering what control he could over the youki. He could not 'speak' without letting go of her wrists and them having to start anew. The muscles twitched in his forearms. Kagome strengthened her resolve and sought her own solution.

She concentrated on her own aura and, after a few false starts, fashioned a needle of reiki. Pinching the two edges of the aura gash together she breathed a prayer to all the gods she could remember then pushed the reiki needle through them as if sewing, pinning them together.

Sesshoumaru hissed softly and his grip on her wrists fractionally increased but did not hinder her movements. Heartened by how the reiki needle seemed to be holding Kagome drew her focus and made more, one by one, tacking the sides of the aura closed again. The flow of youki around her lessened each time. However by the time she placed the last one Kagome realised with dismay that her ki pins were reacting with the youki –the demonic energy gradually corroding them even as the pin holed they had created gradually burned larger from the purifying energy.

Her solution wasn't going to last long.

"Sesshoumaru-sama. I need a thread of youki. Can you … will you make one for me? I'm going to try sewing this tear shut," Kagome asked.

The taiyoukai drew in a slow breath. His colour had improved since she had pinned the tear closed. He did not look so grey and waxen. A small crease furrowed between his brows as he assessed the request. He clicked his teeth together and nodded fractionally in acceptance of the task and split his concentration.
Still encircling her wrists with his hands, Sesshoumaru touched his index claws together, slowly drawing them apart. Finer than embroidery thread and as fragile looking as a cobweb, Sesshoumaru drew the golden glow of his youki whip out for the Miko. He had begun trembling slightly but the amount of youki flowing out around them was now barely a trickle.

Kagome yelped as she took the strand of youki, almost dropping it. The tips of her fingers burned from the contact but she held on, pushing her reiki to buffer her skin from the demon ki. The reiki sewing needle she held almost fizzled out in contact with the strong thread of power Sesshoumaru had provided. Kagome, biting off a curse, set her own will on the fine shaft as she threaded it, concentrating her energy into it until the spiritual needle cast a light that made her eyes water.

As fast and as neatly as she could Kagome stitched the two sides of the torn aura together, discarding the reiki pins as she went. They dissipated into the air with a faint sparkle of power. As she sewed Kagome was relieved to see the stitches absorbed back into Sesshoumaru's aura, leaving no trace of where the rent had been.

Sesshoumaru himself had slowly been releasing his grip on her wrists since he had created the thread of youki. Shamefully he found he could not maintain both the youki in his fingers and the thread. He had not been surprised when Higurashi Kagome's reiki remained strongly present even though he had stopped provoking it. The girl was intent on her task and so did not expecting it to fail her. She had not even noticed he had broken contact. Even as she had begun tacking the wound in his aura closed Sesshoumaru had felt his Youki stabilise and begin to return. He found still could not exert much more control over his ki than before but the majority of it, once again, sat warm and solid in his core.

Kagome grinned triumphantly as she tied off her last stitch and straightened, pulling her reiki needle free of its thread. Both glimmered then faded from existence. She stood there, limned in the confident radiance of her own reiki for a moment, then as she realised she was the only one controlling her ki her eyes widened in surprise and her reiki sputtered out, like a candle.

A gust of wind ruffled the curtains, filling the silence and Kagome shivered, suddenly realising how cold she was. She felt drained. Sesshoumaru, on the other hand, almost seemed to be glowing in comparison to how she had become used to seeing him. He straightened further and flexed his talons, testing to see if he could call up his youki. A faint glow shimmered around his claw tips but nothing more. Sesshoumaru frowned slightly his hand then turned away, back towards the window, obviously intending to leave the way he came.

"Sesshoumaru-sama…?" Kagome's voice wavered. "Um…Where are you going?"

The taiyoukai turned back impatiently, using his claw he wrote across the surface of the white cloth that covered her bedside table. The youki in his fingertips burning words into the pristine fabric.

This Sesshoumaru goes to bathe. The stench is no longer tolerable.

The taiyoukai was out the window and gone before Kagome looked up again.

Kagome sat flabbergasted a moment then picked up the fabric and threw it violently into the hearth. She stood and watched as the coals flared up and flames licked hungrily over the taiyoukai's last callous message, reducing it to cinders. Her earlier elation of success had dissolved all together, leaving her feeling abandoned and isolated.

Any of her friends would have been so happy for her managing to draw on her reiki – there would have been hugs and celebration, demands for ramen and the aftermath of Miroku's attempts as
congratulatory groping. Instead she was in a dark room, alone and with no idea when she would find her way home.

Kagome slumped back down onto her bed and drew her knees up under her bit back tears. She felt so very tired but without anything to show for her exertion. Though a small part of her remained triumphant: after all look what she had just done, and with no prior experience! The cold reality was Sesshoumaru didn't care, she wasn't important now that his youki wasn't bleeding out in front of her.

The fan of paper slid off her coverlet and fell the ground at her feet with a muffled rustle. Numbly Kagome stooped and picked it up, turning the folds to read his other responses, ones to the questions she hadn't thought to ask. She paused, somewhat stunned, on the second to last fold, written, stiffly, formally was the word 有難う. Thank you

Kagome released the breath she hadn't realised she was holding and started to silently laugh, tears trickling down her cheeks, until her mirth became sobs.

He had known she would not fail.

She folded the awkwardly written piece of paper and tucked it into her inner kimono before rolling over and cried herself to back sleep, uncertain of if she was happy or sad.

~o0o~

Sesshoumaru ghosted through the palace, he still walked as if on shards but it was easier to ignore now that he at least could contain his youki again. He revelled in the comfort of having his ki stay where it should be, even if he could not draw on or influence it yet. But this pleasure was undermined by his awareness of how he was encrusted with salt, sweat and lingering the stench of fear. His own.

From the nearness of death when he had been bleeding youki, from memory of the crushing ocean depth that roused him from meditation time and time again, and from the reiki that had just sizzled round him, easily capable of purifying him in his weakened state.

He stank and it was not to be borne any longer. Scenting the air he identified the nearest large body of hot water and headed in that direction.

~o0o~

Chapter End Notes

*Sansho Xanthoxylum piperitum, in the family Rutaceae. Not a true peppercorn tree but known as Japanese Pepper and native to that country. Another reference to that song I mentioned a few chapters ago.
*有難う（ありがとう）arigatou: thankyou.
Sunlight shone strongly through the open curtains when Kagome woke muzzily from sleep. Rolling over under the light goose down blankets she realised she was damp with sweat and her hands felt slightly numb – as if channeling the reiki the night before had stretched the very capillaries that carried her blood to her fingertips.

She tried to sit up and found the room spun. Dizzily she slumped back down onto the pillows. There was a soft knock at the door and, when she called out a query, a pair of maids entered, one bearing a breakfast tray, the other an ewer of water. Kagome's feeble attempt to sit up again was so hastily assisted by the maids and with a degree of concern that she must have looked as drained as she felt.

"I… I slept poorly. I fear I may have a small cold… I would like some food though," Kagome admitted as her stomach rumbled at the thought of the hot meal in front of her being taken away. She realised was ravenous, using her reiki must have burned up physical energy, a strange thought. She concentrated on getting a grip on the edge of her breakfast tray, suddenly afraid the maids would whisk it away and leave her hungry.

"I am sure if I rest I will recover without troubling anyone further. There is no need for a physician. Just food then sleep and I am sure I'll be fine."

~o0o~

Outside the prince's door the two servants clucked and muttered to each other about the sudden poor health of their young lord. The cause of his ill health was speculated on, from the chill of the season to potential assassination attempts by poison.

"The water from the kitchen boiler's tasting strange this morning. Sort of metallic, perhaps a bit salty even, and sharp, like acid*. We had to draw fresh water from the well." The younger of the maids informed the other in a hushed voice. "Perhaps we had best let someone know. It might be some sort of attempt to poison the staff or worse, the king or prince…"

The elder of the maids made a warding gesture against misfortune as they passed by the pale visitor's closed door and both of them hurried back to the kitchen in silence to see to the tainted water in the cistern.

~o0o~

There was a rattle of the doorknob late in the morning then a maid entered, without knocking. Sesshoumaru noticed, without turning his apparent attention from the window, that the tray held only settings for one.

The maid bobbed an awkward curtsey. "Sir, the prince is indisposed and asks that you be informed he will not visit today."

She turned, curtsied again, though only as briefly as was polite, and walked from the room, the door closing faster than necessary behind her. Sesshoumaru sniffed the air. The tea, at least, was not substandard, despite the incivility of the servant, the gossip he could hear through the wall, however, was not so innocent.
From the hall outside Sesshoumaru could hear several female voices, the one who had delivered his tea was describing in an almost frantic whisper how 'that pale man' was no longer looking so poorly. There was sudden speculation that the prince's sudden illness might be connected to his recovery. The other servants there muttered implications but they were moving away now and he could no longer clearly hear the conversation. Sesshoumaru's improved health had not only been observed – it seemed distinctly unwelcome to these humans.

It seemed that the humans were inclined to believe that the sudden illness of Higurashi Kagome was connected to his recovery. Dangerous suppositions when held in the light of the bare tolerance with which the royal advisors regarded his presence.

Sesshoumaru ran a claw across the wooden sill of the window, delicately slicing a curlicue of wood from the grain. Time was wasted in this place. The taiyoukai decided that he would find out the extent of Higurashi Kagome's 'illness' and prevent it from prolonging the role the 'fah-ri-tai-ru' had inflicted upon him.

~o0o~

Kagome stirred in her bed, still slightly feverish but no longer so drained or tired. She opened her eyes to find herself in darkness, she had slept the day through, only waking to order the departure of the court physician and courtiers who, by their constant checking on her, prevented her from resting.

A piece of paper rustled nearby and, muzzily she looked about to see the source, certain that it was not the one still tucked under her pillow. Despite the dark and she recognised Sesshoumaru standing as still and pale as the curtains.

It appeared He had taken it on himself to visit her again. The taiyoukai proffered a piece of paper.

"Mmm surry Sesshoumaru-sma," Kagome slurred as she struggled, still half asleep but now recovered enough to sit up on he own. "Still can't see what you've written. 'v not got youkai eyesight y'see."

Sesshoumaru picked up a hot coal from fire in his fingers and, blowing on it, held the glowing ember up behind the paper so she could read:

**You are ill. This delays progress.**

Kagome barked a self concious laugh and rubbed her face. "I'm just really… really tired… maybe a bit of a fever. I've never controlled my reiki like that. I think it's taken it's toll." Her eyelids began to sag and she barely managed to cover her yawn with a hand. "I'll promise be better soon, tomorrow even Sesshoumaru-sama. I'm sorry I'm not much help at the moment."

Sesshoumaru subtly sampled the air to verification of her self-diagnosis. There was no scent of illness about her, which seemed to authenticate her claim. There was also no sense of her miko aura either though. Flicking the coal back into the fireplace the taiyoukai briskly poked the back of her hand with a finger. He intended to use his youki to invoke her reiki to assess how drained her resources actually were.

With a yelp of pain Kagome jerked into full wakefulness, snatching her hand back, weakly batting his own away.

"Please Sesshoumaru-sama: that burns!"

He huffed a silent 'Hn' through his nose. Her reiki WAS distinctly depleted, though it appeared to
be returning. He considered exerting the effort to write down what he had just learned for her and swiftly dismissed the thought. It did not advance his own purposes - he would not waste time on informing her.

Instead he mouthed the word 'Sleep' and left the way he had come.

~o0o~

Kagome rubbed the hand the youki had touched – it had felt like an electric shock and she could still feel reiki humming lightly under her skin where his finger had momentarily pressed.

The jolt of pain and her irritation with Sesshoumaru for inflicting it then leaving without explanation had woken her fully now. Kagome was no longer so tired, anger and a dab of adrenaline gave her the energy to stay sitting up in her bed, considering.

She concentrated on the small measure of reiki she had available. Rather that trying to control a large amount of her holy energy as she had in the past when firing arrows Kagome grasped at her ki as she had the edges of Sesshoumaru's aura, as if teasing out a spider web. Her fingers itched and tingled, then stung as though raw but she persevered. Her reward was a faint glow of energy visible about her fingers, then a sense of the veins the reiki flowed in. Closing her eyes she internally mapped the paths of her reiki, able to trace the faint traces of her own power. Kagome's breath slowed, her head nodded and, muscle by muscle, she relaxed naturally slipping into an unconscious healing trance, almost asleep, almost meditating, sitting upright in her bed.

~o0o~

Though each step sent twinges of pain echoing up through the taiyoukai's calves he carefully moved through the deserted halls of the castle. He could feel his aura humming out around him, traces lingering behind him, hot in the night air behind him, like a blood trail. However he doubted there were any other youkai or ki-sensitives apart from himself and Higurashi Kagome to note it. The night was late and most of the servants had long since gone to bed. Contrary to Kagome's initial assumptions there were guards scattered the castle. Not many and they were easily avoided by the taiyoukai as he ghosted through the keep.

Sesshoumaru was barefoot. He had found he could not abide the feel of any sort of footwear, from supple leather boots to slippers of the softest wool. The guest room had supplied all manner of shoes. All burned when he wore them, making him clumsier, at least in his own reckoning, than when his afflicted feet were bare.

The scent trail of where he had come in three days ago had long since been obliterated by the comings and goings of the castle but he was not seeking escape – he was seeking information. Sesshoumaru clicked his teeth ever so slightly and pressed on through the terraces and hallways of the castle, listening for the specific voices that would better inform him of the politics within the castle.

Rarely one to stoop to subterfuge the taiyoukai's goal this night was to find out the agenda held by the advisors to the 'prince'.

There was something unsettling about the venom in the gaze of the old men that followed after Higurashi Kagome. Even more so if they considered him a cause for her current state. The advisors trailed as close behind Higurashi Kagome as the lamb did, but with purpose rather than blind besotted favour. There was no malice directed at the girl – but they closed ranks and glowered at him whenever she wasn't looking – like a herd of ox protecting a calf from a potential predator. They did not fear him, which, though irritating, meant that they did not see him as the direct
Sesshoumaru settled into the shadows, pulling himself up to sit on a ledge tucked under the window, shamed with the relief he felt at lifting his feet from the ground.

An informal council of some sort was taking place in the room behind him. He could hear a total of eight heartbeats, though only five voices spoke. They were in hushed tones, only occasionally raised in passion or outrage but Sesshoumaru’s sensitive hearing meant he heard their very breathing clear enough.

"What are we to do with this white stranger? The prince is so besotted with him he does not listen to a word we say."

"Has anyone consulted the temple? The shrine maidens there should know how we might break the infatuation. If he were a woman I would not hesitate to say it is witchery but…"

There was an irritated huff. "If the prince showed more interest in women there would not be this issue."

"If the other kingdoms were to find that our Prince has been bewitched by some strange man of unknown origin…"

"What of the royal succession if he will not chose a wife? He has shown no interest in the portraits of potential brides, and I’ve been informed several of the maids have made unsubtle passes at him that have been ignored or politely rebuffed. What If he prefers men?"

"At least he's not chasing young boys." One of them remarked sourly. "You remember the scandal with Shou Sai Tou-dono two years ago." There was a collective mutter of voices.

"If we cannot distract the prince from this man then how might we remove this man from the Prince’s presence – at least until we have him married and succession established? The prince does appear excessively attentive of him…"

"Do you think we could convince this stranger to leave?" One of them asked.

"You'd be willing to ask? He frightens me – I am willing to admit it"

"Can a sparrow understand the aspirations of a phoenix,*" another sagely offered. There was a snort of derision.

"Then how about a temporary disappearance of some sort?"

"It would disturb the plans for the ball if we had to search for the prince's guest. What of a temporary malady, a stomach upset perhaps. Some mild poison?" A voice chirped

Sesshoumaru's claws dug into the masonry, little bits of mortar crumbled down silently onto the pavement far below.

"Too blatant and the only thing he seems to consume is tea. What about a hunting accident?"

"The prince's guest never leaves his apartments. Short of having a wild pig run through the castle it's not a likely method."

"Snakes? No we've no venomous ones on the island… though I suppose we could import one…"

"There'd be as much risk of the prince finding it. No we should find out if the prince's guest has an
allergy to blossoms and send bouquets"

"A Catapult could do... if the trajectory was right it could take him days to swim back."

As the suggestions became wilder and sillier Sesshoumaru relaxed. He could smell sake now and the ministers appeared to have vented the worst of their worries and were settling in to relax for the evening. They soon lost interest in plotting his absence and, for a while, silence held court.

Finally the eldest of the voices commented. "There has been no harm yet, for all that this stranger is unsettling. In two nights the ball will go ahead. The prince will surely choose a princess and we won't need to worry about any of this. On that note I intend to retire for the night."

There were soft noises of fabric and murmured courtesies as the room cleared, leaving Sesshoumaru to his thoughts.

Two nights… Sesshoumaru glanced at the sky and the waning moon. Two nights until the new moon and O-Toyota Mahime's deadline to solve this 'trial'. The taiyoukai remembered Higurashi Kagome's story about the mermaid reduced to bubbles and glowered at the moon. He would not allow such a thing to come to pass.

~o0o~

Chapter End Notes

*Guess where Sesshoumaru had his bath ^_^

* 燕雀鴻鵠 【えんじゃくこうこく】 How can a small bird (a sparrow, a petty person) understand the aspirations of a great bird (a phoenix)? Simply because I love proverbs.
Eggplants and Melons

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The castle was ablaze with activity, strains of music shivered through the night air as the musicians tested their instruments and the fragrance of human cuisine drifted up from the kitchens of the castle.

The sun had just sunk below the horizon and the sky was painted in twilight shades of purple and blue. Sesshoumaru stood at the window of his room, watching the light dim outside. Behind him on the table the tea service had long turned cold and the single cup was untouched.

Higurashi Kagome had made good on her promise of recovery to her advisors – She had woken the morning after her fatigue as energetic as ever but the old men had ensured that she did not get the chance to be left alone with the Taiyoukai again. The preparation for the ball had given them plentiful excuse to keep her away from the pale stranger. There were fittings to be made, menus to be corrected, decorations to be approved and portraits to be viewed.

She had invited the taiyoukai to the event, had repeated the request the few times she had seen him. He had no inclination to attend, even to spite the advisors. Spite was petty and Sesshoumaru had long since had his fill of that emotion over to his brother's heritage.

"I wouldn't dwell too much on such things. You haven't much time left." Sesshoumaru spun on his heel at the unexpected voice behind him. The very oldest of the courtiers was standing in the corner of the room. He had not entered by the door or, Sesshoumaru's own preference of travel, the window, but seemed to have simply manifest in the shadows…. The angles and planes of his face had shifted vaguely, and he was no longer quite the decrepit old man Sesshoumaru had assumed. In fact there was something distinctly familiar about his face and Sesshoumaru found himself remembering the deer youkai from the ocean palace.

The old man's chinese robes were embroidered with tortoises and cranes, a large, ornate fan* was tucked into his belt. He smoothed his moustaches with a gnarled hand and smiled benevolently at Sesshoumaru, ignoring the Taiyoukai's wary frown.

"Yare yare," The old man clucked. "She certainly has work cut out for herself hasn't she. As eggplants won't grow on melon vines*, she can hardly expect a youkai to be a human princesses. Why O-Benten is so intent on you I really couldn't fathom. However you do seem to be stuck on this part of her challenge."

Sesshoumaru felt his hackles rise but stifled his irritation. Again there was the faint incense taste of divine power in the air, almost suppressed but not quite. The taiyoukai wondered if that hint of aura had been purposefully left 'visible', it had not been present earlier when he had spied on the advisors. The old man's eyes twinkled as if he were reading the taiyoukai's thoughts.

"O-Toyota Mahime asked me bring you a message. Though I can't say I encourage you to follow any advice she might give: She has said, should you wish to reclaim your voice, that she has an exchange she is willing to make and will be present on the shore when the moon rises." The old man smoothed his sleeves.

"Whether you decide to accept her offer or not I would advise you to use some haste.- Time and tide wait not for man*, nor Youkai, after all."
The old man bowed with exquisite and formal correctness before turning and letting himself out of
the room, as if he were a mere human, softly closing the door behind him.

Sesshoumaru flexed his claws in thought for a moment, studying the skyline a moment, then,
decided, he turned to the window and reached for the latch.

~00o~

The seaweed lay in great tangles, boldly delineating the border between the salt water and the
seastrand as Sesshoumaru picked his way down to the seashore. Behind him the sound of music
drifted from the great hall as the evening's entertainment commenced. He still wore the pale linen
shirt. Kagome had ordered more clothing for him but the servants, though swift to for fill any task
specific to the prince, had found excuse after excuse to delay provide it to the unwanted guest.
Fortunately the cambric shirt seemed to hold the same virtue as Sesshoumaru's old clothing –
remaining clean and unstained despite constant use.

The moonlight gleamed off his silvery hair and the carefully woven white shirt, glowed on his
dove grey wool trews and his shell pale skin. Had anyone chanced to look down on the beach, they
would have thought him already wrought of seafoam.

The taiyoukai stopped when he reached the ocean edge. The waves hissed about his bare feet,
immediately washing away the pain he had learned to endure. The taiyoukai scowled at the gently
ebbing water and took a step back, denying him self the relief the ocean offered.

There was a genteel snort of derision behind him and Sesshoumaru turned, unsurprised. O-Toyota
Mahime stood on the wet sand, her kimonos a-swirl with slate grey storm winds and waves. Her
expression was at odds with the tempest of her clothing. The sea-witch's mouth was set in a tight,
satisfied smile, though her eyes remained cold and hard.

"Still so stubborn little dog. Is it that you are afraid of wet paws or being free of pain? "

Sesshoumaru twitched an eyebrow and the goddess laughed. "I waive any expectation of an
answer. My isn't this delightful." She circled the Taiyoukai, scrutinising him.

"Well. The girl is of more use than I thought," the sea witch observed wryly. "She did a very neat
mending job. Perhaps mother will have use for her as a temple priestess after all. I had always
thought the girl completely useless..." O-Toyota Mahime tapped her red lips with a mother of pearl
fingernail.

"I suppose you think you have her in hand now. But remember, always, that she is a miko for all
that she is human. She will betray you sooner or later little dog. That is the divine order of the
world – that the holy and pure cast down and destroy the evil and unnatural."

Sesshoumaru did not grant the goddess so much as a flicker of expression in response to her
prediction. O-Toyota Mahime shrugged carelessly and changed the subject.

"Mother was not happy with my bargain with you." The sea goddess played negligently with a lock
of her hair, looking slyly at the Taiyoukai. "You seem to none the worse for it. However I will give
you a chance to win your voice back. Take these." She reached into a sleeve and drew forth a
package wrapped in silk, proffering it.

Sesshoumaru, at her gesture accepted and untied the parcel. Inside were a pair of red shoes, they
glittered the colour of fresh blood. O-Toyota Mahime's expression was eager though something in
her eyes remained cold and cruel.
"The girl will know what they are for…. Give them to her should you wish to speak again…. But she must be overlooking the ocean when you give them to her. That balcony there, perhaps, would be best, before they are given. Haste little hound. Midnight marches closer."

With that a sharp wind sprang up, whistling past Sesshoumaru, to spatter him fiercely with sand and Toyota Mahime was gone.

~o0o~

Kagome found herself hiding behind a plush velvet curtain in one of the anti-chambers of the great hall. She was certain the curtain couldn't hide her for very long but any breathing space was more than welcome as relief. Sesshoumaru hadn't turned up at the ball, she had expected no less, even if a small part of her had been hopeful.

Kagome had spent the last three hours being passed back and forth between advisors, ambassadors and prospective brides. It had taken several hours but finally, finally! She had escaped half way. Now to find a proper exit.

As if in answer to her wishes Kagome felt a draft brush her ankles from further behind the curtain. Slowly, surreptitiously and attempting to move the fabric as little as possible, Kagome followed the wall and finally found the source of the breeze. A set of double doors opened out onto a terrace and freedom… and Sesshoumaru too Kagome realised as she slipped through the door, closing it quietly behind her.

The taiyoukai stood with his back to the door watching the play of moonlight on the ocean. Though he showed no sign of it Kagome knew he was aware of her presence.

Out of the miko's sight Sesshoumaru's hand tightened around the silk wrapped bundle as he weighed up the Sea Witch's bargain against the old man's advice. Tensaiga remained silent at his side, giving no opinion.

Kagome hung back a moment, uncertain if her company would be accepted. Over the last two days she had missed sharing tea with the silent taiyoukai. She didn't expect he had missed her company. Sesshoumaru turned, assessed her ornate court garb and raised an eyebrow in something approaching sympathy and she smiled in relief. His expression was thoughtful but not forbidding.

Unable to help herself Kagome curtsied in her princely clothes and, cheekily, asked Sesshoumaru if he were "inclined to dance". His face immediately expressed distain but with a touch of amusement that she might have imagined.

Kagome laughed apologetically "I didn't expect so. I'm glad to have a break from it myself."

She walked over to the balustrade and, keeping a respectful distance from the dog demon, leant over to watch the water a moment. It looked cold and curled against the cliffs hungrily. She shivered but wasn't sure why.

Sesshoumaru cleared his throat and Kagome looked up startled and noticed the bundle in his hands. He slid it across the balustrade towards her.

"For me?" Kagome carefully picked up the package, unsure of the meaning of the gift. Sesshoumaru had taken a half step back and was watching her expectantly. Hastily she untied the knot that held the silk closed, letting the fabric fall back to reveal a pair of garnet-red embroidered shoes.
"Ah! Ruby slippers!" Kagome clapped the soles of the shoes together with delight. "I know what these are! These should get us home! You put them on and click the heels together three times and say "There is no place like home." three times and then…." Sesshoumaru raised an eyebrow at her excited babble and looked down. Kagome followed his gaze and found herself looking down at his feet, bare feet, dusted with white sand and far, far larger than the shoes. Then at her own feet – which, even in their leather boots, looked of an exact size for the glistening footwear.

"Um… if Sesshoumaru-sama would allow, perhaps if I try it and I hold your… um hand… or even a sleeve, it would carry us both home, and before my advisors try to marry me off to one of those women."

Sesshoumaru stood still a moment then inclined his head.

Kagome kicked off her own boots and hastily pulled the slippers on. "Oh I can't wait to see everyone again… I bet shippo will…." As she lifted her foot to tap the second slipper properly on Kagome reached for the taiyoukai's sleeve but stiffened as the shoe slid into place.

Abruptly she bounced up onto her toes and chasséd away from the taiyoukai, her arms stiffly rising out to gesture, birdlike. Startled Sesshoumaru watched as the miko began to dance, slowly at first, but with increasing speed and an unearthly grace despite the rigidity of her movements. Like a victim of Kitsune-tsuki* the girl seemed to be fighting, without success, some impulse that commanded her to dance across the patio.

With a sinking feeling Sesshoumaru remembered the events prior to the silvery slippers that had compelled him to act against his will in the inn keepers kitchen.

Kagome feet pattered and spun, her hands fluttering as if she were holding fans as she was launched into an energetic dance that passed near the Taiyoukai.

"These aren't the ruby slippers," Kagome panted for breath as she whirled by, "I… I can't kick… them off! I can't stop!"

Sesshoumaru reached for her, intending to lift her off the ground and shake the shoes free but she curved like a willow branch, evading his fingers with an inhuman fluidity. He clicked his teeth in irritation and followed her across the paving stones at his true speed – yet she evaded him! The faster he pursued the faster she danced, only slowing when he did so himself, infuriatingly out of reach. While granted youkai speed and grace by the slippers it did not come without a cost for the girl.

Sesshoumaru felt a predatorial urge to continue pursuit against all consequences but Higurashi Kagome's breath came in sobs now and her feet carried her on, closer and closer to the edge of the cliff beyond the terrace. Her steps becoming wilder and more frantic as she drew nearer the brink.

Waves splashed hungrily against the cliff edge as Kagome whirled along the edge, her eyes wide with fear and she reached for his help with frantic hands.

Sesshoumaru remembered the wind that had carried the Sea Witches' parting words. "A sacrifice little hound, in return for your voice back. If you will not pay tribute to my mother then pay tribute to me."

The cliff edge crumbled beneath Kagome's feet and, face pale and grey eyes wild with fear she tumbled from sight, too breathless to so much as shriek.

Sesshoumaru snarled soundlessly and dived after her, kicking off from the cliff edge in a vain
attempt to catch up with the plummeting girl.

Chapter End Notes

* 寿老人（じゅろじん） Jurojin is another of the seven lucky gods also known as Gama, is often interchangeable with Furuokuju. As with the other god he grants longevity and is symbolized by cranes, deer and turtles. He is often depicted with a fan.
* 瓜のつるに茄子はならぬ (うりのつるになすびはならぬ),- Uri no tsuru ni nasubi wa naranu. Eggplants do not grow on melon vines; an onion will not produce a rose
* 歳月人を待たず (さいげつひとをまたず), saigetsu hito o matazu - Time and tide wait for no man.
* Chassé – a ballet gliding step-together movement – as a child pretending to ride a horse might make.
* 狐憑き or 狐付き (きつすねつき) Kitsune-tsuki The state of being possessed by a fox.
They hit the water in close succession, Kagome without grace, Sesshoumaru like a silver knife, cutting into the water behind her. The girl threshing as soon as she was submerged, trying to reach the surface as the thick velvets of her costume supped up water and pulled her down. Below her Sesshoumaru spasmed as the salt water surrounded him, returning him to merman form.

Coughing bubbles as he began to breath water once more Sesshoumaru batted his hair out of the way, ignoring the minor tremble of his limbs, He grabbed the miko's wrist as she sank past him and felt the familiar bite of her reiki then another energy that surrounded them both. He felt Higurashi Kagome relax slightly under his hand and glance at her. She seemed able to breath now and flashed him a small shaky but grateful smile. The red slippers drifted down into the darkness, their spell broken by the salt water.

Youki, his own youki, solidified in his veins and tingled to his fingertips once again. Sesshoumaru extended his free hand to call upon his energy whip. The weapon sprang into existence eagerly, gold light rippling out into the water.

Kagome fruitlessly kicked and struggled, trying to evade the gleaming strand that drifted like a jellyfish tendril. The whip flicked around her, neatly slicing off the heavy jacket and over vest she wore, allowing them to fall away. Moments before the razor sharp length sliced into the girl’s calf Sesshomaru flicked his fingers, retracting it with immense satisfaction. Kagome had her eyes tightly closed and her free hand covering her face, still braced for the touch of his whip. Sesshoumaru shook her briskly and her eyes popped open. She gave a frightened silent little laugh and looked down to find herself reduced to undershirt and trews. No longer burdened with finery she would have floated upwards but for Sesshoumaru's grip on her wrist.

The taiyoukai glanced around the water, certain O-Toyota Mahime would shortly come to claim her prize. At his hip Tenseiga whined within it's scabbard with a resonance like a temple bell. The sword did not like the salt water at all but it was also a warning noise – something powerful was approaching, something predatory.

A huge shape appeared in the distant water, manifesting into a massive shark. O-Toyota Mahime rode upon it's back. The shark circled them and Kagome cringed behind the taiyoukai. He tightened his grip on her wrist protectively. He would not be submit to these human Goddesses nor any youkai deity.

The shark slowed in the water and O-Toyota Mahime rose from her living throne, her perfect brow wrinkled in irritation.

"Do you now defy my offer little dog? Have you become so fond of the girl as to give such value to her? Or have you made a pet of her? How distasteful – for one such as you are to lay hand on a miko."

Kagome glanced back and forth between the two powers. The sea witch frightened her far more than the shark, and that terrified her, but Sesshoumaru stood, in a manner of speaking, between them and, against all reason, she felt safe.

"You will not bow to my will?" O-Toyota Mahime's voice was perilously soft. Sesshoumaru's expression answered clear enough as his free hand fell to rest on Tensaiga's hilt. "I shall have you bow none the less."
O-Toyota Mahime drew a clawing hand before her and the water around the two began to solidify, as it had when Sesshoumaru last confronted the Sea Witch. But Tensaiga had not been present then. The blade pulsed, eager despite the salt water. The taiyoukai flicked the sword from the scabbard in one swift motion, shattering the death in the water with the keen edge.

"Defiance?" the Sea Witch snapped. "Know your place." With that she used both hands to claw across the water, the light trembled and rippled as blades of energy sheered through the water towards the taiyoukai. Again Tetsaiga flicked out, easily repelling the schisms in the water. But Sesshoumaru was not used to fighting in water and paid the price.

As the water boiled around him, the currents sheering and whirling away from Tensaiga's edge, Sesshoumaru's white mane was caught in the aftermath. The water sliced raggedly through the locks of his glorious long hair close to his head, leaving them to roil away like kelp, twisting abandoned in the current. Kagome unconsciously cried out at the loss. There was a hiss of anger from Sesshoumaru and Kagome flinched away from him, still tethered by his grip on her wrist.

"You….." The word growled out of him, reverberated through the water, the first sound he had made since his first bargain with O-Toyota Mahime. Ki flared around Sesshoumaru, half blinding Kagome, scorching her wrist. Pent up fury had found a release and seemed to be manifesting as pure demonic energy.

The sea goddess's smug expression fell away and her eyes widened. Youki pulsed out through the water as Sesshoumaru, suddenly in full control of his ki, turned on her. A bargain had been satisfied – value for value, loss for loss. The taiyoukai abandoned Kagome to launch himself at the deity.

The instant the Taiyoukai dropped his grip on her wrist Kagome lost her ability to breath. Fortunately whatever magic had allowed her to breath in the water left her with lungs full of air rather than brine. Desperate she clawed for the surface, kicking with all her might to reach fresh air.

Treading water she looked down into the midnight waters beneath her and tried not to think about the shark

There were pulses of glowing light flickering below her, bright despite the depth of the water, becoming faster and more frantic. Kagome trod water, trying to guess how the battle below was going. She wasn't entirely confident that Sesshoumaru would return for her even if he was triumphant. She was about to swim for the cliffs and the shore when Kagome felt as much as heard the terrified shriek of a woman reverberate through the water from below. There was a rumble through the water and Kagome swam as quickly as she could away from the cliff face as large chunks of stone crumbled and fell into the water.

~o0o~

The shark did not impede Sesshoumaru's progress a jot. The moment he sliced through the water intent on the goddess the shark twisted free and fled. O-Toyota Mahime was not so willing to give ground. She called up clouds of ink to obscure the waters. Sesshoumaru answered with his dokkasu, thrilling at the taste of his poison in the water, the salt changing the nuances of the toxins and making the area sparkle with phosphorescence.

The currents roiled against him but Sesshoumaru cut through them with claw and fin. He had been given a fish form that excelled at attack and he did so with a fierce joy.

He ignore the small voice asking what had become of the miko, here was battle, here was retribution, here were his powers anew and Sesshoumaru could think of no better person to use
them upon. O-Toyota Mahime, still furious but unable to counter Sesshoumaru's attacks, began to retreat but he would have none of it. The taiyoukai was intent on the destruction of O-Toyota Mahime for all of the humiliations he had endured.

Her kimono tattered and hair in disarray and ruby blood seeping from countless wounds O-Toyota Mahime finally turned in the water and fled shrieking "Mother! Mother Save me!"

There was a rumble and a pulse of energy through the water, pummelling both of the beings.

"This is Not Acceptable. From either of you." Benten's voice rang out through the water and Sesshoumaru felt the water thicken around him once again. This time Tensaiga would not obey and his brief struggle to escape the water's hold left him twisted in the water facing towards the surface of the water and the distant figure of Higurashi Kagome He noted with a strange sense of betrayal that she was frantically swimming away. As light seemed to fade around he noted a very large fish heading directly for Higurashi Kagome.

~o0o~

Kagome clung to the dolphin's back and trod water as she watched more of the castle’s cliff crumble off into the sea. If it hadn't been for the marine creature's arrival she would still be there, pummelled into the water by the falling chunks of stone, abandoned as she had been by an angry taiyoukai.

"Good luck turning him into sea-foam." She muttered, spitting out a mouthful of salt water.

The tempest still raged further down the coast but, it seemed for now, Kagome was safe.

"How... unexpected." A female voice enunciated crisply from the air behind Kagome.

She turned in the water, startled by the sudden company Kagome lost her grip on the dolphin and submerged again, coming up spluttering and grasping for the slick mammal's dorsal fin.

Standing elegantly on the back of a huge sea turtle was the goddess Benzaiten. Her hair ornamented with crimson boke coral and her dark fabric kimonos were brightened with embroidery of reef life and fish.

Her expression was stormy and new dark clouds seemed to be rolling in from the other direction.

"I had not expected him to be so... resourceful," the goddess remarked. She appeared calm but Kagome could feel power rising off her like a mist of cold fury. "Nor that he would think to use my own domain, even my own daughter to thwart me."

Kagome cleared her throat, resisting the impolite urge to spit the taste of salt from her mouth. "I... By your leave - I think you pushed him too far... Sesshoumaru-dono... he did not appreciate being stranded on the beach, unable to stand. I think that I was there to witness it only made his anger greater..."

The lady's mouth pursed and she fixed Kagome with a sharp gaze. "I do not believe I have pushed him enough. This act of his does not bespeak the humility and reverence I would have him learn."

"What could be more humiliating than being half fish and washed up on a beach?" Kagome scoffed. Then immediately regretted it.

She could almost hear the lady's thoughts as those pale green-grey eyes focused on her. What indeed?
Kagome frantically tried to avert her eyes from the lady's gaze but found, as if transfixed by a snake, that she could not. Once again her thoughts were peeled through, disrupted like the tearing away of the skin of an orange to get at the flesh beneath. The Lady pried into her memories of childhood books. This time there was no gentleness. The Lady's anger, even though it was not directed at herself, burned like salt water in a cut - every intrusion stung.

Unable to find any other way to escape, Kagome's grip on consciousness cut its ties in self-defense and she drifted into darkness.

~o0o~

When Kagome returned to her senses she found herself lying on sand, one side encrusted with the fine grit, and a pounding headache. Evidently the dolphins had gotten sick of trying to hold her up. But she was on solid land and glad of that at least.

There was a rustle of silks very close and she opened her eyes to see kimono hem very close to her.

Wincing as the headache subsided Kagome rolled herself up onto her knees. Benzaiten was standing beside her, holding something.

"Come. You will need this. Eventually. Ensure that you do not lose it."

An ivory and lacquer-work comb was dropped into her lax hand. With numb fingers Kagome picked it up and tightly held it in her hand. Looking up again she saw the lady was waiting expectantly, holding out a hand to help her rise.

Wary of such a friendly gesture after the past few encounters with the entity Kagome slowly extended her own hand and began to rise.

The woman's fingers were soft and surprisingly cool. As Kagome took her first step forward Benzaiten tightened her grip and tugged Kagome forward, startled and off balance she stumbled and woke up...
Kagome stepped into a different place, her leg jarring as the ground was suddenly a foot lower than it had been. Stumbling across the turf she righted herself in time to see a crossbow bounced off the ground beside her as if she had just dropped it. Looking down she realised that her costume had again changed. Now she was dressed in the hunting garb of a western noble, again male.

A piercing cry of pain echoed from above and a large white shape plummeted downward. Now and then it would beat its great wings awkwardly, slowing its spiraling descent slightly before tumbling again.

Kagome looked down at the crossbow. The bolt was missing.

A story where a hunter shoots a swan came to mind…. Coupled with Benzaiten's contained fury.

"Oh! Crap!" Kagome ran for the bird, trying to judge distance and how fast it was falling. She managed to get herself under the feathered mass in time to catch it in her arms, tumbling backwards as she took the momentum of the swan's fall.

"This is Sick! Sick and Twisted." Kagome panted at the swan as she righted herself yet again, still holding it in her arms. It hissed at her, jabbing wildly at her face with its beak, the arrow jutting mercilessly from its thrashing right wing.

Kagome swallowed, mind racing. The overriding thought was how absolutely furious Sesshoumaru must be. Bad enough that his youki would not answer his demands, and he had needed to ask a human for help, but now…

"Ow!" The sharp ribbed edge of the swan's beak tore along the back of her hand, drawing a shallow cut that proceeded to trickle blood over its white plumage.

"Son of a…." Kagome grabbed for the bird's head and wrapped her fingers tightly around the beak, being careful not to cover the swan's nostrils. The bird began to thrash against her hold, spattering them both with flecks of blood.

"I hope you will one day… forgive me for this… this indecent familiarity…Sesshoumaru-dono…" Kagome gasped as she wrestled with the snake-like length of the bird's neck.

"But you need to calm down…” She bodily lifted the swan and tucked its writhing body in against her own, trapping its feet against her hip and gripping most of its neck under her arm. The bird struggled further then stilled, head pressed against her chest. She could feel its heart pounding through its frame, hers too.

"I hope you will forgive me, Sesshoumaru-dono – I understand the humiliation and frustration you must be currently feeling." Kagome spoke as rapidly and as humbly as she could. Cautiously she released some of the pressure that held his beak shut. "…that my strength is currently so much greater than yours, that I am holding you against your will in this fashion, and that you are trapped in a form so different from your own. Please bear with this and I am sure we will solve it soon…"

The bird was breathing heavily, bubbles formed from moisture in its nostrils and it began trembling all over.
Kagome wasn't certain if it was fear or rage. If the bird were Sesshoumaru then she was sure it would be the latter. However the swan's thrashing had finally stopped and Kagome released her hold on the bird's beak entirely, allowing it to open its mouth and pant. Her hand hovered though, poised to grab again should the bird renew its attack. It gaped hissing but did not strike again. With her free hand she carefully brushed back the feathers around the crossbow bolt.

"Again I apologise for this use of force against your person. Once I have tended your wing I will not lay hand on you again." The swan was shivering more noticeably now but no longer struggled against her. Kagome took a deep breath in and released the swan altogether, carefully lowering it to stand on the ground, then took the injured wing gently in both hands to further inspect the damage.

The crossbow bolt seemed strangely thin. There was no sense of reiki or youki – it was just an arrow. Designed to be shot from a crossbow and for killing game. Kagome gritted her teeth and took a hold of the side with the arrowhead.

"Brace yourself if you can my lord. I can only hope this works…" The swan pressed against her side, allowing her to hold its wing out. Kagome readied her grip then exerted as much force as she could, trying to hold the arrow shaft still in the wound.

CRICK…. The wood fractured, the arrow bent, splinters broke free. Sweat trickled of the tip of Kagome's nose and the swan hissed like a kettle, its eyes fixed on the sky.

CRACK! The wood splintered messily, the arrowhead breaking off but leaving jagged edges of sharp wood fibre.

"Ohhhh Kay…." Kagome breathed out slowly. "Next is to get it out…"

Carefully she picked at the fibres, smoothing them back as much as possible then, gently as she could began to turn and slide the shaft back through the torn flesh. The swan had other ideas. As soon as Kagome had begun to coax out the arrow shaft the bird's attention snapped back to the task at hand and, with one sweep of its wing it tore the arrow free, leaving the gaping girl kneeling with half a bloodied arrow in her hand.

"Gah!" Kagome flung herself on the swan, grabbing its wing and plugging the hole on either side with her fingers before too much blood could flow. "That wasn't a clever thing to do! I had it in hand…"

The blood kept trickling from around her fingers and Kagome frowned in consternation. She had nothing on hand to bandage with and the idea of the wound becoming infected worried her. An idea struck her and Kagome concentrated on her reiki the way Sesshoumaru had so briefly shown her. Cautiously she focused on thumb and finger, closing her eyes to imagine the power weaving the flesh tight like a basket. A smile tugged at her mouth, a kagome* weave, one strand, a second, a third, then more folding over each other into an mesh of six-pointed stars, all glowing rose-gold in her minds-eye.

Her fingers began to tingle with the effort and her wrist ached.

The swan made a strange coughing noise and she started back to her surroundings. The sun was lower in the sky and her fingers were white from the pressure she was exerting. She was cold, the swan warm against her side.

A tremor passed through the swan and Kagome slowly released her fingers from the wound. Her hands were cramped and stiff from being held under tension for so long. Beneath her bloody fingers the wound had closed – though it was still pink and tender but for her blood on the feathers.
it could have been weeks old.

Her reiki still swirled around her in a nimbus of gold and pink, stronger and more controlled than it had ever been… but there was no answering pulse of youki from the swan…

The thought struck Kagome – perhaps this wasn't even Sesshoumaru. "Assumptions and Donkeys"
She muttered under her breath.

"I think I may have made a fool of myself." She told the swan sheepishly, one arm still holding it close to her chest.

"I'm going to let go now and - if you've understood a word of what I have said – you won't peck my eyes out… deal?" Steeling herself Kagome released the swan and flung her self backwards.

The bird staggered slightly then drew itself up, its injured wing still hanging slack by its side. The swan stiffened then slowly, with great dignity, pulled the offending limb back into place and fixed Kagome with intelligent gold cat-like eyes.

"Oh Gods" Kagome muttered. "It is Sesshoumaru… and he's not going to forget this… not ever."

Chapter End Notes

* 'kagome' is a lattice basket weave also found in japanese fabric patterns. I read somewhere that it has protective powers but can't find a reference to that. The word is actually made of two kanji and describes the pattern (kago – basket, me-eyes (or holes))
Kagome had given up her nervous fidgeting several hours ago. Now she sat under one of the willow trees, slowly nibbled at the sad remains of an apple core, watching the white shape that appeared and disappeared through the bulrushes on the far side of the watercourse, to all intents and purposes pointedly ignoring her.

They had walked some way over the course of the afternoon. The after-glow of energy that had remained after tending the taiyoukai-bird's wound had since faded into a weary lassitude but she dare not close her eyes lest she sleep.

Moments after Kagome had been roused from her healing trance Sesshoumaru had turned and, there was no other word she could use, he had waddled briskly, at least for a land bound swan, through the forest, straight as an arrow. Having no idea where they were Kagome had hastened to follow, frightened of being left behind. The Taiyoukai had abandoned her more than once before and she was becoming paranoid of it occurring again.

Eventually Sesshoumaru's short-legged but relentless march brought them to a small lake. There, standing on the shore, He had shaken himself like a dog, ruffling all of his feathers up and blinking with the same sort of disorientation Kagome had observed when she had found him standing on the beach. Then he inclined his head looking at the water first out of one eye then the other before stepping down into the water and swiftly paddling away, out into the lake centre. Leaving her alone on the shore.

~o0o~

Sesshoumaru glided along the surface of the small lake, grateful to have some measure of his old grace back, testing the boundaries of the form now inflicted upon him. He avoided going near the miko who had hovered near the waters edge, having shadowed him from the forest's heart. She had initially babbled apologies and regrets with every breath until he had rounded on her, growling through his beak and attempted to chase her off. She had fallen silent, but continued to follow him, almost fearfully, though he had sensed no threat as they travelled. Still she watched him and, if he moved around a corner or out of sight for more than a few moments she noticed the girl would rise and walk around the shore, sitting again somewhere where he remained in line of sight.

~o0o~

Kagome slowly polished off the core of the last of the late fall apples she had found, wishing there was more food. She had discovered a small loaf of bread, a lump of cheese and a cold sausage wrapped in oiled paper in the pouch attached to her belt but had decided to save them as long as possible. She had no idea where to find edible food and wasn't willing to risk sampling the mushrooms she had seen growing abundantly about the forest.

Sitting staring at the fading dazzle of light on the water Kagome briefly contemplated throwing the fibrous remains of the apple core into the water but thrift, and hunger, intervened. She nibbled on, eating it all but the pips. There was no way of knowing when or how she was going to find more food. Especially since she'd seen no sign of human habitation in their afternoon trek.

The sun was setting. Standing she brushed down her clothing, walked down to the shore and crossed her fingers. Watching the water with far more intensity than she had in the last three hours. Sesshoumaru, drawn by curiosity, casually swam closer to see what it was she was waiting for.
Night fell as moon began to rise. As the last hues of dusk faded from the sky and the moonlight became the dominant source of illumination the swan form in the shallows of the lake rippled, shivered and drew up upon itself. The feathers shimmered like scales then sparkled away, leaving Sesshoumaru standing calf deep in water, wearing a fine white tunic and leggings which promptly wicked water up to his knees. His hair was still short and ragged, most of it less than shoulder length, and it wiped out softly in uneven tufts, almost like swan down itself.

He waded to shore, kicking off the soft leather slippers that were full of silt.

Kagome knelt on the shore facing him, her head bowed low and hands lightly resting on the ground in front of her.

"Sesshoumaru-sama I apolo-"

"Enough Miko." Sesshoumaru's tone still held some of the throaty hiss of a swan's voice. "Get up. No more of this. You know of this tale. Tell it."

Kagome, startled by his voice, so long silent, remained prostrate a moment too long and Sesshoumaru nudged her with his bare, wet foot, almost pushing her over. "Get up and speak to this Sesshoumaru's face. This Sesshoumaru will not have you give his answers to the dirt."

Kagome looked up startled and almost apologised again. The semi-camaraderie she had developed with the taiyoukai whilst in the castle, carefully forged over many cups of tea was gone. His eyes were hard and his expression stony.

You did shoot him with a crossbow before you healed him, or so he might believe. Her memory offered. You shouldn't be that surprised that he doesn't think well of you right now. Kagome drew a breath and focused on answering his question to the best of her ability. If she had to re-win his trust then so be it. She just hoped it would be easier the second time around.

"Sesshoumaru-sama : the story comes from a ballet… A story danced on a stage." She sat back on her heels, and held his gaze as best she could, no longer trying to alter the telling of the tale to salve his dignity– she would give him full honesty from now on. "In the tale I know there are many swans, one is a princess, the others her ladies in waiting. They were put under a spell by an evil sorcerer. Um…"

Sesshoumaru inclined his head, indicating he was listening, that she should continue, though a slight frown creased his brows at being in a female role again.

"Unfortunately, until the spell is broken, the princesses turn back into swans at dawn each day. I remember that bit from the dancing." A slight smile crossed the girls face at the memory and the taiyoukai noticed that there was still blood spattered there in places.

Sesshoumaru's face and stance had relaxed almost imperceptibly during the recitation of the tale and it prompted Kagome to add "On the up side: at least you're no longer stuck in a dress."

Sesshoumaru's face became stony again at the potentially mocking remark. He tossed the fine silk scarf that had draped across his shoulders into her lap. "Wash your face, then tell me all of this tale."

Kagome dipped the end of the sash in the water and mopped at her face, surprised at seeing the rusty red blood on the cloth. As she continued talking she focused on thoroughly rinsing the fabric with each lathing to prevent any chance of staining.
"I don't know much more than that I am afraid Sesshoumaru-sama. I saw it as a very young child. The princess and her attendants were all turned into swans by an evil sorcerer. They turned back to humans at night. A prince nearly kills the princess but they fall in love and he goes and... " Kagome's brow furrowed at the gap in her knowledge. "He goes and defeats the sorcerer. And there is a lot of dancing... and sequined dresses."

"'Sequined'"? Despite his intention to remain aloof from the girl Sesshoumaru rolled his tongue over the unfamiliar word, curious.

Kagome's lip quirked sheepishly. "Sequins are little flat metal disks stitched onto clothing, so they glitter." She gestured largely at the sky with a hand. "Like the stars, or hot coals, or sunlight on water. They use them for costumes for theatre."

"Hn." Sesshoumaru glanced at the sky and shivered. Kagome blinked, startled. It certainly wasn't cold. The taiyoukai shivered all over again and seemed a little bewildered himself.

"I... South... There is a need to go South..." Sesshoumaru's voice was uncharacteristically young and bewildered. He took an unconscious half step in that direction. Kagome looked up worried, studying his face. There was something vague and unfocused about his eyes and the slight breeze ruffled his ragged hair up like feathers, making him all the more unworldly. A third shiver and the taiyoukai snapped back to himself, fixing Kagome with a sharp glare. She averted her gaze.

"This Sesshoumaru goes South. Now." Sesshoumaru turned on his heel and strode in that direction, leaving Kagome to follow or be left behind. She scrambled after him, snatching up her shoes and pulling them on with haste, surprised that the taiyoukai had chosen to inform her of his intention in any fashion.

Kagome managed to keep up with the taiyoukai until the moon fell below the tree line. While there was moonlight she could easily make out the pale form of the taiyoukai and the lay of the ground before her. He moved in a straight line, Brush and brambles irritably sliced asunder by his claws, making it easy to follow in his wake. But when the moon sank there was nothing but darkness. After tripping over twice and stumbling into a briar patch a bruised and scratched Kagome found herself alone in the dark.

She turned, listening. Insects chirped, night birds called, in the distance the occasional sound of splintering wood reverberated, gradually growing fainter as Sesshoumaru moved further away. Kagome drew in a deep breath.

"See... Sesshoumaru-sama?" There was silence. The night creatures listened with her. She tried again, louder. "Sesshoumaru-sama? Please don't leave me behind! I... I can't see."

Silence. Then insects, frogs, birds resumed their night-noises, the wind stirred the leaves softly. Nothing more.

Kagome sank into a weary crouch then and there, hunched over she contemplated bursting into tears but fell asleep before she got a chance. She woke, stiff and cold on the ground to the sound of bird calls in the predawn light. As she rolled over, brushing the leaf litter from her hair she saw she was no longer alone. Sitting, waiting under a tree, eyes closed and his brow slightly creased in irritation, was Sesshoumaru.

"Thank y-"

"Enough. Get up." Sesshoumaru rose gracefully and Kagome staggered to her feet, as he turned to leave. Midstride the light changed, the air brightened and Kagome's prediction about
Sesshoumaru's swan state was confirmed. Brief and lustrous, the taiyoukai glowed and dwindled, in the space of a breath. Motes of light flickered and dispersed as fabric became feathers. The water bird rose up, shook himself and hissed angrily. Again that shiver and with slightly glazed eyes the taiyoukai-swan stumbled on large webbed feet Southwards. Kagome hastened to follow.

~o0o~

The middle of the day found Sesshoumaru's broad webbed feet, supremely suitable for swimming, worn to blisters and bleeding by walking across unforgiving ground, through dense vegetation and across rocky outcrops. He would not slow or avoid obstacles but threw himself at them with a pent up rage. Kagome's feet in their boots fared only a little better. Though the taiyoukai did not seem able to speak in bird form he certainly understood. Her one foolish suggestion: that they travel at a slower speed to suit his leg length had been reprimanded with Sesshoumaru hissing at her and lunging forward to harry her on at a faster pace. The real punishment for Kagome was in watching the white bird struggle on ahead of her, pushing himself harder than she could bear to watch. When possible she would walk behind the taiyoukai, hoping he would relinquish the pace, for his own sake more than her own.

Sesshoumaru finally allowed them to stop when they came across a stream fed pond. Both girl and bird drank thirstily and lathed their feet in the water. When the swan began to turn South wards again Kagome drew breath a deep breath and spoke.

"Sesshoumaru-sama if you would please listen a moment." The swan bent it's neck and fixed her with one sharp amber eye, waiting. "I'm not certain how strong your inclination to go South...
Kagome winced internally, "... if you would allow me to continue to follow you. I think it best if we... if I might rest a bit during the day and we travel when you are..." She bit her lip but ploughed on, "in a form better suited to it. I... I can't see well at night but I will do my best..."

The swan regarded her for a moment, narrowed its eyes, then shook his feathers and turned his back on her, stepping back into the stream and paddling out into the water again, his action indicating they would not leave until moonrise. Kagome let out a sigh of relief and bowed gratefully on the bank. Keeping an eye on the taiyoukai lest he change his mind she turned her attention to lunch, such as it was. She had polished off the last crumbs of cheese the day before, hadn't had a chance to break fast yet, and now trembled with hunger.

With a sigh she took the dry loaf from her belt pouch and broke off a chunk and, after dampening it in the stream, and, repressing a shudder, ate the soggy bread, nasty as it was, along with another drink of water. The bread filled her stomach. Kagome tried offering some of the crumbs to Sesshoumaru but he looked disdainfully at them and went back to foraging through the shallows, sending minnows skimming through the water away from his stabbing beak.

She dozed off while watching him tearing into some sort of waterweed. Her tired mind bemused to see the taiyoukai eat anything at all. He did seem to relish it and she wondered, as her eyes drifted closed, what chance there was it was edible.

~o0o~

Kagome was woken by a foot poking her again. Sesshoumaru stood over her, the sun had set and the moon risen. She saw with relief his feet were healed, in fact he seemed to glow with more energy than before. She bobbed her head in greeting and hastened to follow as he set off through the twilight without glancing back.

Kagome was stumbling by the time they stopped. Sesshoumaru had finally relented after the moon
set, and had deigned to guide her, he holding one end of the silk sash and she the other. They made camp just before dawn, fortune placing them by another waterway. As Kagome sank to the ground she chirped up, remembering another tale.

"I remembered, I do know another story about swans Sesshoumaru-sama. Which may account for us travelling south. That story had seven, seven brothers cursed by a stepmother. They flew south to escape winter with their sister, who had to sew seven shirts out of nettles. She wasn't allowed to speak until they were finished or they would never change back. I don't think we're in that tale though…"

Sesshoumaru huffed through his nose and turned away to survey the changing colours of the Eastern sky. "You would have doomed all to a feathered eternity."

Kagome grinned grateful of the slight thaw in his manners. "I admit I'm not good at keeping quiet. I would like to think I can when it's important."

Sesshoumaru turned back and looked down his long nose at her, a ghost of humour in his tone. "Try."

Kagome grinned at the challenge in the half light and snuggled down into a pile of dried leaves at the base of a tree. "Fine. Good night" There was a swan's hiss of irritation behind her and Kagome smiled to herself. In inciting the challenge she had won a small victory.
Still tongues gather no moss

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next night when Sesshoumaru shook off his swan form Kagome didn’t speak. Not a word, not a whistle. The following evening when Sesshoumaru stepped out of the waters and she nodded a polite greeting but again said nothing, continuing to focus on the fire she was trying to light. He stood and watched her until the sky began to darken and she gave up, choosing to eat the bamboo shoots she had found raw as she followed him further South.

The Taiyoukai almost lost track of her in the forest several times – she did not call out when he drew ahead, or ask for him to stop. She just doggedly kept following south until it became too dark to see and then sat down to wait until he returned to lead her. In silence.

The following day, before when they stopped for dawn, Sesshoumaru looked at her and twitched an eyebrow Kagome arched an eyebrow back with twinkling determination, even as she nibbled on the last portion of sausage she had left. There were times when she was sure he was about to ask her something but he didn’t say a word. And so neither did she.

Two days later, having not found anything to eat in that time more substantial than bamboo shoots, Kagome relented, knowing that she couldn’t outwait the taiyoukai if he had decided to take the challenge seriously. She cleared her throat and knelt, bowing.

“Sesshoumaru-sama…” He half turned towards her, one of his eyebrows twitched. There might have been the upward tightening at the corner of his mouth, Kagome didn’t care. She felt dizzy with hunger now and ‘the game’ wasn’t funny anymore, hadn’t been for the last day and a half but stubbornness had made her hold out. She suppressed the irritation she felt, knowing it was really directed at herself for instigating the challenge in the first place. “Please Sesshoumaru: I need to find food. I can’t live on bamboo shoots and I don’t recognise anything edible here. Will you help me?”

Sesshoumaru blinked and reassessed the girl. She was not wasting words and that alone gave him pause for thought, might have almost worried him, had he chosen to care. Instead he focused on her bowed head, noting the hollowness of her cheeks, the slight sharpness about her frame was not simply caused by the night shadows and the mounting fatigue that sleeping during the day had not cured. She had been modestly wiry when the goddess had whisked them together but now the girl looked gaunt.

Kagome blinked and found she had been half napping, even as the Taiyoukai had been observing her. It had been his sudden movement that jarred her back to wakefulness.

The Taiyoukai had been standing before her one second and then at the waters edge in the next. Crouching he flicked a hand into the stream, removing a sizable fish with barely a splash. Another deft snapping motion of his hand and the frantic threshing of the fish was stilled. Turning back to the human girl he held it out, letting it fall into her lap.

Kagome just managed to catch the offering without dropping it. “Th.. Thank you?”

“Hnn.” Sesshoumaru turned away, turning South, as if to study the horizon beyond the forest. “Eat swiftly. I will wait until you have finished, then we depart.”
Kagome bowed again awkwardly cradling the dead fish in her arms. There was no way she would get a fire made in short time and she wasn’t going to give Sesshoumaru reason to regret the concession of time he had just granted her.

_Sashimi, just like sashimi, just with less rice… Rice._ Her stomach growled and with clumsy fingers Kagome did her best to quickly scale, gut and part the fish flesh from the bone. She was grateful of her sharp hunting knife but dearly wished for a cutting board and a proper filleting knife.

The raw fish was mana. Kagome was too hungry to be squeamish and, fresh from the water as it was, she gave no thought to food poisoning or bacteria. After a day and a half of sparse vegetables the solid meal in her stomach was as good as a half day’s rest and she bounced up with most of her old energy to clean her knife and hands.

“Um. Thankyou, again.” Kagome rubbed her hands and, getting no reply, began heading roughly south without another word.

Sesshoumaru blinked in mild surprise then followed, swiftly over taking her, his path resetting them in the correct direction. Kagome was able to catch a glimpse of his expression as he passed, there had been bemusement but, she hoped she had seen right, perhaps a hint of satisfaction too.

~o0o~

During the day Sesshoumaru found himself taking note of those water plants that he had seen Rinneat. Once or twice he had contemplating fetching some for the girl sitting on the river bank but disregarded the thought. He was not going take on the task of foraging for her. RinnRinn was a third her age and was more than competent at the task. Higurashi Kagome would learn to be the same. He glanced over at the shore. She had found more bamboo shoots proving him right. Snorting he turned and paddled further along the rushes. Only to find a fine fat, fish swimming, enticingly beneath his feet, careless of his presence.

Sesshoumaru had found days ago that his swan form had no hunger for flesh. It irked him, not that he felt any real hunger for tangible foods when there was so much natural ki flowing around. Water plants and tubers were all he found himself inclined to eat when he wore feathers but the memory of the fish flesh he had tasted beneath the ocean and the sudden chance to attack something spurred him after the carp* and he dove for it with gaping beak.

~o0o~

The water threshed and Kagome jolted upright, spilling the shoots she had been peeling. Sesshoumaru was struggling with something almost as large as himself, causing the waters to froth and churn.

Even as she watched Sesshoumaru was heading for the bank, backwards, towing some great threshing grey object with him. As he got closer she realised it was a fish and Sesshoumaru was fixated on getting it back to the shore.

The swan inu-youkai scrabbled through the shallows, dragging the fish behind him, gripping it by a flapping fin with his serrated beak. His eye rolled toward Kagome and he hissed around his mouthful. Interpreting his command she splashed into the water and grabbed at it clumsily. They managed to haul it up onto the bank before Kagome’s feet slipped on the grass as she lost her grip and sat down abruptly. The fish began to flap back toward the water but Sesshoumaru made a sharp yapping noise then plunged his beak through the fish’s eye socket. The creature flipped once more then was still.
Kagome sat panting, looking at the carp. Light glistened along its fat sides, reflecting of the edges of the mud coloured scales. “This is an amazing fish Sesshoumaru-sama. Um. What did you want it for?"

Sesshoumaru looked at the fish corpse a moment as if weighing up what to do with it. Now that it was dead he seemed to have entirely lost interest. His ruffle and reshuffle of feathers seemed to indicate he felt it was her problem now. This was further indicated when he turned his back on the both of them and headed back towards the river to see if he could find something else to kill.

Kagome stared at the fish. She had a whole afternoon to cook it if she could get a fire going. “I don’t suppose you’d help me make a fire…”

Sesshoumaru evidently heard her, he snorted water from his beak and glowered his shoulder at her at her as he stepped back to the water.

Kagome sat looking at the fish. A fly buzzed past, turned in the air and began to land on the carcass. Kagome shooed it away possessively. After poking the fish several times to ensure it was really dead, she submerged it in the shallows with a rock before going to find dry kindling.

The better part of an hour later, having had no success whatsoever with making a fire by mundane means, Kagome found herself remembering the way she had concentrated her reiki to mend Sesshoumaru’s aura. Perhaps she could use her own ki to start a fire, or at least heat the wood enough to help her get a blaze going. Cooked fish. Her mouth watered at the thought.

Kagome crouched near her pile of wood and concentrated. Her reiki tingled, sputtered, faded, then gradually pooled in her finger tips as she worked through the memories of how Sesshoumaru had helped her focus her reiki before. Her fingertip began to feel hot as they had back then. She closed her eyes and envisioned them glowing, imagined them beginning to scorch the wood, like a coal. A stray thought distracted her as she also remembered Sesshoumaru’s long cool fingers around her wrist. Flushed Kagome fuelled her embarrassment into her fingertips, the glow of her cheeks and ears sizzling through into her fingers. The wood erupted into flame and she let out a whoop of triumph.

Chapter End Notes

*锦鯉 (にしきごい) nishikigoi Cyprinus carpio Or the common carp. The ornamental versions can be seen in Koi ponds all over the place. These can be an incredibly invasive species outside of their native lands and are a real problem here in Australia where they stir up the mud, breed like rabbits and destroy waterway ecosystems. The suckers also get huge. Some are seriously big fish – they can weigh over 40kg. Swans are vegetarian so a carp wouldn’t be expecting to tussle with one.
The addition of fish to Kagome's diet marked an improvement in her endurance and in Sesshoumaru's temper. The opportunity to kill things, even so paltry an opponent as a fish gave him an outlet to vent frustration and Kagome had more fish than she could eat. A routine began to form, beginning with a hard march south from dusk to dawn and finishing with setting camp by a watercourse, if one was found. Usually followed by fish terminations and Kagome's improving skill at fire lighting. Conversation, of a sort, had become almost common. "I wonder what has happened to Tenseiga..." Kagome pondered aloud as she tugged at the lacings of her boots. The night was near done and though there was no sign of a waterway Sesshoumaru had indicated they would pause for the day by gracefully dropping to sit at the base of a tree. "The last few tales it's arrived in the story with one or another of us..." She flexed her hand, remembering the eager buzz of youki from the sword, the way it had vibrated through the bones of her fingers. A shiver danced across her spine at the memory. Sesshoumaru watched the fading stars in silence. She had almost forgotten she had asked the question out loud when he answered. "My father's sword will find it's way back as it has several times before. I cannot be rid of the useless thing."
Kagome bit her tongue on a comment then decided to voice it anyway. "I don't think O-Tensaiga is useless. It helped me greatly when I was bargaining with the Kyoujin." Sesshoumaru raised an eyebrow but did not question further for which Kagome was unspeakably grateful. They watched the cold dawn break in silence, a tentative truce having been reestablished.

A cold wind laced with chips of sleet, fierce as wolf teeth, hammered on the far side of the hollow tree Kagome and the swan-formed Sesshoumaru had taken cover in. Heavy dark clouds had rolled in shortly after mid morning and had sent Kagome scurrying for cover. Sesshoumaru had followed her when the hail started. The swan-taiyoukai did not appear to feel the cold but Kagome was freezing. She pulled the threadbare cloak in closer to herself and willed her teeth to stop chattering, trying not to think of extra socks, self-warming cans of coffee and kotatsu*. A particularly violent sneeze rocked her frame and she cursed as she wiped her nose on her sleeve, trying to curl herself further into the back of the hollow. Sesshoumaru, dozing near the entrance, roused and blinked sleepily. Kagome sneezed again eruptively and sniffed, muttering an apology. The swan stretched, shook his feathers then delicately stepped up on to her knee. Kagome had a brief, terrified remembrance of the tale of 'Leda and the Swan' and hastily tried to stand, bumping her head on the wall of the tree, sitting down again abruptly. Sesshoumaru wobbled and nearly fell, hissing at her and stomped his feet on her thigh through the cloak as if he were perching on a particularly irritating log. He didn't seem to register her brief panic and imperiously tight-rope walked up her leg until he was almost resting against her torso. The swan-youkai fluffed feathers and tucked his long neck into the plumage of his back and sank into a crouch perched on her leg. The warmth of his feathers gradually soaking through her clothing and Kagome dared to snuggle a little closer. "I hope you don't have mites"
The swan huffed irritably but did not rouse. He seemed more personable as a bird. A lot more personable even when not a swan these last few days. He was also now blocking most of the draft from the entrance and Kagome found her self gradually warm enough to drift off to sleep.
Kagome woke in darkness. Outside she could hear the sleet still lashing down. It had to be late in the night and yet Sesshoumaru had not woken her to move on. A momentary panic seized her: had he left her behind? Then there was a faint stirring of fabric and Kagome held her breath, listening. As she lay still she realised there was a warm presence at her back, a solid lump of heat that she had firmly wedged her shoulder against in her sleep. She didn't dare look, wouldn't have been able to see anything in the dark, but a warm glow bubbled up in her chest. Sesshoumaru was letting her wait out the weather.

~o0o~

The blizzard passed during the next day, leaving Kagome well rested and Sesshoumaru eager to be away. Everything was crusted in white frost and ice. The few small water-courses they passed appeared frozen solid in the moonlight.

Then they came upon The Lake.

Beyond it, situated close to the bank, with lights reflecting in the waters, was a castle with surrounding township. Between there and where Kagome and Sesshoumaru stood there was forest, marsh and rising mist.

A soft rippling of the waters surface caught Kagome's eye and she looked for the source, drawing a startled breath when she found it. Suddenly there, bathed in moonlight, were eleven very young girls standing in the shallows. Eleven children, none older than Rin, each clad in a thin gown of white silk and feathers. As Sesshoumaru turned to look upon them they all curtseyed low, remaining there, knee deep in ice water.

"Quick! Come out!" Kagome yelped to them, reaching for the nearest, as she herself waded out into the chill pond, "Come out of the water, you'll catch your deaths standing there."

The children looked to Sesshoumaru, at his slight inclination of head they curtsied again and obeyed.

There was something almost eerie in the silence but his companion didn't seem to notice. Kagome was almost frantic, chaffing hands, feeling foreheads and scooping up every piece of nearby wood in reach to make a fire. Sesshoumaru stood aloof watching. The children seemed to have taken no harm from the water.

He scented the air. They did not seem to be youkai. Their scent was human enough, considering the amount of feathers surrounding them all... but their composure was unnatural.

Then one child stirred as though waking up, shivered, a second followed, a third let out a soft birdlike keening sound and they all drew closer, clustered together around his feet like ducklings.

"Enough. Silence!" Sesshoumaru barked and they obediently went quiet. Still but for a shiver that now ran through all eleven of the swan maidens.

There was a sharp "Fwump" and a small burst of flame behind him, reflecting off the trees, indicating Kagome had gotten the fire lit. The pulse of reiki that accompanied the blaze set Sesshoumaru's teeth on edge. She was not happy with the situation.

Like a mother hen she shepherded the young girls away from Sesshoumaru, chivvying them over to the fire, firing off questions about names and parents. The children mutely shook their heads but allowed them selves to be fussied over in silence. Sesshoumaru frowned into the darkness, looking towards the lights and their reflections in the distance.

~o0o~

Kagome sat staring at the fire for some time trying to figure out what the presence of the children meant to their own situation. They had made camp in a sheltered lee of the lake shore – in the distance on the far side of the water the twinkle of lanterns indicated the presence of a town of some size. The eleven children seemed to set them definitely into the swan princess story she remembered. But she wasn't sure exactly what her own part was in it.

When the sun glimmered on the horizon Kagome woke surrounded by fuzzy grey cygnets. Taking a fortifying breath she decided on her course for the day and turned to the irritable white swan
who, in humanoid form, had stood guard through the night. She extricated herself from the young swans and brushed off her knees feeling guilty for what she was about to do.
"I am going to walk down to the town now."

Sesshoumaru straightened and glowered the miko, feathers hackled. Kagome took a deep breath and put her hands on her hips, ready with her argument. "There's no use waiting until tonight – there isn't likely to be anyone around to question. You won't want them following us and I won't leave eleven young girls alone in the forest at night. During the day I can go down and find out what I can quick enough. You can't as a swan." Sesshoumaru hissed and snaked his head at her, his hackles not quite so bristled.
Kagome ticked off points on her fingers. "Look you have to stay with them Sesshoumaru-sama. I'm no use if anything happens here – at least as you are now you can lead them off into deeper water. I know they're a part of this story, they might be important for us too. I don't have your abilities but I can do this at least. I should be able to find out what we need to know and get back before sunset."
Sesshoumaru snorted irritably and turned his head away but his feathers had relaxed back into place.
Kagome, taking it as leave to do as she would, bowed deeply.
"I promise I'll be back as soon as I can!" She turned on her heel and, swinging her threadbare cloak over her shoulders, headed off for the town at a trot.

~o0o~

Chapter End Notes

* Kotatsu (こたつ) A low table with a quilt over it and a heater under it used in winter. Very warm but, according to a friend of mine who is an engineer and pulled one apart once: the wiring is often really dodgy and they are a major cause of house fires.
It took Kagome less time to reach the city than she had expected. Despite having to pass through marsh and boggy ground Kagome found she now automatically found the game trails and pathways along solid ground. Not once did she fall into the water, or slip into the mire, though she did have a few close calls.

Despite her expectations the only thing spattered with mud remained her boots and the cuffs of her breeches. She reached the town gates as pristine as one could be having camped out rough for as long as she had.

As she neared the town gates, now one of many people, on foot, horseback and driving carts of raw goods, she found she could smell cooking rice over the dust and other smells. Her stomach growling she quickened her pace, expecting to have to justify her passage to the two guards who flanked the entrance way.

They barely gave her a glance, waving her through when she hesitated before the open heavy timber gates. Having been half expecting to be recognized as someone of importance on reaching the town Kagome didn't know whether to be relieved or disappointed. Shaking her head at her vanity Kagome was about to head straight for the castle when the beguiling aroma of freshly cooked rice drifted past her again.

Casting a glance at the towering walls of the castle Kagome rationalised:

*There is no certainty who ever is up there will even see me immediately. It is first thing in the morning the nobles might not be up yet…*

Another breeze drifted past her carrying the smell of miso and red meat grilling with spice and making her stomach make up her mind for her.

Kagome rattled the coins in her pouch, certain that she had more than enough for both a meal for herself and more rice to take back for the cygnets. Money had been useless in the wild but here she could use it for all of them.

Breakfast first. Then she would go to the castle. She might even learn something important in whichever eatery she decided on. Kagome gave in to temptation.

~o0o~

Sesshoumaru coasted lazily across the water surface, keeping one eye on the cygnets as they foraging in the shallows and the other on the shore for potential predators.

There had been an incident earlier in the day, some time after Higurashi Kagome had left, which had left him more than wary of what might be hidden in the dense reeds and marsh flowers.

The young swans had just been stepping into the water when one of the smaller cygnets, had been ambushed by a mink. Sesshoumaru had seen the movement in the shadows well before the child but had but recognised it as threat until the beast sprang. The small, savage carnivore bounded out of the undergrowth, latching sharp teeth into the swan-child's neck, attempting to drag her back into the bushes. Sesshoumaru had been startled by the insolence of the animal but at the frightened shriek of the cygnet he found himself moving forward, a trumpet of fury resonating from his throat as defended his new wards.

Despite his ungainly form, thoroughly unsuited to fighting, Sesshoumaru launched himself at the
weasel, bowling the other cygnets out of the way as, with precision, he slammed his beak into the animal's side, trying to make it lose it's grip on the cygnet without further tearing her flesh. The mink squealed as the breath was knocked from its lungs and released the cygnet. Turning as it fell the mustelid landed in a crouch, unwilling to give up its meal. Sesshoumaru stepped over the prone child, placing himself between her and the mink. He did not mantle his feathers, hiss or glower at the carnivore. He did not threaten or attempt to warn it off - Sesshoumaru moved forward to kill and the mink, recognising this fled into the undergrowth, faster than any swan could pursue.

Sesshoumaru sighed through his nostrils, setting the memory aside, and tucked his wings higher, holding the injured cygnet in place on his back. She slept soundly after her fright. As far as he could tell the child was not greatly injured. He was certain Higurashi Kagome would be able to heal whatever wound the cygnet has sustained- as the miko had done so for his own wounds. Sesshoumaru dipped his beak and dabbled at the water surface in thought.

He had surprised himself by attending to the injured cygnet at all. They were important to the story Higurashi Kagome had said, but that did not explain why he had found himself scooping the child onto his back with a wing and chivvying all the others out into the safety of the water again. Perhaps such responsibility was an inherent part of the swan form he currently wore… He had never been so solicitous with Rinn. A small stir behind his breastbone caused him to blink in surprise at the thought bubbled up from that shivery sensation. Perhaps I should have… perhaps in future...

Sesshoumaru jerked his head up, shaking it thoroughly to clear away the unfamiliar sensation and alien thoughts. He did not, however, shake the sleeping cygnet from his back.

~00o~

Sesshoumaru ruffled his sun-warmed feathers and turned an amber eye towards the sun, marking its progress across the sky towards the horizon. Higurashi Kagome should have returned by now. The cygnets were all resting on an islet away from the shore whilst Sesshoumaru patrolled the shallows, watching for some sign of the girl's return.

He had thought about leading the cygnets closer to the town but dismissed the idea. Higurashi Kagome would look for them here first and he had established their safety here in this part of the lake. Not for the first time he regretted the loss of his canine nose whilst in this form.

There was a stirring in the deep reeds and Sesshoumaru straightened, craning his neck, expecting to catch sight of the familiar colours of Kagome's travel stained red jacket. Instead he saw three men in green mottle, then a fourth and a fifth, searching the reed beds intently and very quietly for humans. They carried bows and game bags. Hunters. Sesshoumaru's eyes narrowed as he watched their movements and he remembered the sting of the arrow in his wing. They had not seen him yet – would not if he had any say in the matter.

He ducked back down, sculling in closer to the shadows of the overhanging vegetation, careful not to cause sound. He knew he was a vibrant white against the water, stealth would stand him in best stead until he found out what these humans were searching for.

For some time there was no sound but their searching then, softly.

"Nothing. Not a feather."

"There's a dead mink here. Fresh."

"Bag it then."
There was a rustling of burlap and fur. Sesshoumaru glided in closer, it seemed his strike to the animal had been mortal after all. He did not bother dwelling on satisfaction: The humans were gathering again, slowly but with less stealth now. Their movements had not flushed any game and they seemed to assume they were alone.

"Swans'd be out in the open if they were anywhere. At night they might be on one of them grass islands just out there on shore..."

"Think it’s a bit of a wild goose chase."

"She said they'd be by the shore, somewhere near a patch of white water bloom. Twelve fine fat swans for the table she said."

Sesshoumaru's eyes hardened as he glanced at the clusters of icy white water lilies near him. He remembered how Kagome had twirling one between her fingers.

His first, brief, thought was that Higurashi Kagome had sent the men but instinct and the memory of her tending the children did not accept this easy betrayal.

"It's the wrong time of year for swans." One of the hunters said irritably.

"Well She said she saw them as she passed the lake. Wants them for t'night."

There was a honking noise above them and six sets of eyes, five human, one not, scoured the sky. A flock of swans glided across the sky, grey as storm clouds, drifted down towards the lake.

"Well I’ll be damned! Swan - And in this season too. We’re not going to get them on the water. Come nightfall they’ll go to ground. We’ll bag them then."

“Good thing swan cooks faster than beef.” One of the hunters jested

Sesshoumaru's jaw tightened and his eyes flickered up to the sky. The light was dimming but twilight could not come soon enough.
Kagome put her rice bowl down for the final time with a sigh of pleasure and smiled her thanks to the serving girl on the far side of the room who was collecting dishes. Beside her, wrapped in bamboo leaves and packed into a simple woven box were twenty-two large rice balls. Next to the box was a jar of pickled vegetables. It had been a productive morning and Kagome looked forward to returning to the far side of the lake and what she had learned with Sesshoumaru.

Most of the gossip that flowed around her was inconsequential – local scandals and match making, opinions on the weather and the price of foodstuffs in the markets. Amidst the humdrum though Kagome was informed that there was to be a ball at the castle that night to celebrate The Prince's coming of age and pending coronation. That the black banners and panels of paper she had noticed on many doors about the area were due to the King having recently passed on and that The Prince was expected to announce his bride to be at the event. A little careful steering of conversations had also informed Kagome that yes: The Prince did enjoy hunting and yes: there was rumour of a wicked magician in the area who was thought to spirit away young women who ventured out at night.

Thoroughly satisfied Kagome lingered over her fourth cup of green tea and began plotting how they could get Sesshoumaru into the castle, whether they would need to find a dress to fit him and what to do with the cygnets in the mean time. Her thoughts were interrupted.

"Sir, You are expected at the castle."

Kagome blinked and turned up to look at the uniformed man who now stood rigidly beside her, she then glanced around the room incase he was addressing someone else.

"The Prince wishes the presence of his Valet. Immediately."

"Um… Me?" Kagome rose uncertainly, gathering her packages. "Are you sure?"

"With haste please Sir. You were expected to return last night."

Casting a last glance in the direction of the town gates and the lake Kagome followed the guard, hoping that she wasn't heading into hot water and that her morning's luck would last.

~o0o~

The prince lay propped up in bed, dreamily looking out the window, a breakfast tray lay before him on the coverlet, contents half eaten. He did not appear to have undressed the night before and his jacket was rumpled.

As Kagome sidled into the room and the door closed behind her the prince sat up eagerly, gesturing her closer.

"At last! Valet! Where have you been? You know I dreamt of her again last night…"

Kagome made a non-committal noise hoping the prince would elaborate since she was evidently meant to know what he was talking about. To cover her uncertainty she poured water from the ewer beside his bed into the basin while trying to remember exactly what it was valets did apart from parking cars and hoping it wasn't anything too personal.

"It was as though I were there again, riding in the forest with her. I cannot remember what she said
in the dream. Something sad and sweet. She was like a white lily against the dark forest, watching me leave again."

Kagome slightly shook her head to dispel the memory of Sesshoumaru in the wilderness – pearlescent against the conifers deep green foliage. The prince might be talking about the Taiyoukai but she didn't think so. There'd been no chance for them to meet… had there?

Kagome lost patience with the prince's waffling remeniscences.

"Sorry. Who are we talking about?"


He slid his feet from the bed and splashed his face from the basin, combing back his tousled dark hair with his fingers. He looked pointedly at the wardrobe and Kagome realised she was expected to fetch him a fresh change of clothing.

Hastily she opened the doors and picking out a selection of clothing. Remembering that the king was recently dead she chose the more austere garments. When she turned around she blushed and hastily averted her eyes. The prince didn't seem to notice. He had stripped down to his undershirt, leaving the shed clothing piled on the floor, and stood expectantly, waiting to be dressed.

The prince's complete blasé manner and self-absorption removed all intimacy from the scene and Kagome found she could easily imagine him as a doll to be dressed. Probably an anatomically correct doll, but she didn't intending to go looking. The prince continued talking about his dream as Kagome held out a pair of pants for him to step into.

"…Then my dream changed she was one of twelve hunters. We rode out in the forest after bears… or boars… or perhaps it was a stag… Then a giant black hawk swept in and she was gone… Everything was gone except my father's crown."

"Sounds like a scary dream." Kagome allowed, buttoning the prince's shirt. He was a little pudgy she noted absently, catching herself comparing him to the trim elegance of Sesshoumaru. She glanced at her own wiry hands. She had been that soft once, not that long ago if she thought about it.

Kagome held up the jacket so the prince could shrug into it.

"Perhaps the dream is indicating you miss her and should go see her." She suggested.

The prince shook his head

"My Sweetheart…"

Kagome cocked her head interrupting "You know you've not mentioned her name once. What is she called?"

"Name?" The prince looked puzzled. "Why would she have a name? She was my Sweetheart"

"Don't you have a name?"

"Of course not. I have a role, I do not have a name."

"Role? Wait a minute what do you mean 'was'? What happened to her?"
The prince shrugged. "I left her. To forfill my father's last wish."

"You can't just be called 'The prince' surely you were given a name when you were born."

The Prince laughed, perhaps a little bemused. "You have been drinking haven't you. I am the Prince, just as you are The Prince's Valet, Valet. We each have our role – it tell us who we are. What need do we have for names here? I am The Prince now but I will be The King soon."

"I'm not just a valet! I have a name and it's Kago-"

The prince slapped a hand over Kagome's mouth. He had gone pale white. "I don't want to know. Don't tell me."

"Can I give you a name?" Kagome asked, prizing his fingers from her lips. The prince went even paler. "Oh Lords no! No. Don't do that! Names make individuals. Individuals feel pain, loss, hardship. Things best avoided."

Kagome waved her hands in a calming fashion. "No names. No problem. Just... did you have a name before you gave up your Sweetheart?"

The prince looked away, uncertain. "I think I might have. Before I locked my heart away. Cufflinks and cravat!"

Kagome scrabbled to find the items he demanded, putting them on the prince as best as she could. He did not adjust them and she wasn't sure if she had gotten it right or he didn't know how.

"What about your Sweetheart?" Kagome asked, confused as they strode down the hallway. "You must still cherish her. You dream about her. Miss her. Don't you?"

"That doesn't matter. I will never see her again."

"Why not?" Kagome almost bounced into the back of The Prince who had stopped suddenly.

There was a susurrus of expensive fabric and Kagome looked up. A beautiful young woman dressed in amethyst stood at the top of the staircase, her hand elegantly resting on the banister. She made no move to descend, as if she knew full well how she looked from that vantage point. She was beautiful like the edge of a blade and Kagome resisted the urge to take a step back from the sharpness she saw in the lady's eyes. The lady glowed with elegant confidence and Kagome found herself feeling every speck of mud and crease marring her own appearance.

"My Fiancé." The prince said, uncomfortably. "You've not had a chance to meet her yet. My father and her father organised the match. I promised him on his deathbed that I would make her my queen."

Kagome's mouth made a little 'O' and she followed dazedly behind the prince, her brain frantically scrabbled to find what had happened to the story she thought she was in. This tale certainly didn't seem have anything to do with swans.

Above, leaning on the banister the prince's fiancé's gaze bored into Kagome's back, her eyes narrowing with suspicion.

~o0o~

The day passed swiftly as Kagome tried to wangle her way out of the castle again. She had to get back to Sesshoumaru and figure out what had gone wrong with this tale – why there seemed no link...
between what was happening in the castle and what had happened to him.

But every time she thought she'd finished one task for the prince there was another. Fetch and carry, retrieve a change of jackets, a change of footwear. The prince seemed to go through as many changes of outer clothes as fashion model on a catwalk. And Kagome was expected to be the one doing the changing. She was finally excused when the prince was hustled into a meeting by an advisor. Glancing at where the sun rested in the sky Kagome bit back a curse and tried again to reach the entrance of the castle, still carrying the box of riceballs she had been optimistically lugging with her since early that morning.

"Prince's Valet…"

Kagome cringed as an impersonal voice called behind her. She turned, expecting another summons from the prince.

"The Prince's Fiancée wishes to speak with you. This way."

Curious Kagome cast one last glance at the open gate of the keep. Perhaps talking to the fiancée would give her another piece of the puzzle. There were several more hours until dark… Biting back a sigh Kagome turned and trudged behind the servant, letting them lead her into an unfamiliar part of the castle.

Kagome was ushered into a long hallway and directed to continue forward alone. The prince's fiancé would be found beyond the next three doors. There was a crunching sound beneath her feet and Kagome looked down. Someone had liberally sprinkled the floor of the corridor with dried peas. Had she been wearing lighter slippers they might have rolled under her feet and made her slide but her stout boots crushed them as she stepped. She thought she heard a rustling of cloth from one of the side archways but saw no one.

Shrugging Kagome opened the door at the end of the hall and passed through.

The next room was filled with elegant looms, baskets of rich thread so full they spilled over onto the floor. Kagome barely cast a glance at them as she hastened on, intent on hearing why the fiancée wanted to talk to her then escaping the castle before the prince spilled something on his cravat… again.

She pushed the doors open into a third antechamber. This one was full of spinning wheels, large baskets of fluffy white fleece rested beside each. The thought of another faerie tale that involved those items immediately leapt to Kagome's mind and she tucked her hands into her belt and grimly picked up her pace, shouldering her way through into the last room.

The prince's fiancé sat on what could only be called a throne. At her feet a collared lion sat watching Kagome with a bemused expression. The Fiancé glowered at the beast and prodded it with a foot.

"I was told you couldn't lie." The woman bit out, her beautiful face marred with a scowl.

"Excuse me?" Kagome asked. Her words were ignored but two guards in unfamiliar livery stepped in to grasp her elbows, immobilising her. The fiancé rose irritably from her seat and walked a tight circle around Kagome and her captors, finally grabbing Kagome's hair at the nape of her neck and twisting it, forcing Kagome's face into a clearer light.

The fiancé cast a glance back at the lion and studied Kagome's face one more time.

"You may not be a woman, despite your pretty face. But you can't have him and I won't let..."
someone else to displace me. He's mine." The fiancé let go of Kagome's hair and gestured at the guards. "Get rid of him."

A dark bag was placed over her head and Kagome was roughly manhandled away, still clutching the handle of her box of rice balls.
The sack over her head had muffled sound somewhat but Kagome was certain she had not only been smuggled out of the castle but also out of the city.

After being manhandled from the Fiance's presence Kagome had been bound hand and foot then slung into the back of a cart. She had bumped and bounced with varying speed over cobblestones, then the wheel ruts of a dirt road. At the end of the ride she had been bodily lifted then, dangling, lowered somewhere by rope. Kagome was fairly certain the rest of the rope had been thrown in after her when she reached the bottom, the end of it bouncing off her head, only partially cushioned by the hessian sack.

She now sat in the dark, working her fingers blindly against the knots at her wrists, eager to get the sack off her head and still irate at the Fiancé's dismissive words, as much, if not even more so, as by her subsequent treatment.

"'May not be a woman.' May not be a woman? What was that all about? What was she expecting? That the prince was hiding old girlfriends around the castle? Evidently I appear male again..."

Fingers still picking at the knots Kagome remembered the peas on the floor, the looms and her own very evident aversion to the spinning wheels. Wasn't there was another story with twelve girls that had mentioned those items as some sort of test... What had happened to the swan story?... they weren't in the same narrative... a little similar but then there were dozens of stories that had twelve siblings...

The first knot loosened and Kagome focused her full attention to untying herself.

The sack, the second her hands were free, was ripped off and thrown, with more than a little satisfaction, across the room. Glancing around Kagome took in her prison even as her fingers attacked the cords about her ankles. A faint light from far above illuminated enough for her to see that she was in some sort of dark, stony chamber.

Free at last she stiffly levered herself to her feet and She wasn't sure how long it had taken to free herself, but she knew that she should have been back at the lake a long time ago. Sesshoumaru would be more than... well probably not worried... but, she found herself hoping, maybe more than a little concerned by her absence. She trusted he would look after the young girls, at least as well as he had Rin.

As if in response to her memory of the pale youkai lord the light around her brightened, a cool silver light that formed a ragged circle on the floor around her.

Looking up Kagome realised that the sudden increase in illumination came from the moon rising high enough to shine down into her prison. She was in some sort of deep pit. Her heart sank. Around her feet the length of rope lay like an inert and very long snake. Escaping from the direction she had arrived didn't seem very likely.

She could now see the walls of the rounded chamber were a mixture of stone and earth, great tree roots radiated out from above almost like pillars. The reflected light also gleamed softly on the brass doorknobs of the three wooden doors set in the walls of the chamber.
Kagome then noticed that her box of rice balls had also been thrown down with her and it had survived the impact. She picked up the box and hugged it to her chest. Well she wouldn't starve if she found couldn't get out immediately... just die of thirst. Great.

There was a stirring and a coarse growling noise from behind one of the doors. Kagome jumped. She'd not thought about anyone else being down there with her. The sudden possibility of being trapped there with something dangerous became a distinct possibility. Warily she tiptoed over to the nearest and listened.

With her ear pressed against the wood she could clearly hear loud breathing on the far side, as if from a very large animal. Behind the second door she could also hear breathing, though quieter, a large animal, not so big. The third door was quiet. Steeling herself Kagome pushed that door open and stepped into the room.

A small lantern shed light from the wall, illuminating a dog with huge glowing eyes that watched her from its perch on a wooden chest in the middle of the room. It was grey and terrier like with wiry hair and a wispy tail. It was also the size of an Alsatian and very intent on Kagome.

Warily she stepped forward. The dog didn't move and she took a glance around the room. The walls were white marble and the floor was a mosaic of what pale blue tiles with a large yellow sun the centre of the pattern upon which the chest rested.

She edged further into the room watching the other inhabitant. The dog didn't seem hostile, just alert. Kagome had spent enough time with individuals of a canine nature to have a fair grasp of their body language. If anything this one seemed a little… expectant?

"Hullo… Um… Would you like a riceball?"

The dog's ears perked and Kagome thought she saw the tail wag, very slightly. Careful not to break eye contact Kagome fumbled for the catch of the box and withdrew a rice ball, holding it out. The dog licked it's lips and blinked then stiffly stood up, stretched, then hopped off the chest.

Politely it took the morsel from her fingers, chewed it a few times and swallowed. Then it looked from her to the chest and back again, it's tail subtly wagged.

Kagome, prompted, lifted the lid and looked inside. The chest was full of copper coins so polished that they seemed to give off their own light. Resting on the top of the pile was a full lacquered bottle in the shape of a gourd. Vine leaves and tendrils curled across the glossy black surface, picked out in gold powder.

"Am I mean to take this?" Kagome asked tentatively picking it up. The was an inviting sloshing noise from inside. The lid of the casket dropped closed, narrowly missing Kagome's other hand and she jumped. The dog scratched itself nonchalantly behind the ear before hopping back onto the lid of the chest, turning three times around then sitting again. Taking its action as a 'yes' Kagome carefully uncorked the gourd and took a sniff.

Fresh water! Gratefully she took a sip, then another, drinking thirstily. When she finished she found the gourd still seemed as full as ever.

She looked at the dog. It blinked and yawned at her. Kagome thanked it anyway and gave it another rice ball before going to investigate the second room. She left the first door open. Just in case.

The next door opened onto a room with a starry mosaic on the floor. A dachshund the size of a
pony crouching on a chest that was similar but longer than the first. Its nose twitched and Kagome heard its stomach growl softly.

"I guess you like rice balls too…" Kagome remarked and then laughed as the coppery dog barreled off the chest and sat in front of her eagerly even before she had finished opening her box. She fed it two rice balls since it was twice the size of the first dog and, with trepidation, let it lick the stray grains from her fingers with a tongue the size of a hand towel.

With slightly spit-wet fingers she lifted the lid on the second chest to find it full of silver coins. Resting on top was a small painted red box. Leaning in Kagome picked it up and held it toward the light to read the black Kanji that marked the four main sides.

"Hah! I know what tale this bit is at least!" Kagome laughed out turning over the large cardboard box of matches with "火口箱" “tinderbox”, to show the dog who was more interested in hunting for stray grains of rice on the floor.

"But it's completely different from the swan one and the other one… I've got no how they fit together… But at least I know how I get out now." The dog's ears dropped in uncertainty then rose again at her relieved laughter.

Kagome happily ruffled the huge dog's ears with both hands until they slapped like great velvety kites against the sides of its head. "Good dog! Here, have another rice ball!"

~o0o~

Kagome stepped into the final room with confidence, feeling that she was getting the hang of the numbers, if nothing else, in Benten's maze of fairytales. Things came in threes, or twelves, it seemed. And if the first two doors had held friendly dogs this one would do the same...

The sight of the third dog, despite having some idea what to expect, made Kagome stumble backwards instinctively. She bumped into the doorframe and braced herself there until she remembered to draw breath again.

The third dog was a black greyhound the size of an asian elephant. Unlike the other two it did not attempt to sit on the chest in the middle of the room, rather it rested its long head on the box. Rolling its huge eyes to watch her it made no move to rise. Its stomach's gurgle reverberated through the moon mosaic tiled floor beneath Kagome's feet.

Kagome sucked in a deep breath and fumbled with the catch of the box, her fingers shaking a little.

"Um. Hullo…?"

The giant dog's long tail thumped once.

"Would you like a rice cake?"

The dog's tail thumped twice, harder, stirring the dust on the floor.

"Um. You'd best come over and get it then."

Kagome held three rice cakes out on the flat of her hands and the greyhound surged to its feet. Stretching it yawned revealing long ivory teeth. This dog's tail brushed the ceiling and its lanky legs were like tree trunks. Kagome dazedly wondered how it had been coaxed into the room in the first place and who fed it in between adventurers.
Carefully picking up it's feet the third dog stepped over and delicately licked the morsels off her hand with the tip of it's tongue. It didn't bother to chew.

"Uh. Wait a moment and I'll give you another one... Just give me a minute" Rather than walk around the dog that towered over her Kagome ducked between it's legs to get to the wooden chest. Lifting the lid she found the expected gold coins but also, sheathed and resting on the shimmering wealth, Tensaiga.

"Ah. I lose one of you and find the other..." Kagome wiped her hands thoroughly on her jerkin before carefully lifted the katana from the box. There was a pulse through it – a sort of sharp warning buzz that became a surprised, friendly hum, or at least as far as she could interpret. "Sesshoumaru-sama knew we'd find you again." She confided in the fang.

The greyhound dog whined uncertainly at the sound and turned on the spot to face Kagome, carefully prancing in a tight circle on it's paws and forcing her to duck as it's tail swung over her head. It attempted to nose the sheathed blade and Kagome was forced to fend it off with one hand, still speaking to the blade.

"Tensaiga-sama. Um. Thank you again for the assistance you granted the last time we met."

There was a pleased purr from the blade, almost audible. The dog whistled through its nose and Kagome produced a fourth rice ball to distract it from the unusual sounds.

"See we're all friends here now."

"Hullo? Hullo is that a voice I hear in there?" A thin wavering voice arose from outside. Kagome held her breath. The call was repeated and she ran out into the original chamber. The moon had moved across the opening and only a fraction of light remained, partially blocked by a silver-headed person.

Sesshoumaru! was Kagome's first thought, but the voice was old and female. The hair frazzled and half pulled back beneath a kerchief.

"Um... Hullo up there? Would that be a lady who might lend a hand?" Kagome called up to the silhouette.

"Eh? Eh? Who's that down there? What's that you want?" The old lady's head cocked like a bird. She did not sound unfriendly, just a little bemused. "Is that another of the fiancé's cast offs?"

"Er. I'm a... a soldier down on my fortune... Can you throw a rope or something down that I can climb up? Um. I think I have something that belongs to you."

There was a wry chuckle. "Do you now?"

A rope descended and Kagome hastened for it before the moon moved further and all light was cut off. She was grateful of the knots set at close intervals that allowed her to scale the rope. When she reached the top a pair of wizened hands gripped her arms and helped her out of the pit. A wooden lid, like a well cover rested beside the hole. The old woman noticed Kagome's glance.

"I usually keep it covered – it wouldn't do for some lost kiddie or animal to fall down there. What with the Fiancé using it as a casting bowl for whichever young thing she thinks the Prince has set his cap at I tend to check here about every second night now."

She scrutinized Kagome’s face then glanced down at the three objects Kagome had carried out of
the pit. "None of them tried the chests though… If they ever got close enough to see them."

“Um. I believe these are yours...” Kagome tucked Tensaiga under her arm and proffered the gourd and the tinderbox.

The old woman clucked in amusement. “Very ready to hand away what could be important treasures. That sword isn’t yours either yet you look to be hanging on to it.”

Kagome tightened her arm over the katana. “I know who owns Tensaiga.”

“So you do lovey. And the gourd isn’t mine either. I’m sure the owner will get it back off you in due time. But this, this is mine.”

The old lady gently took the little red box from Kagome’s hand and turned it over lovingly. There was something in her presence that prompted Kagome to speak.

"You know in the story I know the old lady who helped the soldier was killed by the man she rescued. Without him knowing what it can do.” She paused and added “The more I think about some of these old stories the more the main characters seem to be really horrible and not heroes at all.”

"Well." The old lady patted Kagome's hand. "That's them and you're you. Keep that in mind. Stories are useful for what is taken out of them. Not just for what they contain."

Kagome opened her mouth to ask the old woman about who she was, how the three current stories fitted and how to escape but the crone held up a hand, silencing her and offering back the little red box.

"You can consider this a test of character if you like. As a reward for not killing me”, the old lady’s eyes twinkled. "I will lend you this tinderbox. Use it to call my three dogs if you are in need. One strike for the smaller, three for the largest. Ask them for anything and they will do it. One time each only though. They will return to me when their task is done."

“Who are you?” Kagome asked, taking the box in both hands.

“Oh you may call me Kichijo-ba-san* if you really feel a need to refer to me at all. I don’t know that you’ll be seeing me again any time soon.

“Here I will give something else even more powerful for safe keeping.” The old woman grasped Kagome's arm and drew the girl's her head down, softly she whispered three words into the girl's ear, repeating them three times to be sure they were remembered.

"Now." The old woman straightened. "You'd best get going – the night will not last forever and someone will be looking for you."

Chapter End Notes

* 火口箱 /Literally: 'origin of fire' box
* Kichi-ba-san Grandma Kichi – referring to:
* 吉祥天 Kichijōten, a Japanese counterpart of Lakshmi and is wife to Bishamon (see chapter 1 footnotes) She is sometimes one of the seven gods of fortune, replacing Jurōjin.
The sun was sinking on the westward side of the lake, the light coating everything in a thick golden lacquer. Sesshoumaru scoured the shore from his place obscured under the foliage of a stunted willow tree. He was not hiding, rather assessing his opponents, readying to strike as soon as was free of the confines of bird form.

He was also contemplating the ability to fly. The heavy, cumbersome body he wore had never felt particularly aerodynamic but seeing the wild swans gracefully wing their way past he registered jealousy. The weight of the heavens seemed to prevent him from taking to the air in his youkai form. Would they have tried to stop him as a swan?

How much faster he would have travelled had he thought to try these wings? And now there were five men with crossbows nearby waiting for something white to fly past near enough to shoot. He glowered inwardly and added a mark to his score to settle with Benten.

A logical thought shortly followed his brief pang of envy; that Higurashi Kagome would not have been able to follow had he taken to the sky. Followed by the knowledge that something probably would have happened to ensure she didn’t have to, and probably to him. He snorted irritably and checked the sun, hoping it had sunk more during his ruminations. He felt in need of something to kill and the hunters were close to hand.

There was a soft noise near the island where he had left the cygnets. Sesshoumaru turned his head to fix one eye then the other on the clump of trees that sheltered his charges.

There was another querious sound, this time louder but from the shore. He spat an expletive noise through his nostrils. It sounded like an adult swan but it could not be. He had been watching very attentively despite his thoughts being elsewhere.

The hunters: could they be making the noises?

Trying to lure the mudane swans to them?

Would the cygnets know the difference?

Sesshoumaru warily sculled out from the shelter of the willow as the sky dulled to lavender and his white plumage gleamed silver on the grey water. He strained each sense for a sight, a sound, from the hunters. Nothing stirred.

He made up his mind and paddled swiftly for the island. Soon it would be moonrise and then all this skulking could end. But until then he would see the cygnets safe.

There was a shout from the banks, too far away for an accurate shot from a crossbow, but it appeared he had been spotted. Sesshoumaru ignored it and clove on through the water, striding swiftly up the bank and into the vegetation of the isle. The cygnets were huddled where he had left them, silent and obedient. He dipped his head fractionally in approval then turned to face the coming hunters.

The young moonlight cut through the trees like a knife through rice paper and Sesshoumaru reared up into it eagerly. With youkai form he could properly deal with these hunters…
He shivered eagerly out of his feathers, stretching up into human form only to find he was hampered once again by skirts, thick and heavy fabric with more brocade than a wedding kimono. He hissed his irritation and turned, claws curled, as the first man burst through the bushes.

~o0o~

The huntsman Takano pushed through the undergrowth intent on the swans. What he found in the clearing made him drop to his knees in disbelief and awe.

Standing in a shaft of moonlight was a lady so fair she seemed carved from alabaster and ice, her white damask gown was stiff with embroidered waterlilies and her short hair floated around her head like a tufted halo. Arrayed in a half circle were eleven dark-haired young hand-maidens in similar but simpler garb, their eyes modestly lowered. The woman’s eyes were not. They flashed golden and hard, skewering him as if for his impertinence. She stood with her head held high, a dusting of colour on her fine cheekbones and her slender hands clenched into fists.

He remembered to draw breath after a few heart beats.

“M… My Lady? Forgive me for startling you.” Takano followed her sharp gaze down at the ready crossbow he still held. Hastily he lowered it and removed the bolt, throwing it aside. “I beg your pardon.”

The woman’s gaze did not change.

Takano remembered his manners and pulled his hat from his head. There was a scrabbling through the thicket behind him and Shikuri came stumbling through, almost falling over the first hunter. He too, after a glance at his fellow, snatched the hat from his head and bowed, confused. The lady’s gaze flickered towards the mainland.

“You… You’ll be here for the ball then?” Takano stuttered, gesturing frantically for Shikuri to lower the crossbow he too carried.

“I am sure The Prince is expecting you. Were you waylaid by bandits? Are you all unharmed? Where are your guards?”

~o0o~

Sesshoumaru had been ready to throw himself at the human hunters, claws ready to tear them limb from limb. But again, like invisible cobwebs hindering his movement he had been unable to move. His fury brought a high colour to his cheeks and ears as he struggled against the Goddess’s intervention.

Before him the two men babbled questions he barely heard. Taking a firm grip on his anger he slowly breathed out through his nose and focused his attention on the deferential hunters. He could not kill them, he would make use of them then.

He had heard Kagome referred to in past tales by the foreign word “Prince”. It had seemed to indicate someone of status, perhaps a feudal lord or daimyō. Perhaps that was the reason she had not yet returned.

He turned the thought over like an interesting pebble. Evidently there were specific ways to move through the labyrinth of these tales and he had now happened on one of them. Very well as she had not been able to come back by the expected time then he would deign to take the cygnets to her. The sooner he found her again the swifter they would escape this story.
He returned his focus to the first of the huntsmen who was waiting anxiously for his reply and inclined his head slightly.

“If… if you would follow me my lady – we will escort you to the castle.”

~o0o~

The lady and her maidens followed Takano with the elegant grace of swans on the water. Stepped lightly in their doe skin slippers behind the hunters who found themselves filled with a protective care. Within moments they were back on the bank of the island, a knee-deep wade to muddy shallows to the shore facing them.

Takano looked at the pristine white gowns of the gathered women and swallowed, holding out his arms to their leader.

“We will carry you to shore.”

The lady looked at the hunter’s proffered hand and her nostril’s flared in distaste. Takano blushed and glanced away, wishing his hands were cleaner. In that moment she seemed to gather herself and then sprang over the water, landing as light as thistle down on the shore, her slippers unbesmirched by the mud. The eleven girls stood waiting on the shore, their eyes fixed on their mistress like goslings. Takano blinked and shook his head unable to fathom how it had occurred.

He opened his mouth to query but the beautiful, aloof face of the lady, utterly complacent and distinctly waiting, shut it for him. Nodding to his fellow as he rubbed his hands cleaner on his jacket Takano turned back to the girls who, mercifully, let themselves be carry to the mainland.

There was another of the faux swan calls querying call from further into the forest and Takano raised his own voice.

“Enough of that! Forget the swans! Masato! Tekugi! Bring the horses and make haste!” Takano spun to face the Lady. “By your leave your grace – we’ll take you to the ball immediately. I’ll leave Pano and Shikuri here to search for your own escort and to direct them on. So please you…”

Sesshoumaru inclined his head fractionally. A part of his pride boiled at being perceived as a woman yet again but Benzaiten seemed intent on proving a point by it. He would not rise to her bait again.

Instead he ran a critical eye over the five humans who were now hastily removing their hunting kit from their six horses and, very deferentially, hoisting the young girls, two per horse, sideways onto the saddle. The children sat obediently. The first clinging to the horse’s mane, the second to the back of the saddle with one hand and to her fellow with the other.

Sesshoumaru eyed the final horse they lead up. The youngest of the swans, her throat and shoulder still marred from the mink’s teeth earlier in the day, clung silently to the saddle.

“I will walk. You-” Sesshoumaru gestured at the first hunter, “will ride with her. We depart now.”

Takano bowed, eager to serve the lady, his allegiance to the prince almost entirely forgotten. Her voice was mesmerizing, soft and dulcet but firm and not to be crossed. She stood expectantly as Pano and Shikuri, at his direction, bowed and darted off to comb the lake area for traces of her retinue.

Takano glanced at Tekugi as he swung into the saddle behind the smallest of the handmaidens. His tracker nodded and set off towards the keep at a trot, the white lady striding along behind, her
skirts rippling out behind her.

~o0o~

Footmen hastened to open the large and ornate doors to the ballroom as the latecomer glided towards them across the green marble floor, her handmaidens strung out behind her like a skein of snow geese.

There had been no hindrance at the gates, crowds of peasant revelers had parted in hushed curiosity to allow the huntsmen lead the noble women to the castle. From there servants had been falling over one another in an effort to please. Refreshments were refused.

The only words the white lady uttered were “I will see this “prince”.” Her countenance brooked no opposition.

The doors of the ballroom, swung inward just as the music trailed off and Sesshoumaru stepped into the crowded ballroom. A liveried man at the door tried to catch his attention to ask for a name, Sesshoumaru looked witheringly at the man and entered unannounced. There was an uncertain murmur from the other participants and then the music began again and, apart from the occasional covert assessing glance and occasional hushed comment between ladies behind their fans, he was left alone. A footman who had followed him in noticed him searching the crowd of people.

“My Lady – The Prince will appear shortly. If you would care to mingle in the mean time I am sure he will be willing to speak to you after he has made his announcements.” He shriveled beneath Sesshoumaru’s gaze and hastily bowed himself out of the taiyoukai’s presence.

Sesshoumaru surreptitiously scented the air, immediately regretting it. The number of tinctures, powders, perfumes, eau de toilettes, rose waters, posies, fragrant lilies and underlying human sweat made his eyes water. He could not find any trace of Higurashi Kagome’s scent among them.

Sesshoumaru weighed up leaving the hall to look for her but, irritatingly, found the air thickened against him whenever he attempted to walk to the doors. Instead he circled the ballrooms and halls, seeking the weak points in Benzaiten’s wards. The guards, like decorative statues, stood to attention by each of the doors and windows. Their armor was light, more ornamental than anything, human and no threat. Sesshoumaru assessed in a glance and moved on, scanning his surroundings as he prowled through the rooms seeking any trace of youki or heavenly power. Irritable and seeking distraction while he waiting for the “Prince” to make himself known. Kagome would be left unmistaken in regards to his displeasure at being left to wait.

All the while he cygnets followed quietly behind him.

A flicker of light amidst the crowd of humans caught his eye as he turned from eyeing the iron grills set into the high windows. He found himself focusing on the skirts of a particular dress, noting the small metal disks that glittered at the slightest movement of the wearer. Silently he mouthed the word ‘sequins’. Higurashi Kagome was right, they did bring to mind stars, or hot coals, or sunlight on water.

Showy and a little ostentatious. Rinn would like them very much.

During his assessment of the ornamentation worn by the human women Sesshoumaru found himself drifting closer to the alcove where the musicians providing the dance music were seated. Most of the instruments were familiar to him but one especially was entirely foreign. Intrigued he stepped closer.
Sesshoumaru intently watched the fingers of one of the musicians, trying to follow how they were coaxing the sounds from their instrument. The musician, daunted by the intent gaze of one of the most striking women in the room, found himself playing better than he had ever before. As if inspired by his energy the rest of the musicians picked up their pace and the music became passionate. More and more individuals stopped dancing and turned to listen to the music. Time passed, the musicians played on at though possessed, sweat trickled down their collars.

There was a hammering noise from the dais and Sesshoumaru whirled started and angry with himself for allowing so petty a distraction as music to hold his attention.

The musicians, with a mixture of relief and regret, downed their instruments, certain they would never play so well again.

~o0o~

The Prince escorted his fiancé up onto the dais. She wore imperial purple edged in silver, rich against the Prince’s plainer white dress uniform. Her eyes scanned the crowd below triumphantly until they settled on Sesshoumaru. The cygnets had arrayed themselves behind him in a fan, their white dresses creating a patch of snowfall in a room bright with colour. The fiancé bit off a hiss of irritation.

This woman, this stranger had entered Her ballroom dressed to match Her Prince. And with attendants as if she were a bride.

*How Dare She!*  

~o0o~

Sesshoumaru glowered in irritation. The prince had turned out to be a vapid human man with poor dress sense.

He hitched up his skirts and strode up onto the dais to look at the man closer, already certain that there was no way this could be Higurashi Kagome in disguise. The crowd parted around him in uncertainty. His cygnets followed obediently behind.

“Who are you?!” The woman beside the Prince’s voice was shrill and she took a step forward, her diamond encrusted décolleté heaving with emotion. Sesshoumaru side-stepped her to scrutinise the prince closer.

There was a faint trace of Kagome about the Prince’s clothing. He could smell her exasperation still. She had been vexed by the man but not harmed.

The prince remained still, for a moment then feebly said. “But.. but you’re not my Sweetheart… who are you and why are you here?”

Sesshoumaru’s eyes narrowed as the woman plucked at his arm, still yammering about protocols, civility and the knowing of one’s place.

Below the crowd watched, fascinated to see what would happen next

Sesshomarù twitched his arm from her grip but did not step back rather drew himself up fractionally to run his gaze down the dress of the hostile woman and back up to her face. His slightly raised brow succinctly communicating: *Who are You to address Me?*
Daimyō – Is a title used for land holding lords often powerful individuals owning large amounts of territory. The office was often hereditary and existed from the 10th to 19th century.
Kagome ran along the road, the rice box bouncing against her hip. She was nearing the edge of the lake now. The smell of marshes was sharp at the back of her nose, burning her sinuses as she panted for breath. The track the old woman had pointed her towards had taken her downhill through woodlands to the marsh surrounding the lake. It had been a long run as she had ruled out using the tinderbox to get her to the lake, certain that the three wishes would be needed later.

Ganbaru Kagome! She chanted to the beat of her stride and the jab of the stitch in her side. Hashiru, Ganbaru, Hashiru, Ganbaru*.

The ground grew boggy under foot and the moon was well along it’s descent back to the horizon. Despite the dwindling light Kagome could make a few old footprints, some her old tracks from the morning but these were crisscrossed by other, fresher prints in the soft ground. worried she hastened on…

Only to find no sign of Sesshoumaru or the cygnets on the lake.

With fear rising in a walnut sized knot in her throat Kagome cast about the reeds, calling out his name. Her voice sounding shrill and lonely against the soft susurrus of the reeds and lap of water on the shore.

A breeze fresh off the lake slid over her sweat-wet skin, chilling her, but the shiver that rattled down her spine was borne more from emotion than temperature. She was sure he hadn’t abandoned her, not this time. Something must have happened…

There was a “Hoy” from the dark forest and Kagome spun, hopeful even when she knew that Sesshoumaru would never hale her in such a fashion. Lanterns appeared through the trees and a pair of shadows detached themselves from the forest.

“Oii! Oiii! Hey there?! Who’s that?” An unfamiliar male voice called out, waving his paper lantern as he and his fellow strode closer.

Indecisiveness froze Kagome for a breath – should she run or confront these strangers. She felt suddenly vulnerable and very alone. The man’s next words made the decision for her.

“Any chance you are of the White Lady’s retinue?”

“Ah! You’ve seen them?! Where are they?” The words tumbled from Kagome’s mouth and the men, now almost within arms reach, lifted their lanterns high revealing all faces.

“Why it’s the Valet! What on earth are you doing here? Hasn’t the ball begun by now? If the prince sent you to find her Takano san and the others escorted them to the keep hours ago.”

Kagome’s eyes fell on the white bird hanging from the second hunter’s hand. A swan, half plucked. The light of the torches flickered on its blank eyes. Bile rose in her throat and she blurted out: “All of them?! How many. How many ladies did you find”
“Eleven.” The hunter said, Kagome’s breath caught, oblivious to her panic he continued. “Along with their mistress. Aiie. What a beauty! Oi. Are you alright?”

Kagome had sunk into a crouch, focusing on controlling her breath, tears leaking from her eyes. Eleven and Sesshoumaru. It was just a normal swan. It was ok. Sesshoumaru had kept them all together.

“Oi….o..oi Valet. Are you alright?”

Kagome drew in a shuddering breath. “Yes. I… I just have to get back to the castle.”

The hunter sucked his teeth thoughtfully. “Maa. Not much luck for you there. The others took all the horses. You look done in though. Shikuri and I didn’t manage to catch all the swans the fiancé wanted for the table though. We figured better to have a night out on the lake than head back and face her tonight.”

“The prince’s fiancé sent you out here for swans?”

“Yah. At this time of the year. Crazy eh. It was only by amazing chance we saw a flock fly over. Only managed to bag one too… Oi.”

Kagome wasn’t listening by that point – Despite her leg muscles twitching and jumping from her earlier exertion Kagome turned on her heel and began heading for the road and the distant lights of the city.

“Oi: Valet… where are you going?! Are you crazed – with the moon so low it’ll be dark as pitch before you get anywhere”

“I have to get back to the keep.” Kagome replied, trying not to be curt. The two men did look worried for her sake. “It’s very important – on the Prince’s business.”

“Take a lantern at least… Good luck.”

~o0o~

Kagome lost the lantern only a short while later.

She slipped in her haste and then tripped on a stump hidden in the undergrowth, painfully barking her shin as she fell, headfirst, into a peat-dark pool. Surfacing spluttering she pulled herself from the water using handfuls of bulrushes and staggered back onto solid ground.

Kagome crouched empty handed, hugging her knees, ignoring how her grazed shin stung. Tears welled in her eyes and she drew in a shaky breath as she streamed water and duckweed onto the dryer ground. She had no clue how to get back to the township in time, or if Sesshoumaru and the children were still alright. Gathering clouds blocked out any moonlight and she was all but lost now. If she’d stayed with the hunters she would be dry. The memory of the dead swan in the hunter’s hands made her shiver in revulsion. No. There was no way she could have stayed there. And when the moon set Sesshoumaru and the children might turn into a swan in a room full of guards and nobility. She couldn’t let that happen...

She sniffed and wiped her eyes on the back of her hand, as she did so she felt a lump in her sodden coat pocket bump her hip.

The Tinderbox.
She cursed herself for an idiot. Saving them for something important? Like people died of thirst saving the last water in their waterskin.

With fumbling fingers Kagome pulled the cardboard box from her pocket, noting with dismay the cardboard was damp beneath to the touch. Carefully she thumbed the box open, relieved to find it did not contain wet matches. Instead there was a flint and an elegant curl of steel, both of which felt dry. Experimentally Kagome took one in either hand and cracked them briskly against each other three times. There was as sustained shower of sparks that made her almost drop everything.

The sparks swirled up into a Catherine-wheel bright wreath, the smoke drifting up, smelling of sulphur and incense. A long nose poked through the wreath of sparks, followed by a giant head as the enormous greyhound pushed it’s way out through the fiery hoop.

Kagome gaped and would have done so for some time had the dog not turned its enormous eyes on her and spoke.

“What would you have me do Rice-giver, having summoned me?” The greyhound asked, its voice a nasal rumble.

“I… I need to get to the keep where the Prince is having his ball, as quickly as possible.”

“And so it shall be done.” The greyhound stretched down, bowing until it’s belly touched the ground. “Climb on my back and we shall be away.”

Kagome hastily put away the tinderbox and in doing so realised she had left her woven box, carried so long and with such determination, back where she spoke to the hunters.

“I… I’ve lost my riceballs…” Kagome said inanely.

“That is of no relevance,” the dog said briskly. “Let us be off. I have my task.”

Making sure she Tensaiga and the lacquered gourd still firmly tied to her belt Kagome scrambled up onto the hound’s back. She had barely gotten a grip on the scruff of its neck when the greyhound rose in one smooth motion and launched forward in a bouncing stride that nearly catapulted Kagome from it’s back.

The distance between the lake and the township was an eye-watering blur and Kagome spent most of it with her eyes squeezed shut against the wind, hunched down in the black fur.

The Greyhound didn’t slow as it approached the town gates The guards shouted and began to close the great doors but the hound accelerated, digging it’s paws in meters before the pike wielding men to spring over the stone walls.

Kagome clung on for dear life as one of her sodden boots slit off and plummeted to the ground below.

The landing of the greyhound on the far side of the wall was no smoother than the take off but Kagome managed, against her own expectation, to remain on the dog’s back. They pelted down the main streets, terrifying the festival-goers that thronged the streets. Unable to watch Kagome closed her eyes again and muttered prayers that no one would be harmed by her wish for haste.

And then they were sliding to a stop by the wall of the castle, the castle guards gaping at the dog, lowering their spears nervously.

“You have reached the Keep as you wished.” The greyhound stated as Kagome slid from it’s back.
“My task is done.” With that it turned, nose to tail, faster and faster, dwindling and throwing off sparks until nothing was left but a charred set of paw prints on the cobbles.

“Thank you!?” Kagome breathed, turning toward the bewildered guards.

“I don’t know what chicanery that was but Clear Off!” The older of the men shouted at Kagome, gesturing with his pike in her direction. “Take your conjury elsewhere.”

“I… I work for the Prince. I came at great haste and must attend him immediately…” Kagome

“We..We’ve orders – The invite list was Full and tweren’t no magician on it. Move on before we make you.” The second guard said, reaching for the hunting horn strung on a lanyard at his neck.

“Go on now - Get.”

Dismayed Kagome bobbed a quick bow and hastened along the castle wall, away from the entrance. She met with a similar, though slightly less terrified response at the servant’s gates and a bucket of water thrown at her by a cook from a window, telling her there was no use her begging for scraps.

Kagome glanced down at her disheveled clothing and bootless foot. She looked thoroughly disreputable. From inside the keep she heard a strain of music interspersed by a woman’s shrill laughter. She was about to kick the wall with her booted foot but stopped and mentally kicked herself instead.

Ducking back into the shelter afforded by a side street she pulled the tattered tinderbox from her pocket and struck sparks twice. The sparks flared and sizzled on the stones, glowing like embers and the Dachshund, large as a pony, was suddenly standing amidst them.

“What boon do you ask Rice Giver?” The dog demanded.

Kagome pointed at the castle. “I need to get in there, into that castle, without alerting the guards.”

“Then it shall be done.” The Dachshund snuffled along the solid stone cobbles that covered the street that wound around the castle. It grunted as though satisfied with what it had found and then began digging, stones the size of a man’s fist were flung up by the dog’s paws, then soil, barrow loads of soil – it was almost like watching an animation as the pony sized dog excavated it’s way in down through the street towards the wall. Within minutes the dog’s rump and tail disappeared under ground entirely. Kagome remained pressed against a wall, watching for guards.

The dog’s head poked out of the hole then it’s entire body surged out of the hole, shaking dirt from its coat. “Come, I have made you a path. Catch hold of my tail and I shall lead you thorough.”

Kagome thanked the dog and did as instructed with one hand, keeping a firm grip on Tensaiga with the other. There was no light in the tunnel and she had to crouch to follow the dachshund. Beneath her bare foot she felt cobbles, then soil, then the sharp bite of shattered stone. She muffled a squeak of discomfort and stepped as lightly as she could. It seemed the castle had been built on bedrock and the hound had burrowed through.

Not that surprising thinking rationally Kagome realised, a crazy little giggle escaping her It is a magic dog after all. And certainly not the only one she knew, not by a long shot.

A particularly sharp stone jabbed that thought out of her head and she focused on using her booted foot to clear spots to place her bare one.
After what seemed an eternity the hound lead her out into the a wine cellar that was only lit by a small spill. Someone had been here and intended to return.

“You are within the castle, my duty is done.” The dachshund stretched and yawned. “This has been one of the easier ones I must say. Good luck, I suppose.” It shook itself and was gone in a sparkle of cinder motes.

“You too.” Kagome murmured, looking around her in dismay. She couldn’t hear any sounds beyond the cellar door. Steeling herself she cracked the door and looked out. A long dark corridor stretched in both directions.

Taking a deep breath and hoping that she wasn’t using her last request wastefully Kagome struck her final blow with the flint and steel. The two implements crumbling as the Alsatian sized terrier shook sparks from it’s fur and looked at her expectantly.

Kagome thought of her last two wishes and how they had been to the pretty much to the letter of her word.

“Please: Can you help me safely get to Sesshoumaru?”

“Heh. That’s no challenge.” The dog snorted. “Follow me, keep close and do as I say.”

Chapter End Notes

Kagome's box of rice balls is a inverted nod to a piece of advice I once read on writing: "If it isn't important to the plot leave it out". In reality things there is so much incidental stuff - not every pen is a magic sword in disguise -we loose pencils, and socks, and never find them again, and it's a part of life that is usually left out of written narratives - like going to the loo and bathing regularly. But at the same time, for a hungry person, who has been living on forage for weeks, those rice balls were important, providing for the kids and herself was something in Kagome's control at that point. - the rice balls weren't ever intended to be a plot device but my character clung to them and it's only in hind sight that I noticed why. And as the dog inferred: sometimes stuff just happens and you have to let it go.
The terrier trotted across the stone floor, his toenails clicking sharply and Kagome followed close on its heels. Occasionally it would sniff the air and hurry on or else chivy her into a shadowy corner until some servant or guard passed by.

Kagome had abandoned her other boot in the cellar in favour of moving silently behind the dog, still trailing the occasional drip of marsh water and mud.

As they moved upwards through the keep the floor changed to dirt to marble and the smoky tapers gave way to pristine white candles. The guard patrols became more frequent and the number of hiding places became fewer.

Finally, flattened against a wall behind a tapestry as yet another bevy of serving maids hastened past the dog turned to Kagome and softly spoke again:

“From now you will need to be attentive and ready to act. Have that gourd to hand. You’ll be needing it shortly. Now follow me, follow quick!” The dog darted from the curtain, and Kagome stumbled after it, scuttling down several winding corridors to a point that seemed to satisfy the hound.

“Here, tip some of that stuff across the corridor here.” The terrier indicated a line bisecting the passage way with its nose

“What the water?” Kagome “Why”

“Less Yap, more do. Now!”

Kagome pulled the cork from the gourd and tipped it up. Instead of the water she was certain had been inside thick oil spread glugged out, coating the floor in a slick layer that smelled rather like olives.

“Don’t be stingy. Nice big puddle. Ready? Back around that corner until I call for you.” The dog sucked in a deep breath and began barking – it’s voice a shrill yap that echoed off the walls. There was a sound that resolved into cursing as two guards came jogging down the corridor – They hit the oil in unison and went base over apex, swearing furiously.

“Now follow and Jump! Before the rest come!” The terrier threw itself towards the prone guardsmen, easily clearing the tangle of limbs. Kagome grit her teeth and followed, wedging the cork back into the bottle as she went, praying she wouldn’t step in any of the spattering oil.

Behind them the sound of cursing was joined by shouts of alarm as more guards were drawn to the noise.

“Into this corner. Silent as a mouse and wait now.” Half a dozen guards hammered past in the direction of the disturbance. As soon as they’d passed from sight the dog bounced back into the corridor

“Quick That’s most of them!” The dog yapped at Kagome, rolling its eyes “Pour.”
“What?”

“The gourd you fool! Pour across the corridor. Make haste!” The terrier stood stiff-legged, listening intently.

Kagome pulled the cork from the water container with her teeth and frantically sloshed around the content of the gourd. No oil fell this time. The smell of strong sakè roiled out in the confined space, making Kagome’s eyes water, as the fluid almost crawled up the walls. Litre upon litre of triple distilled alcohol glugged from the small container, rapidly spreading across the floor.

“Be ready to run” the dog commanded as it drew breath, whiskers bristling.

The dog sneezed sharply and a little spark shot from its nose and into the sakè with a WHOOF! as flames leapt for the ceiling, hungrily biting into the tapestries on the wall.

“Run!” The dog yapped, it’s tongue lolling as it followed it’s own words and hightailed down the corridor. Kagome staggered after it, realising, with a slight degree of resentment, that the dog was enjoying all of this.

~o0o~

The dog crouched intently by the end of this final wide corridor and Kagome cautiously peered around the corner – only four guards stood flanking large and sumptuous closed double doors, strains of music and conversation rippled from beyond.

They looked a little nervous. Probably something to do with the reports of the fire that couldn’t be put out in one of the lower corridors.

The grey terrier licked it’s chop in anticipation and glanced up at Kagome. I will remove the guards for you – beyond those doors you should find what you seek. Then my task will be done.”

“Thank you.” Kagome said. “Um… Can you not hurt them. The guards I mean. It’s not their fault I need to get past them. I don’t want anyone to get hurt.”

The dog rolled it’s eyes at her. “You aren’t a realist. I will do what must be done to forfil the wish you asked. Be ready to enter.” It rose and silently shook itself, nudging her out of the way.

With a loud and feral snarl the wire haired dog launched itself around the corner, barreling into the first of the guards, causing him to slam into the doors with force and tangle the movements of the other three.

Behind the corner Kagome got ready to run for the door at the first opportunity.

~o0o~

The Prince fluttered his hands limply still staring at Sesshoumaru. Finally he seemed to find his voice, only to repeated “You’re not my sweetheart… Why are you here?” His voice rose peevishly. “What is going on? Where is my Valet?! I want my Valet.”

Sesshoumaru’s eyes narrowed and he parted his lips about to lift the prince up by his ruffled shirt and shake and answer out of him in regards to the appearance of this “Valet” when another disturbance ruffled through the watching crowd.

“Ameia? Is that you?” A half hysterical voice rose from the general murmer of the room. “Where have you been!?”
A bejeweled woman pushed through the crowd to seize the arms of one of the Cygnets. “Say something Ameia!” The child paid no heed and continued to stare blankly and attentively at Sesshoumaru. The woman glared at Sesshoumaru. “You! What have you done to my daughter?”

Sesshoumaru blinked down at the woman. The similarity of face and scent confirmed the cygnet’s relationship with the woman but the child remained unresponsive. The crowd shifted uneasily - no longer as entertained by the spectacle.

The Fiancé’s eyes narrowed and a narrow smile creased her lips. Stepping forward she pointed theatrically at the half circle of children and declaimed:

“There is Sorcery at work here! The Prince and these children have obviously been bewitched.”

“I have?” The prince stuttered looking down at himself. “I don’t think I am.”

The crowd surreptitiously sidled away from the eleven girls, but for Ameia’s mother who glared poisonously at Sesshoumaru.

A hand took his elbow and the taiyoukai’s gaze impaled the guard who had been trying, courteously, to remove him from the dais.

"Excuse me Mi’Lady…” The guard swallowed, his voice dwindling. “You'd best move away for safeties sake. We.. We have to protect our prince foremost.”

“Guards!” The Fiancé shouted “Guards – seize this…”

A loud thump of weight thrown against the ballroom door interrupted her as the sounds of shouts and scuffling suddenly became audible outside. A visceral growl of challenge seemed to vibrate through the woodwork, followed by the clatter of armor and the sound of several more things bouncing heavily off the hall doors.

The accusations of witchcraft died on the Fiancé’s lips as the doors burst open and a guard fell backwards through them, his head bouncing once on the floor then he lay still. Outside in the entrance hall a huge grey dog was baling up three guards against the far wall. Their spears lay scattered about them in splinters. The dog turned and darted into the room with a triumphant bark.

The crowd of courtiers scattered like hens as it neared, hindering the guards within the ballroom who struggled to free their weapons without striking down the terrified nobility.

Behind the dog a tatterdemalion figure sprinted into the room, frantically scanning the crowd for a familiar face.

~o0o~

Sesshoumaru had spun on his heel at the growl from the hallway, a reply had been half on his tongue even as the doors burst inwards and Kagome followed the grey dog into the room.

Around him the cygnets drew closer, all but the one still clutched in the arms of her weeping mother who remained still.

Kagome was covered in mud, duckweed and missing her shoes. Her hands, knees and feet were plastered in red mud from beneath castle. Her hair hung in rats-tails and her jacket was torn into strips in places. She pushed her fringe out of her eyes and stumbled across the room, the crowd parting around her as though she were covered in blood rather than lake silt.

Clutched in her hand was his father’s sword. Sesshoumaru’s lip quirked as she held it out towards
him with determination stamped on her face.

“I say! That's my Valet! Where the devil have you been?!” The prince’s shrill voice rose above the furor of the room. That Kagome’s attention was fixed on Sesshoumaru and not him self seemed to incense the prince from his vapid lassitude. “What the devil is going on?! Is this your doing?” He jabbed a finger in Sesshoumaru’s direction accusingly.

As Kagome drew within arm’s reach of Sesshoumaru the dog barked loudly. "And I am done!" It jumped into the air, becoming a burningly bright ball that then exploded into sparks, dazzling all who looked upon them.

The woman turned red then pale. She rose with alacrity. “Guards! seize Him!” Sesshoumaru glanced at the finger, bemused to find it was not pointed at a Him but at a Her. Kagome appeared in no way male to him, especially with the way the wet shirt she wore clung to her torso.

"The prince's valet is in league with the sorcerer and has brought that witch to ensnare our Prince and steal your children."

There was a confused muttering through the crowd as people looked from Sesshoumaru to the Fiancé in confusion. There was no hostility directed at him… yet. His youki hearing picked out murmured discussions on the haste with which the Fiancé had moved in and the harried appearance of their prince.

Kagome stepped between Sesshoumaru and the woman on the Dais. The fine hairs down the taiyoukai’s back prickled as Kagome drew on her reiki. To his eyes, and perhaps his alone, a pale pink light shimmered across her skin… Not his eyes alone: The fiancée drew herself up and stared at Kagome as if she saw a poisonous snake.

“I know what you are! I was warned against you.” Kagome said, her words getting louder as she spoke. “You’d better leave right now or I will tell everyone what you are.”

The woman in purple hissed as though struck “You will not say such before me!”

Kagome drew in a breath “Yokubari-Onna!*”

The Fiancé stiffened and turned her entire glare on Kagome. The woman’s dark eyes had become golden, face rigid. The beauty was still there but it was a dangerous thing now – stripped of all softness.

“You will not….” There was an edge to the voice, a fluting panic.

“Shisshi-onna*” Kagome shouted, her voice humming with Reiki. The woman on the dais spasmed in pain began clawing at her dress with jagged talons, a fine fretwork of feathers appearing on her face, through her hair, her nose sharp and beak-like. “You… You dare….”

Sesshoumaru crouched slightly ready for the attack that he knew was coming from the bird Youkai as Higurashi Kagome forced it to show its true form. The crowd behind them bunched together on the edge of panic. Sesshoumaru tightened his grip on Tensaiga as Kagome drew another breath. She knew all three names? She was going to speak the demon’s third name?! He watched with fascinated horror as she wielded kotodama with a ruthlessness that was equal to many of his past bouts of destruction.

“You sent hunters to kill baby swans you bitch. You can’t hide here anymore Nest-thief! Go back to where you came.” Kagome shouted at the prince’s Fiancé as bird feathers continued to grow fast and free from the woman’s arms. The torn purple silk fluttered in ribbons and gems sparkled down
like ice shards at the woman grew in size and thrashed the air impotently with her wings.

Kagome drew a deep breath and hurled the last of the woman’s names like an arrow, pushing every ounce of reiki she could muster into the words as they left her lips.

“Amidori-woman*”

The Cuckoo-woman shrieked in terror as her feathers and gown burst into an inferno of flame. Kagome’s cry of surprise and horror was just as loud and frightened. The prince fell over backwards and attempted to crawl under his throne as his fiancé beat uselessly at her burning flesh, her cries becoming weaker and then choked off all together.

“No! I didn’t mean to hurt her! Not like that! I didn’t think I could do so much damage.” Kagome was frantic. “I just wanted to warn her off. We have to put out the fire! Quick!”

Sesshoumaru found Tensaiga pressed into his hands as Kagome pulled the gourd from her belt. She shook it fiercely, eyes closed, her lips moving in a quiet frantic prayer that made no sense to him “soda water, soda water, soda water…” Then she unstoppered the cork.

Against physical possibility water foamed and gouted from the container, fizzing violently as it splashing across the floor with the force of a fire hose. The water bubbled out, washing over the Prince who clung to his throne but too late to save the ashy remains of the fiancée who was now little more than a twisted charred form smouldering on the carpet. There was no movement. No life. Nothing more than a brief grey stain in the white foam. The cuckoo-woman was very very dead. And through Kagome’s action. Her mouth opened and closed as she sought some way to apologise for her action. Nothing emerged but a tremulous, barely audible keening.

The Prince dragged himself to standing, still gripping his throne with whitened knuckles looking from the blackened patch where his Fiancé had stood to the catatonic Kagome with her endless gourd of water and the elegant silvery figure standing behind her.

“G…Guards! Guards do Something!” His voice was a shriek of panic. “Do Something!”

Roused from the stunned disbelief that had held the entire room still and staring the palace guards shook them selves back to attention and warily turned toward the two outsiders.

Kagome couldn’t seem to tear her eyes from the spot where the Amidori-woman had stood. Everything else seemed to be covered with a haze. Sesshoumaru was not so afflicted. He took her firmly by the shoulders and spun her hard on the spot, liberally hosing the crowd around them. The marble, polished to mirror finish became treacherously slippery and one after another the women around them lost their footing and sank onto their damp posteriors. Their enormous ball gowns expanding out in tussocks of coloured silk, tulle and lace, like clumps of sodden blossoms floating on a pond surface, effectively blocking the guards approach.

At that moment the sun crested the keep wall outside and the hall was lit with the pale rays of dawn Sesshoumaru grit his teeth, waiting to be feather clad again. Sunlight sparkled off the mist of water in Kagome’s hair but nothing else stirred. His hands, both which had been clenched into her shoulders opened and then, almost of it’s own accord, one of them darted out to slap Kagome across the face, the pain shocking her back to attention.

“Wha.. Why? Oh!...oh!” Kagome’s eyes widened as the soft light glowed on the hanging pennants and the white marble walls and sharp crack of his slap echo through the hall. Sesshoumaru was still humanoid. She blinked.
There was another moment where the only sound was the stream of rushing water that still spilled from the gourd, still in Kagome’s lax hands, and out across the hall.

Then one of the cygnets shook her self and called for her mother, a clear, awake noise, and the others followed suit. Colour returning to their faces and several nobles, and one guardsman within the hall shouted in reply, wading through Kagome’s gourd’s water, and in some cases slipping to their knees, to scoop up their lost children.

The gourd trembled in Kagome’s hands and then, along with the water, horses* poured out of the opening. White and dappled grey, appaloosa with black spots and black with white blankets. A foam of horses that grew in size as they leapt to the ground, against all likely hood their flinty hooves finding purchase on the slick marble, they surged towards the huge windows,shouldering aside courtiers and breaking through the window shutters as though it were paper.

There seemed no shortage of horses, Kagome frantically tried to stop the flow with a hand. The cork seemed to have disappeared somewhere in the flood. Her hand was pushed away by the force of the flow.

Sesshoumaru huffed irritably caught one of the horses by the forelock before it could join it’s fellows, reefing it’s head around in a tight circle as he threw Kagome up over it’s withers with his free hand before swinging up himself, cursing the skirts as they hampered him. As soon as he was astride he dug his heels into the horse’s sides and let it bolt after it’s fellows, kicking up a spray of water behind them.

Chapter End Notes

*嫉視 女 ししおんあ  shisshi-onna jealousy woman
* Kotodama, as mentioned back in the Ash-child chapter, using words and names to control people
*欲張り よくばり女 yokubari onna - greed woman
*網鳥 あみどり amidori - cuckoo
* This gourd belongs to Chokaro—Japanese hermit who owns a horse which emerges from a gourd on command to take Chokaro thousands of miles a day wherever he wants to go.
The main street down to the lake was awash with water and Kagome wasn’t entirely sure if the horse she was on was running or swimming. All around them other horses, wild eyed and snorting, were stampeding down the road. The water shattered windows and doors, occasionally she saw a person frantically clinging to a part of the architecture as the waters swept past. She put her hands over her ears and closed her eyes tight. Her fault. All her fault and now one person, if not more were dead or hurt. The strap of the gourd around her wrist caught on something and dragged at her, nearly pulling her off the horse. Sesshoumaru’s hand caught her by the scruff before she fell head first into the torrent. Despite this she got a faceful of water and spluttering, realised that the gourd had been torn free from the strap and was no longer in sight.

Both the girl and the Taiyoukai were spattered with woodchips as the flood of horses battered through the town gate and washed out into the marshes. The further they got from the town the slower the horses moved. One by one they seemed to melt back into the water until, as they neared the willow thick lake edge, the very last horse, their mount, crumbled into nothing under them, depositing Kagome onto the sodden, crumpled skirts of Sesshoumaru.

The Taiyoukai rose as quickly as they’d fallen, pulling his garments out from under Kagome and immediately tearing the skirts away from his legs with claws that could at last find a purchase on the brocaded fabric. With relish he tore those pieces into smaller pieces and then proceeded to melt them. Kagome coughed a little at the fumes.

While her eyes were still watering she pulled herself up into a kneeling position. “I’m sorry I was so late Sesshoumaru-sama. I had some trouble escaping the castle. Then you weren’t at the lake anymore.” Kagome offered, her own adventures seeming at that moment nothing but a feeble justification. Then the thought of the shrieking, burning cuckoo youkai flickered behind her eyelids and she mentally shied away from the memory. Best not to think about it. Best to leave that terrible mistake alone.

“I … apologi…”

Sesshoumaru cut her off, throwing one of the few larger remaining scraps of his overdress onto the grass her. “This Sesshoumaru has no use for your platitudes. Wash and bind your wounds so we might leave this place.”

Kagome blinked and stared up at the taiyoukai in bewilderment and then looked down at herself. Her wrist was raw from the gourd strap, her legs and hands were flecked with small cuts from flood debris and her knees and foot were lacerated from her passage through the tunnel.

Now that she had noticed them they began to sting. Tears of pain and shock welled in her eyes again and she sniffed, picking up the wet fabric.

Bowing again, uncertain what to make of the taiyoukai’s somewhat out of character solicitude, Kagome limped to the waters edge and rinsed her cuts, picking the fine bits of gravel from the sole of her injured foot. Behind her came further sounds of tearing of fabric as the taiyoukai turned the dagged sleeves of his dress into strips for bandaging.

When he dropped them by her side she found herself automatically digging into her pockets for some sort of return gift. She caught herself before she proffered the only thing she still possessed - nothing but the shredded damp remains of a cardboard box that had once been painted red.
Sesshoumaru had never claimed reward or demanded anything of her specifically. She glanced up briefly. Beneath the layers of the dress, somehow, Sesshoumaru wore the tunic, leggings and a scarf of swan feathers. Tenseiga was tied at his hip again, even from where she sat she could feel the satisfied thrum of the sword and noted the taiyoukai’s hand rested on the hilt in unconscious possessiveness. Perhaps in returning Tenseiga yet again she had earned some additional degree of respect.

Sesshoumaru’s eyes narrowed as he noticed her gaze. Kagome dropped her eyes back to her bandaging.

"For what it's worth - I think this story is finished now..." She murmured, certain he would hear her.

There was an awkward silence between the two of them and then a quiet "Thank you."

It wasn't loud or specific but it had been spoken and not by her. Kagome ducked her head to hide the smile that she couldn't suppress. Sesshoumaru had actually expressed gratitude! She busied herself with binding her foot, internally leaping with unexpected happiness. Head bowed she did not see the taiyoukai approach. He moved like shadow, soundless, wary.

Sesshoumaru tentatively reached out to lift a yellowed sprig of willow leaf from Kagome's hair and...

woke up...
The room in which Sesshoumaru found himself standing was circular, the walls made of stone. Under foot were fresh tatami mats and where they met the wall they had been cleverly woven to match the curving edge. The stonework was unfamiliar –dressed differently from anything he had seen in his past travels within Japan, Korea or the Mainland.

A single window showed nothing but sky. There was no door. And Higurashi Kagome was distinctly absent.

Sesshoumaru shed his mantle of white feathers thoughtfully, holding it up in one hand. As he did he noticed old flecks of blood on the feathers and he brushed a finger over it, the rusty marks crumbling slightly at his touch.

It was not his. The scent was rich, distinctly human. He remembered the cut he had caused on the back of Kagome's hand when he first fell from the sky as a swan. He had been triumphant at being able to inflict that small harm on her at the time - when she had held such power over him. Now he was intrigued to find he regretted it somewhat. That, despite his past behaviour, she kept striving to assist hm was bemusing. He kept looking for betrayal and she kept denying him the satisfaction of being right.

The feathers ruffled and he felt himself shudder at the same time, as if somehow still linked to the garment. Then he noticed the cause of the sound: his hair had slid forward over his shoulder, brushing the feathers. However rather than coming to a rest against his arm it continued to fall, drawing a soft susurru from the feathers and the rest of his clothing.

His locks were growing at a disturbing rate...

Sesshoumaru picked up a strand of his hair. It now reached the ground and yet continued to gently lengthen, rolling over itself at his feet like a skein of fine silk. With a claw he sliced at the strands, seeking to trim it back to its usual length, as he had done in the past. But now it would not yield. Each strand seemed to have become impervious to cutting. He could not break a single fibre of it, no matter how he sawed - and his claws were sharp - they gouged the stone of the wall when he tested them. Acid and tooth had no effect either.

Nor could he pluck the hair from its roots.

Like a white serpent his hair continued to spiral down, nor did it seem to be slowing. Casting about for some means of keeping it under control before too much of it got underfoot Sesshoumaru noted a large bundle of coloured cord now resting on the surface of a low table. Neither of which had been there when he first looked about the room.

Hastily the taiyoukai tied the first of the cords at the nape of his neck and then alternated between that which already spilled down onto the floor and that which continued to grow from his head. He tied it in measures of shaku* with a different coloured cord and a different knot every sixth span to count the ken**.

By the time his hair had ceased it's mad growth it measured some twenty-six ken, four shaku and it coiled like a brightly banded white snake around him, heavy and lustrous.
Time passed and Sesshoumaru initially alternated between destructive fury, icy rage and resentful resignation in his small prison high above the world. He had clawed the walls and filled the room in acid in fury, practiced hour after hour of kata in cold rage, and, when he deigned to be resigned, the room would relent and some small means for passing time would appear.

His bouts of destruction were few from the beginning. The first and only time he flooded the room with miasma the toxic fumes ate through all of his hair cords, leaving him stumbling through yard after yard of hair. The walls could not be scored by his claws.

On the first day he had attempted to leap out the window. Several times. Each time he could get no further than half way out the sill when something would catch him by the base of his hair, preventing his forward movement. No matter how he writhed and clawed behind him there was nothing.

The room changed around him, never while he looked. At times he would turn and there would be cushions, a different table, some banner on the wall. When he was lucky there were scrolls or books. Sometimes a brush and ink.

He could throw these out the window easily enough. Had done so in some fits of temper that had afterwards shamed him. But could not follow after them himself. Below he could watch the world but was too high to clearly hear the early morning bird-calls of the woods and he found he missed them. Beyond the soughing of the wind and snippets of noise from below the only sounds were those he made himself.

Days rolled on into a week, two weeks. Beyond binding his hair in a plait, a long and fiddly task, and what weaponless kata he could do in the go-jō sized space whilst hampered by his hair, he was initially at a loss for activity. Then one morning, when he rose from meditation, he found a shamisen and bachi resting by the window.

Thoughtfully he had strummed it. The strings had sung out, but were a little out of tune. Eager to make use of the new distraction Sesshoumaru settled in to set it to rights, twiddling and tuning the entire morning until he was satisfied with the result.

Sesshoumaru had been surprised to find himself lonely for sound. The time traveling with Higurashi Kagome had been filled with noise, as had his wanderings with Rinnand Janken. He found he missed it. With the shamisen he conjured the conversations of animals and people to flow around him as they had in the past.

With the strings he could pluck the call of the shrikes in the trees, the laugh of Rinnas she splashed for fish and even the cross scoldings of Janken. They were not the same as reality but they filled the silence that surrounded him.

Unlike the scrolls, and furniture that came and went at the towers whim he kept hold of the shamisen and it tower let him keep it. Then a string on the shamisen, worn thin from use, snapped. And another. He mended them as best he could.

Day by day he rationed the time he played on it.

But now it was nearly voiceless…

Spring was drawing near, the wind carried the smell of plum blossom and Sesshoumaru, sitting by
the window in a state of near meditation, breathing the dilute fragrance, had his attention diverted by a rattling noise from below. He lowered the shamisen. There was a clatter of horse hooves on shale and a female voice cursing everything that went on four legs and bore passengers.

Leaning out the window as far as the tower would let him Sesshoumaru looked down towards the base of the tower and was pleased to recognize the rider and called out by way of curt greeting:

"You have taken far longer than I had expected"

Kagome looked up elated, and waved vigorously from her seat on the horse’s back, almost falling off. While Sesshoumaru had youkai hearing it was evident she had forgotten the fact in her relief at seeing him as she shouted a loud greeting up at his window followed by:

"Am I glad that the insanely tall tower was the right place?! I know what we're up against now."

The taiyoukai quirked an eyebrow down at her.

"Do tell.” Sesshoumaru made no effort to raise his voice for her in return and the sound was almost snatched by the wind. Kagome still caught his off hand comment, the tone droll but there was a subtle air to his posture that conveyed relief. She was learning to read his nuances and her grin widened.

From his place in the tower Sesshoumaru noted that this horse was saddle-less. Kagome, for all her clumsiness appeared to have been riding it with only a bridle. The last few times he had seen her in the presence of a horse he had been certain the girl had no idea of how to ride. There would be a story there. Perhaps he would even maneuver her into telling it. The thought surprised him. He would be interested to hear her words, her inane, babbling opinions and rambling descriptions.

He glanced down at her and the horse, his expression, unusually benign. His eyebrows communicating without words: “Well?”

Kagome hesitated then threw caution to the wind. Striking a pose she cried. "Sesshoumaru-sama, Sesshoumaru-sama - let down your...um... very long hair?"

Sesshoumaru raised a brow. She knew of his affliction then. "And why would I want to do that?"

"Well I climb up and cut it - then we both climb down... or something like that" The last part of her sentence was muttered as if she remembered something not so pleasant about that part. Sesshoumaru heard it clear enough – that bit hadn’t sounded entirely confident or eager. Kagome rallied, as if pushing some thought. "I bet you'd like to get out."

"And do you expect me to tie it to something?"

"There should be a hook by the window" She instructed.

"I assure you there..." Sesshoumaru trailed off. For there - where only stone window facing had been before was a stout hook set in such a manner that would allow him to wind his hair around it.

He rested his hand on it and looked back down at her.

"What is to stop me from lowering this Sesshoumaru now that I have found this?"

The hook gave way under his hand, falling from the window and bouncing off the ground right next to Kagome. She gave a frightened squeak and leapt back.
“Sesshoumaru-sama. The last time you really angered someone powerful you were turned into a large bird. I think playing along with the story is in the best interest of both of us.”

Sesshoumaru was about to remark that there had only been the one hook and so now there were none... then noticed that, on the other side of the window, a second hook had appeared. Sighing, very slightly, through his nose he turned to follow her instructions.

Hefting the loops of hair he had taken to wearing in a coil like a rope at his waist to keep it out of the way he payed out three shaku* from his head, to allow himself movement, then firmly looped the plait of hair around the hook. Tugging on it to be sure that THIS hook was firmly set in the wall he tossed rest of the coil out the window, watching it spiral down to the ground and beyond.

Kagome had wisely moved back out of the way to tie the horse to a tree.

Cautiously she advanced and tugged at the white silken rope. "I'm coming up."

Kagome managed to climb a few meters before her arms began to ache, another meter and a half before she sagged and her hands began to slide.

"Uh. I'm not very strong... is there any chance you could pull me up?"

"Hn" Sesshoumaru threw the three shaku of plait over his shoulder, out of the way and, with one slippered foot resting on the windowsill, easily hauled the girl the rest of the way up.

"Ojama shimasu.*" Kagome said, as formally as she could as she climbed in through the window and then carefully over the loops of hair.

Sesshoumaru snorted, unlooped his hair from the hook and relooped it back into it's coil

"That is a lot of hair... Why all the ribbons?"

"Twelve ken, four shaku. The blue for ken, the green for shaku." Sesshoumaru stated.

"Wow. You must have been bored."

"Hn"

"I am guessing you've already tried just jumping out the window."

Sesshoumaru merely raised an eyebrow at her and she ducked her head apologetically.

"I *am* sorry. I took so long to find you. I didn't have any directions to and I was a lot slower before I caught the horse."

"You. Caught a horse?"

Kagome flushed. "I don't think it was very wild to start with..."

Though that didn't give credit to the day and a half she had stalked the animal, coaxed it and finally bribed it into reach with the last of the dried apples she had found on a wizened tree. Once she'd managed to get her shirt around its neck the beast had become quite docile... and then she'd found the bridle things had gotten progressively easier.

Sesshoumaru's next word startled her.

"Tea?"
"Uh.. Yes. Please. That would be lovely."

Chapter End Notes

* shaku - 30.3cm. A pre-metric measurement still used in carpentry. gofukujaku (36.4cm) is the form of shaku used for measuring clothing and, I imagine, would be what Sesshoumaru would use for hair rather than that used for measuring wood or metal. So his hair is about 49 meters long ^_^  
** ken- six shaku or 1.818m  
* Go-jō – five tatami mat sized room. Traditional rooms are measured by how many tatami fit into the space. The room is round so this isn’t an entirely accurate measure you must understand.  
* A shamisen is a type of Japanese stringed instrument depending on the sort it can be played with the nails or a  
* Bachi – a plectrum or pick used for playing various oriental stringed instruments.  
* おじゃまします Ojama shimasu 'Please excuse my intrusion' commonly used said when entering another person’s house.
Kagome glanced around the tower room at the small square cushion that seemed to have been set out for her. In the middle of the room was now a stone heath and a tray of tea things. Neither of which, she was certain, had been there before Sesshoumaru had made his offer. There was no sense of haste in the room, no rush to escape that she had expected. The serenity seemed to soak in through her grimy ash stained jacket and soften some tight muscle near her heart.

The taiyoukai cleared his throat softly and moved to kneel beside the tea tray with a practiced grace. Kagome set aside her fidgeting and questions and knelt herself, very attentive - as she realised that Sesshoumaru wasn’t just offering tea, but was about to prepare Tea.

~o0o~

Eyeing Kagome's grubby hands Sesshoumaru had begun the tea-making with an elaborate ritualised cleansing of the hands, a basin and containers of water and towels appearing in a glance-away. An arched eyebrow in Kagome's direction had ensured that she followed his example. As he laid out the tea implements her posture subtly changed and he could hear her breathing slow. When he glanced across at he could almost picture her in formal robes. Her initially tentative attempts to copy his own fluid practiced movement in the hand-washing ritual had gradually given way to a different process than his own – unfamiliar but equally meditative and elegant.

She then, with proper deference and ceremony, though the offering was certainly not a part of any Tea practice Sesshoumaru had experienced, silently presented and offered a small handful of ripe berries wrapped in broad leaves taken from her sleeve. The tart smell of the slightly squashed fruit mixing with the fragrance of the brewing tea and Sesshoumaru savoured the moment with additional concentration.

From the corner of his eye Sesshoumaru watched as the agitated, energetic young woman centred herself and focused on Tea. Her story was left to wait as the first cups were poured, the implements silently admired, the initial sips of tea were taken.

Elegantly drawing back a sleeve he selected a berry, assessed it and ate it.

Startled by his action but also recognising that there were many subtle shades of nuance Sesshoumaru was choosing to communicate in that one action Kagome put her cup down and began her tale.

~o0o~

Kagome had been oblivious to Sesshoumaru's approach under the willow and so missed seeing him blink out of existence. She did not miss, however, the buffet of divine power that knocked her onto
her backside. When she picked herself up off the ground she was distinctly alone. Again

The silence had been temporarily deafening. She had sworn, with feeling, as much to break the silence as to relieve her feelings and had then threw a stone as hard as she could at the nearby puddle that had once been a horse.

"What am to do now?!" She had demanded of the sky. No answering epiphany ensued. Evidently she was expected to figure that out alone, again. Her gaze fell upon the pile of discarded skirts Sesshoumaru had hacked from his dress and then down at her battered feet. Drawing the small belt knife that had accompanied her Valet outfit she had set to rendering the fabric into strips.

~o0o~

Several hours of walking later, with feet liberally swathed in silk overlaid with flexible bark stripped from a tree and bound with more silk, Kagome found herself in an abandoned orchard. Leafless persimmon* trees heavy with late fruit, all but dried on the bough, grew in abundance and, having nothing better to do, nor any idea of when she might find food again, Kagome filled her pockets and then went on to make bundles of the fruit using the remnant silk rags from her pockets and burdock leaves* from the ground.

When she had all she could manage to carry Kagome turned on the spot still uncertain of where to proceed. Overgrown and crumbling on the edge of the orchard she noticed an old hut. Further investigation showed the roof had fallen in and the dirt floor was littered with building rubble but, more importantly, an overgrown path was visible leading away from the doorway and downhill. One of Miroku's past comments stirred in her memory - that people tended to settle near water and so downhill usually lead to streams and streams to towns. With that thought Kagome realised how long it had been she had thought of her companions. Just how long had she and Sesshoumaru been mired in these trails? Guiltily she hitched her parcels of fruit and hurried down the road, hopeful that it was towards wherever she was expected to be.

~o0o~

The path did eventually lead to a larger road, just as overgrown and unused as the path. As Kagome followed it she heard a croaking song and found an withered old woman sitting by the side of the road playing inexperently with a pack of cards*. Something about the sight made Kagome stop and as she realised why she noted another anachronism. For the woman was also sitting by a wooden crate marked "California-type mikan." which had Juicy-juicy-kun, a mascot she remembered from her childhood, stencilled on the side.

"Hullo child, come over, come over. Set down your bundles and have a game with me." A waving hand invited her and a slightly creased furoshiki was shaken out for her to sit on. "So many parcels My Duck – are you a merchant?"

"Not at all – I found some persimmon as I travelled and saved some for later. You are welcome to some if you like them." Kagome offered sunnily, glad of the company.

"Well in that case, shamelessly, I should love some." The old woman answered, clumsily cutting her cards. Kagome opened a pack of fruit and held it out. The old woman surprised her by not taking the expected one or two pieces of fruit but rather the entire thing

The old woman rambled in detail about her relatives and the state of the crops over the past ten years. All the while her bony fingers transferred the dried persimmons to her gap toothed mouth where they disappeared. When one package was empty she would look pointedly at the next until Kagome would avert her gaze and open another one.
"My mother always said if you ate too much fruit it a sitting it wouldn't be pleasant later…"
Kagome hesitantly opined when the elderly lady began on the sixth and final package of
persimmons Kagome had been visibly carrying.  

"Pish!" The old woman said, "Nothing wrong with eating a little bit of fruit. But look- I shall leave
one for you as you've been so nice to share." Her bony hands folded the final burdock leaf around
the last shrivelled piece of fruit carefully and she passed it back to a glum Kagome.

"And I'll give you this. I don't have much use for it anymore." She drew a small fabric bag
embroidered with geometric patterns from her sleeve.

"Uh… Thank you Grandmother," Kagome began politely, beginning to open the bag to put in her
last persimmon.

"No no!" The old woman battered Kagome's hand away. "You don't use it for that sort of thing!
That would be a waste! No watch carefully." The old woman pointed the opening of the pouch at a
large raven that was pecking at the ground some ten meters away.
" Hyakyu Hayaku! Uchi no naka ni hairu!" She cackled and the raven, evidently much to its own
surprise, was sucked into the bag which the old woman was then quick to cinched shut. A
frightened squawking came from within the small bag and Kagome opened her mouth to protest
but the old woman, just as quickly chanted "Iku! Iku! Sota ni koyou!"* and opened the sack again.
The bird fluttered out and away with all haste.

"Isn't it a neat trick. I don't use it anymore – after all the Buddha teaches that animals things should
not be eaten… and I did promise… Though one does get hungry at times. You can fit a whole cow
in this bag without trouble. Or several small people"

Kagome glanced askance at the old woman's rambling, noting a certain sharpness to the snaggled
remaining teeth and the long fingernails. Suddenly less than comfortable with the company
Kagome excused herself as quickly as she could and, once she was out of sight, set off at a trot to
put distance between herself and the old woman.

~o0o~

Some time later, while pausing for a drink at a stream, Kagome put a hand in her pocket and found
a few persimmons there. Pulling them out she turned them over on her palm and immediately
recoiled. They were all full of fat grubs hungrily munching at the orange flesh. Revolted she
emptied her pockets scrubbing her hands on her sides. The thought that the old woman had
possibly been so eagerly eating the fruit because she had noticed the insects made Kagome cringe.

~o0o~

Kagome spent the night curled in under a stand of ferns. She'd been fortunate to find a few wild
daikon and her new fire-lighting skills provided her with a supper of roasted vegetables. The
following morning saw her travelling an area that seemed to be abandoned farmsteads. Untended
fruit trees, picked clean by the birds and the wilted remains of self-sown vegetables that had not
survived the frost were abundant. The few ruined buildings Kagome had seen indicated it had been
years since people had cared for the area. But there had been people in the past and the path
continued down hill.

How much of the world she and Sesshoumaru currently travelled was real and how much had
Benten set in place, like some toy theatre for her own amusement? As Kagome meditated on this
she found herself passing through an abandoned orchard of yuzu* trees still carrying fruit. The
small bright yellow citrus would be far too tart to eat but Kagome filled her pockets nonetheless.
Though first she inspected every one she picked closely for signs of insects. The citrusy aromatic weight in her pockets lifted her heart and she found herself singing under her breath.

It was about lunchtime when Kagome, considering if she could find anything in the way of edible food when the smell of rice porridge wafted past from a crumbling little shed tucked in behind a riot of brambles and bare branched fruit trees. Hesitantly she ducked her head into the house. On the central heath was a small iron pot of rice porridge over a fire and dozing by it an elderly lady in a quilted blue jacket.

“Um…..Excuse me!?” Kagome called at the woman as the crackling sound and smell of burning rice became evident. As the woman muzzily began slowly to stir Kagome hobbled forward on her hands and knees across house floor, holding her feet in their boots up and away from the old tatami matting. Scooping up the dish cloth by the woman's side she removed the rice pot from the coals and put it on the pot holder evidently placed for that purpose.

"Pardon me for intruding – it was going to burn…” Kagome's apologies trailed off as the woman turned milky eyes towards the sound of her voice and began to put out a questing hand. "Uh- I put the rice pot just here." Kagome tapped the side of the vessel to make a noise and the old woman straightened and tidied herself. "Why thank you Missie. I just nodded off a moment – you are welcome to have share this lowly one's lunch… but what is this?! What is this?!" The old woman's hand bumped into one of the yuzu that had tumbled from Kagome's pockets and she scooped it up, snuffling at it enthusiastically. "Why yuzu? I've not had these in years."

"Uh… Please do." Kagome offered weakly even as the old woman bit down eagerly into the sour little fruit. "I've plenty more…"

The old woman scrunched through the citrus as though it were a strawberry and Kagome found herself, one by one, handing over every piece in her pockets and watching with a terrible fascination as they all disappeared down the scrawny woman's throat. To balance this though she got a large bowl of rice porridge and cup after cup of bansha tea*.

Finally the old woman sat back and took a sip of her own tea with a satisfied sigh.

"Well that it's a doubly fortunate day that these old bones met you today I've a full belly and still rice to spare. In thanks I'll give you that the cup to keep Missie – it's a good size, for all that it is a little battered but it's more than that – If you look in it's reflections you can see more than is there for the seeing in it."

"Moreover if someone seems deathly sick a glance can tell you if they're for recovery or not. If there's a dark shape at their feet a little tea from this cup will see them well again, but a shadow by their head means you may as well order the straw mat* and monk for sutras."

Kagome began to protest against the value of such an item and the old woman waved away her protests. "Not much use to me now you can surely see. I'm not planning to live much longer – you'd best take it as I'll only leave it for the mice to nest in. Now off with you – I've other tasks to finish myself."

Kagome thanked the old woman again and donned her boots, having pulled them off and left them by the door after the offer of lunch, before bowing her way out the door. As she was about to step onto the path another question about the cup struck her and she turned back to ask it, only to find the hut deserted, the floor free of tatami and the heath cold and empty of ash. As she backed out of the building it crumbled inwards and an irrationally cold shiver ran down her spine. Not pausing to question why she should suddenly be so afraid Kagome bolted down the road.
Eventually the sense of dread faded and a stitch in her side convinced Kagome to return to a walk. The landscape had opened up from the semi-wooded mountains. The ground was flattening and the fields looked less abandoned.

As the sun reached a few fingers above the horizon, on the side of the road Kagome found a large kabocha*, the nubbly edges forming a crown around the top edge that made it easy to carry using the remaining silk strips to macramé together a net bag around it. It wasn't light but Kagome rationalized that she could roast it whole in coals. The thought made her stomach growl eagerly. However Kagome had barely rounded a corner in the path when she came across a third old woman.

Hitching the pumpkin on her shoulder Kagome strode forward, now certain she was on the right track back into another tale. Three dogs, three old ladies, three shared meals and three gifts in reply. She felt a little guilty about assuming on the third gift part but the stories had been nothing if not predictable about numbers.

"Good afternoon to you Grandmother. I've just found a fine pumpkin. Would you like to share some?" Kagome asked. The wrinkled face twisted into a smile.

"Blessings be upon you young one. I was just contemplating supper…" Kagome looked down at the small pile of charcoal and the three lizards skewered on sticks over them and quashed a grimance. The old woman however had eyes only for the pumpkin. While Kagome unlaced the pumpkin and set it on the rumpled furuoshi the woman had placed on the ground for it the crone rummaged in a basket clucking for a knife.

Kagome was barely surprised when the old woman pulled the long sheathed form of Tenseiga, from the tiny wicker box and, in vain, attempted to unsheathe the sword to cut the pumpkin.

"If I may suggest it… I think this might suit a bit better…" Kagome said, warily proffering her small hunting knife hilt first. "Swords aren't really designed for vegetable cutting…” A wry inward smile at her own past use of the sword, "If you like we could even swap…"

The old woman's face lit up as she took the knife and, checking the edge with her thumb, she thrust Tensaiga out towards Kagome with her other hand. Cautiously and politely Kagome accepted the swords with two hands. The pulse of recognition that jarred through Tensaiga's hilt at her touch was so sharp that Kagome almost dropped the blade. Her fingers tingled at the silent buzz that vibrated through the sword like the happy whine dog finding a friend in an unfamiliar crowd.

By the time Kagome had used her silk scraps to make a strap to secured Tensaiga to her belt the pumpkin had been raggedly hacked into slices like a watermelon and, despite appearing to have few remaining teeth the old woman was enthusiastically eating it raw. Piece after piece of marrow disappeared into the rapidly working mouth until one last small piece of pumpkin remained. The old woman looked at it longingly and then began to fold it up into the grubby cloth.

"No. It's quite alright." Kagome hastened to say, eyeing what appeared to be old snail tracks running across the fabric. "You keep that bit too. I'm not all that hungry."

The old woman's fingers closed around the pumpkin and it disappeared into her sleeve swiftly

"Good fortune to you then child. An' if I were you I'd get off this path quick as you can." The old woman said, scooping up her three lizards and her basket.

"Why would you say that?" Kagome asked and followed the old woman's gaze further along the track. Ahead came the rumble of hooves intermingled with cries of fear and pain.
looked back the elderly woman was gone. The sound of horses drew nearer and, deciding on caution over curiosity for a change, Kagome threw herself into the underbrush.

Chapter End Notes

A cultural note on tea: The Japanese tea ceremony as we know it today developed in the late Muromachi period (mid to late 1500’s). The Sengoku Jidai, the warring states period where Inuyasha and co live, includes this time period but I am playing it that it would take time for such ceremonial style changes would to filter into Yokai practice. As much of the origins of Japanese culture is highly influenced by Chinese innovations I decided Sesshoumaru would be well versed in the tea practices or China rather than that of modern day Japan. Being a daughter of a temple I imagine Kagome would have been expected to be well versed in all forms of the elegant arts for a lady – hence her own, modern, ritual behaviour while taking tea.

I don't practice myself, however I've read enough culture based texts (and manga on the subject) to know one of the fundamental aspects of the Japanese Tea Ceremony is the understanding that every meeting is a once in a life-time occurrence and so should be recognised as such by all involved. Kagome’s offering of the fruit is NOT a part of any Tea ceremony I know about but I wanted her to bring something to the process and in modern Tea ceremony a sweet is offered by the host and eaten by the guest prior to drinking the tea.

* Persimmon (Diospyros kaki), in Japanese Kaki (栃). There are two forms of persimmon – astringent and sweet. The sweet ones can be eaten from the tree like an apple when they are a deep orange. The astringent ones have to be either left on the tree or picked and allowed to ripen until they are very soft or else dried to be palatable.

* Burdock (Arctium lappa) in Japanese Gobou (牛蒡) – the roots and leaves are used in cooking but it also grows wild/feral. There are varieties of edible burdock in England and Australia too. Probably all over the world.

* Playing cards were introduced by the Portuguese in and around the late Edo-Meiji time and so didn't, to my small bit of research, exist in Japan in the Sengoku period ^_^ Juicy-Juicy-kun is my invention but I am sure there exists one somewhere in the Japanese mascot world.

* Furoshiki (風呂敷) are squares of fabric of a variety of sizes and often used as a wrapping cloth. The kanji is basically ‘Bath cloth’ – indicating the use of the item to wrapping one's clean clothing and toiletries in when going to public baths.

* Yuzu (柚子) A yellow citrus fruit and about as palatable as a kaffir lime for eating raw. This is used in a lot of deserts and as a flavoring for alcohol – if you've ever tried ume-shuu (plum wine) yuzu-shuu is equally delicious

* Bansha- a variety of roasted rice green tea often drunk with meals

* Order the straw mat - The old woman is being somewhat crude: in anime and samurai movies you will often see dead bodies, particularly the poor and murder victims, covered by straw matting, presumably for several reasons - the dignity of the
dead person, the sensibilities of the onlookers and to keep off the flies.

*Kabocha (かぼちゃ) – Japanese pumpkin.
Horses rushed by. Big glossy fat horses with brocaded saddle blankets and black lacquered tack, laden with silk tassels across their breast bands. They tossed their heads and fretted, stomping and dancing as their riders drew rein. From what could be seen of the men through her screen of leaves they wore rich arrangement, unarmored but serious of face. One carried a large bundled shape carefully before him. Kagome held her breath and shrank deeper under her bush.

"You there! Peasant! Stop groveling and tell us where the nearest healer is!" commanded the most elegantly dressed. Kagome crouched deeper into the vegetation hoping that there was someone else visible. And that no harm would come to them or her.

"Oi. Come out of there!" The tip of his stick of office jabbed her in the shoulder as the man leant down and poked her. "You're not fooling anyone in there. Not in that bright jacket."

Blushing Kagome crawled out from under the foliage and bowed meekly. "I am very sorry. You startled me."

"Enough. You will take us to the nearest healer," she was informed. "And with haste."

"I... um... I don't know this area... I am a traveller but I do know some healing myself. I am a miko you see." Kagome offered. The spokesman raked a glance down her battered red over jacket, somehow mercifully Japanese in style again, to her silk bound feet.

Kagome's ears glowed. "I have had some troubles recently trying to get back to my own shrine. What is the matter - I may be able to help."

The spokesman scowled at her and his horse danced nervously on the spot, rolling it's eyes, he reined it in brusquely. "I very much doubt..."

His words were cut out by the large bundle behind him whimpering and spasming. The horseman holding it cried out and struggled to prevent his charge from falling. Several of the other riders dismounted and flung their reins aside, rushing to help.

The cloth wrapped form turned out to be a boy of seven or eight, blotched and feverish. His teeth chattered and occasionally he jerked in violent convulsions. Kagome was instantly by his side, resting a hand over his forehead.

"I've not seen anything like this before," Kagome said. "And you have no medicines with you? Nothing?!"

They shook their heads and Kagome's heart sank.
"Nothing but trail food. We'd no time to do more – we had to escape the plague," one of the horsemen offered.

"A Plague?! And this child has it?!" Kagome asked, her heart sinking further. Photographs of the diseases that had plagued depression period Japan danced frighteningly from her memory, barely watched history documentaries from school reared their terrifying heads.

"Not when we started out," was a defensive reply. "He's our Lords only son! We couldn't leave him once he took ill!"

Kagome bit her lip and then remembered the crone's rice bowl. "Have you water… better yet water and tea… Have you any tea?"

The spokesman looked at her as though she was deranged. "The child is dying of the plague. Tea won't do anything."

Kagome drew in a deep breath and straightened, calling on the arrogant theatrics she had used to fool the giant she drew herself up and fixed the lead horseman with her most authoritative look. Almost unconsciously she drew on her reiki, drawing the glittering holy power around her to mask her shabby clothing and smudged face with a heat wave of purity. In her sleeve the bowl sang like a prayer bell and Tensaiga at her hip hummed enthusiastically.

"I carry with me the sacred item of my shrine, a Cup of Destiny. Only let me fill it with tea and, if the gods will it, I shall heal the boy."

The spokesman attempted to stare her down but behind her, awed by the sense of purity that had washed over them all like a spring breeze one of the horsemen scrabbled for his saddlebags while another freed a bamboo water canister from his saddlebow. Kagome kept the leader's gaze and she could see him bristle at this undermining of his authority. He did not stop them however.

"The water is already warm from being beside my horse's flesh… will it do holy one?" Asked the young man that bore it to her, awe and a faint degree of fear written on his face. Inventing shamanistic flim-flam even as she took the water, nodded reassuringly but aloofly at the man. As she turned to the man with a small bamboo canister of tea she reassured them.

"The strength of your horse will be in this water, and the swift growth to recovery will be in this tea, granted by the bamboo that has carried it." Kagome rinsed her hands carefully, drying them on a cloth proffered silently by the headman.

She held out the teacup for it to be filled by its holder with one hand. With the other hand she gestured for a teaspoon's worth of tea to be tipped into her palm. Ceremony was half of the magic in religion. Kagome had been raised to these tasks and from her O-Jiji* knew how to embellish them. She closed her fingers tightly over the tealeaves.

"Shinjuku, Harajuku, Shibuya, Akihabara*!" Kagome changed softly, blowing on her closed fist and embuing the water in the tea bowl and the dried tea with as much Reiki as she could. Hopefully that would deal with any bacteria. She fully intended to test her reiki with a microscope when she got home again.

Another idea occurred to Kagome as she shook the leaf from her palm into the cup. Transferring the still damp cloth to protect her hand as she directed her spiritual energy into the cup, heating it as she had her firewood in the past. The water simmered and boiled. The tea leaves would be scalded, bitter, but the water sterilized. An audible hiss of breath was drawn from the headman, he took a step closer despite himself.
Looking at the reflection of the child in the tea's surface proved harder than Kagome had expected. Eventually she bade the strongest of the horsemen, all of whom had since dismounted and were watching her with a gamut of emotions that ranged from reverent to disbelief, to lift the child carefully. As the old woman had described – a small dark man knelt at the boy's feet.

Kagome let out a deep breath of relief. "The gods are merciful. Let him sip from this sacred vessel and all will be well." She glanced at the head horseman, expecting some opposition. He looked searchingly at her and she noted a glimpse of pathetic hope behind his rigid face.

Oh Gods be kind. Let this work. Please do! Kagome sent up a prayer as she rested the tea bowl on the lad's lip and tilted it. Weakly he began to shake his head, spluttered and swallowed. A second sip and Kagome withdrew the cup, watching in awe as his feverish blush faded and the gaunt face became healthy again. The boy opened his eyes and looked up at the large man cradling him in his arms. A slightly peevish voice piped from his mouth. "Akibi! Why are you carrying me?! I am a grown man now and no one should carry me!"

The child struggled to stand and his captor gently lowered him to the ground, helping him get free of the swaddling fabric that had held him. There were shouts and tears and then, as a man, all but the confused child in his under robes, they knelt reverently to Kagome and bowed their heads ~o0o~.

As the revived boy was lifted onto a horse the Spokesman, Hiruki-san, completely thawed by Kagome's success, having introduced himself, asked in a hushed voice, "Your sacred charge is truly a gift from the gods. How do you come to be travelling alone and in such a …"

"Untidy state?" Kagome finished smiling wryly and inventing furiously. "It was decided after the third bandit attack on the pilgrimage that a single humble petitioner would be more pleasing to the gods than a vermilion palanquin with attendants. Alas the gods saw fit to break my journey several times. Yet I hope to soon return to my shrine."

"It would seem the gods have favoured us, while halting your progression. A terrible illness has struck our town and our Lord's household. Will you come and set it right with you divine gifts Miko-sama?"

Kagome hesitated. She should hurry to find Sesshoumaru but how much of this crisis was real and how much Benten's invention? She had been given an amazing gift. To not use is would be a greater evil than she could allow. For all she knew this was where she was meant to be.

"Yes Hiruki-san. I will give what assistance I can."

Chapter End Notes

*mon are family crests. These round designs are seen on formal kimono, as decorative features on precious objects and in architecture. The hollyhock crest, paulonia plant and chrysanthemum are all commonly seen designs.

*Ojiji – Grandfather. Horribly anglicised in Vis comics into "Gramps" from memory.

*Shinjuku 新宿, Harajuku 原宿, Shibuya 渋谷 and Akihabara 秋葉 are all stations on the Tokyo loop line. ^_^ Fine Juju-chant for a medieval period where the language
will have changed distinctly since.
A bad decision is worse than spilt milk

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kagome sat reflectively on the newly wrought stone bench before her small dwelling and watched with satisfaction as the townspeople passed, going about their business. A mere three days had passed since she had arrived in the large settlement.

After returning the young heir to the lords keep and curing all of the staff that showed signs of the pestilence Kagome had insisted on being free to tend to the populous. This had lead to two days non-stop attending to the infirmed, followed in her rapid progress by endless round of pages bearing jugs of hot tea.

The bowl had been better than penicillin, better than antibiotics. And miraculously only a few, the very old, had been found with the shinigami sitting at their heads. Kagome had apologized to their relatives, ensured they were as comfortable as could be and left them to pass on, hastening to the next plague sufferer. These had even been less, and the plague not as virulent, than she had expected. Now everything seemed fine… And she felt like a medical Midas – everything (well almost everything), was healed beneath her touch. She knew she really ought to get on with finding Sesshoumaru but just another day or two here to be sure then she would slip away. The town healer, unfortunately, having been a victim to the disease shortly before Kagome’s arrival.

In the mean time she had a house to herself. Despite the best attempts of the local lord and his retinue she had insisted on not being guested in the fortified mansion. Instead she had requested and been the of a small town house where she might be available as a healer. She didn’t need to cook or do any general chores – the younger girl of the village were eager to take it in turns serving the ‘priestess’ who had potentially saved many of their family members from death.

“Uh… Kagome-sama….I am very sorry….” Kagome roused from her brief foray into smug self-satisfaction. Aiko, the daughter of the dry goods store was kneeling in the middle of the open veranda behind Kagome. She had been cleaning but now held a rag to her hand. “This clumsy one cut herself on the jizai-kagi…”

“Ah – let’s have a look at it.” Kagome said, dusting her hands on her skirts before peeling back the cloth. A shallow cut ran across the heel of Aiko’s hand from her little finger almost to her wrist, it had almost stopped bleeding.

“It doesn’t look very bad. I’m sure we can clean it and you’ll be fine.” Kagome reassured. She’d seen Souta and his friends come home with far worse injuries from playing basketball.

~o0o~

Two days later Aiko’s mother came to fetch Kagome. The cut had not healed and Aiko admitted that her hand now felt unpleasantly tingly where it didn’t hurt. Kagome hastened to see. The wound became puffier and then septic over the next three days. Kagome tried her best to keep it clean, several times she lanced the oozing mess in order to relieve the pressure but that only seemed to make the wound worse. Aiko began to rapidly lose weight and began to refuse food. Kagome began to ask around for local medicinal plants but was told again and again that the healer, having passed with the plague, had left no apprentice. In her own world small injuries were so easily mended but here in the feudal period, she had been increasingly aware, they could be fatal. But through her travels with Sesshoumaru, both fortunate with their health, she had forgotten this. Aiko
gave way to a mounting fever. Her mother, Mika, spent most of her time by her child’s side, every
time Kagome entered the room the weary eyes of the woman were upon her.

‘It’s not fair!’ Kagome thought aggressively sitting by where Aiko now lay on her own bed palette.
‘No one should have to die from something as trivial as a small cut.’ Her eye fell on the magic
bowl resting by the hearth. It couldn’t be as bad as the plague had been – why hadn’t she thought
of this earlier?

Kagome lifted the bowl and tilted her head to gaze at the girl. The small dark figure sat at the girl’s
head, it’s long pale fingers brushing her temples. Kagome’s heart gave a skip in her chest.

“Shikigami-san…. Must you take this girl?” Kagome asked the bowl. From Mika there was a sob
of loss. The being nodded deeply. Kagome’s mind raced. Then she thought of the first old
woman’s gift. Holding the bowl steady she slowly drew the faded sashiko bag from where it had
been tucked in her obi.

“Shinigami-san Can you see what I have here?” She asked the reflection in the bowl. The pale face
looked up at her with milky white eyes framed by impossibly long white lashes, like cobwebs. It
was the face of a child, terrifyingly old. Kagome clumsily opened the bag with her free hand.

“Shinigami-san : Hayaku Hayaku! Uchi…uchi no naka ni hairu!” There was a hiss of surprise and
then fury as the shadow-being was torn from it’s place at the child’s head and dragged from the
reflection and into the sack. Frantically Kagome drew the cords at the mouth of the bag tight and
tied them in a knot, and another knot and another until there was no cord left to tie.

“Mama?!?” The Aiko’s querulous voice rose from the blankets. “Mama it was so dark…” She was
scooped up by Mika who, between sobs, bowed to Kagome over her daughter’s body.

Kagome carefully turned over the girls hand – the cut, though still raw, no longer had the threads
of dark decay radiating out from it. She had saved her!

Chapter End Notes

*Shinigami – death god – Generally there are more than one Shinigami – often
depicted as coming to collect souls, escort the dead to the next world. They are
popularly used or appear as characters in manga.
*Jizai kagi is the pothook that hangs over traditional Japanese hearths – many that I’ve
seen pictures of have a fish involved in the ironwork. Mmm old iron and sharp edges,
a recipe for tetanus.
Aiko recovered, more or less, but her little finger didn't.

When the digit darkened, then continued to blacken and wither, when the remaining mild infection appeared to be definitely moving down into the hand, Kagome swallowed her pride and took Aiko to the next village over, and then next one over from that in order to find a healer with experience in amputation.

With Aiko sleeping off the anaesthetic herb tincture, her hand now short a finger, Kagome and Youko, village midwife and bone-setter of that village, quietly discussed healing matters over tea. Learning that Kagome had spiritual powers, Youko begged Kagome's advice. Others in the village who had been close to death continued to linger.

Too frail to rise but unable to quite let go of life. Youko was bewildered.

One of her patients was a woodcutter who had been partially crushed by tree fall. He should have been dead by the time he was found by family members. His skull and ribcage had been partially crushed. He lay in a coma tended by his grieving wife who could do nothing but wait. Youko was only a healer but Kagome, her guest, was a miko! Could she not petition the gods or exorcise whatever prevented the poor man from passing on?

Kagome hesitantly allowed herself to be led to the small hut on the edge of the village. They were met by a haggard looking woman, her face tight with fatigue. She too looked at Kagome with pathetic hope when Youko introduced them. Inside the house, like the others Kagome had visited it was shabby but scrupulously tidy. Even so the smell of blood, old and fresh lingered. By the hearth, covered in patched blankets, lay a human figure, its head visibly misshapen and swathed in bandages through which fresh blood seeped. Kagome averted her eyes feeling queasy. The only sound, apart from the soft roil of the kettle on the hearth, was the ragged bubble of the injured man's breath.

The two women looked at Kagome expectantly. Awkwardly she pulled the magic tea bowl from her sleeve and held it out for tea to be poured into it. Everyone in the region by now had heard of the famous divining chawan*. Carefully angling the cup she looked at the man. Nothing. Just his reflection. No shinigami form…

Kagome set the bowl down before her and closed her eyes to focus on drawing out her reiki. There was a soft indrawn breath from one of women – evidently her power had manifest strong enough visible. Kagome opened her eyes and Looked out through the veil reiki. Where, on her peripheral vision, the souls of the women filled their bodies and sparked with the semblance of health the man's soul was a small grey lump at the core of his body. Withered and dormant but hard, as though solidified and unable to transcend. There was no taint of demon influence. No lingering incense of divine power. Nothing but a drained soul unable, it seemed, to leave the body that was now a cage

Even as Kagome shook her head sadly at the hopeful women in denial of any spiritual remedy her thoughts slid guiltily sideways to the sashiko bag hidden in the thatched roof of her own hut back in the other village. Her earlier exultant thought "I've caught Death! I've caught Death in a sack!" returned to her. At the time she had thought she had just captured Aiko's death… but could it be everyone's?
Relentlessly Youko chivied Kagome to check on all of her other patients – old and young. Most were the paper frail elderly, those waiting and ready for death. After the first three Kagome ceased looking into the bowl. No one waited by their feet or heads to carry them away. Her reiki-vision showed her the souls shrivelling and grey on those that were surely past death.

As they returned to check on Aiko’s recovery Youko suddenly stooped and picked up a stone and hurled it at someone lurking between the houses. Kagome started in shock as the otherwise friendly midwife’s face became a mask contorted with fury and disgust. "You*! Clear off! I don't want you near by drawing in the bad spirits with your impurity!" Youko shouted, advancing on the figure and searching for another stone. Kagome grabbed the woman's arm to stop her attack, looking in bewilderment for why Youko was suddenly so aggressive. The victim was a young girl, even younger than Kagome. She stood pale and swaying, one hand resting on the daub wall for support, staring at Kagome blankly, her hair dripping and littered with water-weed. Her clothing was ragged, torn and patched, the wet fabric clinging to her swollen belly.

"Who is she? What has she done wrong?" Kagome asked. "She's only a child…"

Youko spat in the heavily pregnant girl's direction. "That is the village slut. She gives good men the pox and my husband died of it. No one will claim her child, she won't be able to feed it and it will die, the same as the last one. She should drown herself."

Kagome looked in horror at the Healer, her own morality appalled despite the awareness that scapegoats were a common part of Sengoku period village life.

Kagome's bile rose as she looked at the girl again, despite her fear of what she knew she would see reiki tinted her vision. Not one but two small grey blotches marked the trapped souls of the should-be-dead.

"I… I think she has already tried…"

The girl shuddered and turned, stumbling away in a manner that put Kagome unpleasantly in mind of old horror movies.

"Yuko… I… I need to get back to my village quickly… I think I know what is wrong with your patients. Do you think Aiko would be alright to travel if I carried her?"

Youko, the scapegoat gone from her sight, was all smiles again, "No need! No need! I'll have Hangi-san carry her for you. He's not bright but he is as strong as an ox and very obedient."

Kagome drew in a breath trying to word it right. "Yuko I need two favors of you. The first - is there is another priestess or even a priest in the area? I need to consult with someone else about this matter."

Youko looked blank for a moment then her brows cleared "No priests exactly but the nearest thing would be the village head's grandfather Jūjō-jii-san*. He often consults with monks of pilgrimage and lives near the graves behind your village."

Kagome nodded and plunged into the bigger favour. "My other favour Youko san,- and this may be hard for you but the gods will see and reward you for it: Find that girl and be kind to her. Find her food and somewhere safe to live for however long she has left. " Kagome scrabbled in her satchel for anything of value. Her hand closed on the bowl. It had been broken in the past and mended with gold. An earlier cleaning had revealed that the cracks had all been overlaid with an even coating of the precious metal. She put the tea-bowl in the stunned healers hands.

"You know what this is. You will be the keeper of this sacred item… But you must promise you'll look after that girl."

"Of…of course…" Youko looked pole-axed. "Did the gods give you a divine message about me? About her?!"
Kagome shook her head, frustrated at cultural barriers and moral values that were beyond her ability to change. "I can't tell you but please…"

Youko knelt before Kagome could stop her, formally bowing in reverence. Kagome felt even sicker. All this power over these people's belief and she was abusing it without even thinking about it. But to not do something for the drown'd girl…. Either way she damned herself.

~o0o~

The miles had seemed shorter on the return journey. A decision she'd rather put off had to be made and it seemed to hurry towards her. Kagome had escorted the simple but friendly Hangai in returning Aiko to mother's hut, rewarded him with foodstuffs to take home with him before she had sought Jūjō-jii. Kagome found the old man at dusk, sitting on a rock before his house. Tea was offered and declined. Kneeling before the elderly man in seiza* Kagome cautiously explained the nature of the bowl, the child's illness and the sack. The man's face remained still as she described the shinigami she had captured and the state of Youko's should-be-dead-patient's souls. She couldn't bring herself to describe the drowned girl.

"What should I do Jūjō-jii-san?"

The old man said nothing but continued to stare over her head in thought as he had the entire time she spoke.

Silence reigned.

In the undergrowth near the house a rat or lizard scuttled on its way. A cricket began to call and stopped.

Kagome, despite her practice with Sesshoumaru, found herself trying to fill the vacuum "I don't think the situation can be left as it is….but I don't entirely know what will happen if I let the shinigami out…. What should I do?"

The old man lowered his gaze to pierce her own.

"Child. If you are truly responsible then you must take responsibility. This you already know."

Kagome bowed her head glumly. "I know… I just don't want to be…” She rose and bowed, "Thank you. I guess..."

~o0o~

A long stick, a box to stand on, and a bit of poking in the thatching freed the small bag. Kagome picked it up reluctantly. To fingers prodding on the outside it felt empty.

Taking a deep breath Kagome undid the knots one by one and tentatively opened the mouth of the bag…

Empty.

The old woman's words muddled up from her memory, fragmented and ill remembered.

What was it… to call something in she could remember well enough, but to call something out again…? Kagome held the well bag away from her and extrapolated from memory:

こっち！こっち！ここに行こう！*

Nothing happened. She reviewed her word choice, remembered how the second part had gone and tried again:

早く！早く！外に行こう。

Still nothing, Kagome subtly, perhaps foolishly, relaxed. She could be here sometime trying combinations of words before she got it. Sitting down she tried a third time:

来る！来る！外に行こう。
The roiling cloud of fury that boiled out of the tiny sack threw her backwards, billowing and erupting as the correct words release it from imprisonment. Kagome failed to land well and bumped her head hard on the wooden floor. She managed to push herself up onto an elbow in time to see the cloud draw in on itself, solidify and furiously launch at her.

She threw up an arm automatically to protect her face and her Reiki sprang up with a roar to protect her. Cutting through the other noises was a wine-glass-rim-sharp growl, red and primal as claret, resonating between her and the shinigami. The strike she had expected did not come.

Kagome lowered her arm, looking for the source of the new noise. Through the glow of her aura and illuminated by the burning remains of the sashiko bag where it lay on the coals of the hearth she saw Tensaiga. The sword has been knocked from it's cloth draped sanbō* and now lay on the ground between Kagome and the shinigami.

The katana, only partially sheathed now, was vibrating like a bee, gradually wriggling out of it's sheath like an object on top of a washing-machine gravitates towards the edge and the brief freedom of gravity. The cloud drew in on itself, solidifying until the small, pallid child faced creature that had been drawn away from Aiko's head stood on the floor staring venomously at Kagome, shadows roiling around it like water vapour.

Hissing the creature tried to reach a hand to Kagome over the sword. Tensaiga buzzed the more furiously, working it's way entirely free of the sheath it rocked like a landed fish, slicing the air near the creatures 'fingers'. It snatched back it's hand.

Risking her own fingers Kagome scrabbled forwards on her knees to grasp Tensaiga's hilt welcoming the familiar irritated prickle of youki on her skin that made her reiki flare jealously. There was a snarl of conflict between the two opposing powers that surrounded her as reiki and youki clashed for dominance. Kagome's teeth clattered at the jarring disruptive energies that coursed over her skin warring with each other. It might have caused her injury if the shinigami hadn't, at that moment, attempted to attack her while her defenses appeared down.

Like a pair of hunting hounds distracted from a minor squabble by the appearance of a dangerous boar Tensaiga and Kagome's reiki arced together, dragging the girl to her feet. Tensaiga gripped her arm and drew itself up to point at the shinigami. The creature cringed back as the reiki and youki combined, forming a pure and glittering, acidic and aggressive barrier of energy to protect 'their' miko.

The creature hovered angrily, aware that to come closer was to risk injury. Despite it's animalistic fury Kagome tried to communicate.
"I am at fault. I shouldn't have done what I did. You've a lot to put right – I apologise for that. But I don't intend to die here today."

The shinigami clenched and unclenched it's fists. Blood, black and steaming, trickled from the cuts it's nails made in it's palms and the floor charred where the drops fell.
"Then I want none of you!" Spat the creature, it's voice a stony scrape, "watch alone and suffer as you like." It turned and stalked from the house, disintegrating into smoke that was dispersed by the breeze.

In the hearth the magic bag continued to burn rapidly, flickering emerald and safflower briefly the ashes seemed to writhe in on themselves. There was a sharp hydrogen-spark pop as the core of the bag suddenly tugged in on itself, entirely disappearing, along with the all the flames . Kagome poked the fireplace with a finger – the remaining ashes were ice cold.

From nearby rose a wailing keen Kagome recognised as the voice of Aiko's mother. Lowering the sword she sat down again numbly. Death had claimed the child after all…
Kagome rested her head on her grimy forearms where they crossed, braced on the handle of a shovel. She could feel the slow swell of blisters on her palms and welcomed the penance she associated with the pain. The last of the elderly were now buried, as was Aiko. A plain wooden marker with a hastily painted name marked each grave. Mika, Aiko’s mother had refused to look at Kagome. The villagers had avoided her with a mixture of respect and fear. A priest had been found and asked to recite the prayers for the dead. They were polite, respectful, but unyielding. A wall of grieving humanity that blocked her assistance as word had passed around the now shell-shocked community.

The only thing Kagome had been allowed to do was help dig the graves and even the she'd had to insist.

Now, looking up from her shovel Kagome found the entire village, including Aiko's mother had gathered, close knit and were watching her. One, the village head, stepped forward.

"We don't want you here Miko-sama, your god has left us. This is not your place and you'd best go now. You have caused enough grief trying to help."

Pointedly one of the people stepped forward and put a large furoshiki wrapped box on the ground before her. Kagome's heart sank, she couldn't even muster resentment, they had had evidently packed all of her small effects already. The only thing visibly missing was…

The crowd parted and two men stepped forward carrying….

Good gods – they'd ripped up the floorboards under Tensaiga's sanbō rather than risk touching the sword. Kagome wondered if any of them had even tried…

Feeling rather like a leper Kagome gathered her things and, even as she was about to bow and depart, she was struck in the face by a handful of salt*. Mika, tears running down her face, scrabbled a shaking hand in a ceramic jar trying to get enough to throw a second handful. Her neighbours tussled gently but silently with her, dragging her away back to her own hut.

Kagome let her head fall forwards, resisting the urge to wipe away the salt she could feel caught in her eyebrows. Her eyes itched with dryness. She'd no more tears left in her it seemed. She bowed a second time and turned, walking numbly away. Behind her there wasn't a movement, not a rustle of cloth to indicate that anyone stirred. She could feel the barricade of grim faces pushing her away up the path. She'd destroyed a community through ignorance.

The sky was streaked with black smoke from the myriad of funerary pyres Kagome turned and looked back over her shoulder . She shuddered, seeing in her minds eye the rows of peacefully dead, hidden beneath woven straw mats. A confused buzz drew her attention to the sheathed sword that had rested silently in her hand until then.

"Which way Tensaiga? Which way is Sesshoumaru?" The sheath trembled a moment and then twitched distinctly tangential to the road. Kagome scrubbed her face with her hands, drew in a deep breath and set out in that direction.

She found the horse three days later. Sesshoumaru another three days after that.

Kagome gave a brittle laugh as she ran a finger around the lip of her tea bowl, her eyes focusing on the reflection in her cup.

The inner calm that had settled around her during the preparations to take tea had been abraded
away by her telling of the story. Brushing his sleeve out of the way with elegant fingers Sesshoumaru began the ritual of cleaning and packing aside the tea implements. Kagome gratefully fell back into the familiar pattern of ceremony and pushed her memories aside.

"I still don't know what was expected of me back there." She finally added, "...If I did the right thing or not. Some how I don't think I did, but I got here so I suppose that tale is over. I wish I could just forget it all together."

Sesshoumaru made no comment but he looked closer at the human woman noting new lines of grief, exhaustion and, fastidiously, dirt, creasing her face.

She turned her cup listlessly staring through it and he found himself sliding a small, untouched plate of red bean confections closer to her free hand. She didn't stir. Then she suddenly stiffened, shivered and looked up suddenly focused.

"There's something comi...." Kagome had half turned, rising from where they had been sitting but Sesshoumaru, belatedly feeling a wash of malevolent ki from afar, was already at the window.

The two of them looked out across the forest, roiling from the horizon, across the wind, was a turbulent cloud like smoke but an unhealthy green grey. At the ground below the horse was stirring restlessly and tugging at the rope with which Kagome had tied it to the tree. Around it's stomping hooves it small animals fled from the underbrush, birds pelted by, voicing agitated calls.

"What IS That?!" Kagome breathed, her narrative totally forgotten. Sesshoumaru narrowed his eyes, assessing the unfamiliar energy, aware that, for some reason, the Miko had noticed it that fraction before he himself had.

Chapter End Notes

*塗壁 (ぬりかべ) Nurikabe - a japanese monster in the form of a wall that shows up and blocks the way at night - making people lost (usually drunk people. Go figure.)
*茶碗 (ちゃわん) Chawan – tea bowl. There you have been fractionally further educated
* Jūjjōjin is one of the seven gods of fortune, again for longevity. Jujo-jii is a play on his name – being Old-man-Jūji
*Seiza – A formal kneeling position. Often used in anime when one is repentant or awaiting punishment.
*三宝 sanbō is a name for the little tray on a base you will see used for making offerings on Shinto shrine. I figured in a spare hut Tensaiga wouldn't be left on the floor or placed on a shelf. There would need to be somewhere for it to 'sit' but it would also need to be something that reflects the respect Kagome has for the katana.
*salt : is often used in purification rights. This along with red beans, according to Japanese folklore can be thrown at bad things to scare them off.
Meanwhile... on the way to Enoshima

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“How much further is it to Enoshima?! We’ve been walking for hours! I could just run there and deliver the damned thing in a flash. You’re all too slow!”

Inuyasha growled and kicked at a ri* stone half hidden in the rank long grass that edged the road.

Miroku walked on past him as the hanou hopped cursing. The stone had been buried deeper than he had expected.

“Inuyasha-kun we’ve only been on the road for a half day. You’ve no real reason for complaint. We’ve not yet even reached the border between provinces. If this is meant to be a pilgrimage then each step should be made with consideration.”

“Sooner we get there sooner we get Kagome back…” The hanyou froze, ears perked. Shippo, who had been picking lint off a lollypop he’d found in his clothing, and Kirara in Sango’s arms also twitched their ears and stared in the same direction. Shippo sniffed loudly then sneezed. “’S familiar somehow.”

“Keh. No real threat. Just the Bastard’s goldfish droppings*.”

They rounded the bend in the road and then Sango and Miroko too, could hear the monologue of bickering that had attracted the youkai’s attention:

In the middle of the road, berating his charge for stopping yet again to climb off the dragon creature Ah-Un*’s back was the small green imp that travelled with Sesshoumaru. Ignoring the imp to search the sedgy growth beside the road was Sesshoumaru’s ward.

Janken and Inuyasha immediately began to throw incriminations at each other. Ignoring them and wary of the dragon who appeared, at the present, placid enough, Sango, Shippo and Miroku greeted the young and somewhat bedraggled girl.

“Might I ask what you and your friends are you doing on this lovely day?” Miroku opened with, ignoring Sango’s rolled eyes.

“Looking!”

“For Sesshoumaru?” Sango asked, leaving Inuyasha and Janken to squabble

“No Sesshoumaru sama will come and find us when he wants to. Until then we’re just looking. I found a flower and three round pebbles! Soon I will start looking for dinner. I might find some fish.”

The girl proffered her cupped hands, revealing her treasures. Only Shippo paid any close attention to the objects, muttering that one of the pebbles looked more like a mud ball than a rock. Rinnrefuted his claim. While the children were subjecting the items to a closer examination Sango and Miroku had a quiet discussion over their heads.

“I don’t think she should be left alone with a two headed dragon and….,” Sango trailed off. The two remaining humans of the inu-tachi party shared a glance at the small green demonoid who was
“Mahhh” Miroku shrugged negligently and turned his back on them, “I’m sure those two will be friendly enough once they’ve worked out their differences.”

“Neh, Rin-chan would you like to come along with us? We’re going to visit a temple on an island in the ocean.” Sango crouched,

“There will be lots of stone on the beach!” Shippo suddenly piped in tossing aside what had turned out to be a mud-ball after all. “And seashells! I can show you how to catch sand crabs- you can eat them!”

“You can stay with us and help us until Sesshoumaru comes back for you. Would you like that?” Sango asked.

“Really?! Yes please!” Rinnounched her hands at the thought.

Janken broke from his tussle with Inuyasha at this point to decry against the plan but Ah-Un, flicking both sets of it’s ears derisively at him simply picked up Rinnoun the back of her obi with one of its heads, turned around, and began sedately walking in the direction Inu-Tachi had been heading.

Three of the four minds of the group, it appeared, made a majority. Shooting bemused glances at each other Sango and Miroku coaxed Inuyasha back onto his feet and caught up to walk along side the dragon. Grumbling Janken turned and followed.

~000~

They sat around the campfire that evening just inland from the coastal road. From the tree line they could look out over the waters of Uchi-umi and see, in the distance the Miura peninsula as it stretched out towards the South.

“We’ll have to cut across inland tomorrow but If we make good time we should be able to get to the beach near Enoshima before dark. If we can immediately find a boat we might even be able to spend the night there. Is that soon enough for you Inuyasha?”

“Keh. It’ll have to do. Especially with all the short legs we have to wait for now.” There was a beat of silence and then Janken realised the dig. Contentedly the one and a half youkai started verbally abusing each other. With long practice the others tuned them out.

“Bozu-sama*… why are you going to En’shiba?” Rinasked, looking up from a game of Shippo’s devising that involved her pebbles and another two that had been found on the walk.

“We’ve a special thing to deliver to the temple there. Would you like to see it?”

Miroku carefully unwrapped the bundle he had been carrying all day. The biwa, it’s strings reflecting the fading light of the sunset, was as beautiful, if not some how more gorgeous, than the last time they had looked upon it. Even Janken grew hushed, noting the godly aura that emminated from it.

“Somehow it reminds me of the biwa my mother used to teach me… Even though they really look
nothing alike…” Sango mused, more to herself than to anyone else. Realising everyone had heard her she blushed and hastily covered her mouth, embarrassed.

“You can play?” Miroku asked in surprise. The playing of an instrument was a skill he associated with the genteel and sheltered beauties of noble families rather than the rough and realistic inhabitants of a hunter-village.

“A little.” Sango said. “It’s been a while. I used to play it for my mother before she died. She wasn’t of the Demon-Hunter village but was part of a reward to my father for exorcising a daimyo’s palace. She never really thrived in our village. She died when my brother was young…”

Miroku fully unwrapped the biwa and held it out to her. “Will you?”

Sango began to reach out and then hesitated. “Isn’t it a sacred item?”

“I think Benzaiten-sama would prefer her instruments to be played rather than be left silent and swaddled in care. Besides” He flashed a cheeky grin. “We won’t tell the head priest if he doesn’t ask.”

“I don’t have a bachi…” Sango backpedalled, aware of the intent gaze of an audience. Her blush grew darker.

“Would this do?” Shippo clenched his little fists together, a frown of concentration on his face, and with a small puff of smoke – a Bachi the colour of autumn momiji* and shaped like a Ginko leaf* now rested on his two hands. “It’s only made of a leaf so it won’t last more than a day at most though….”

Sango took the bachi and turned it over in her hands. Unable to quash the welling of affection she felt for the little fox boy’s gift she pulled him into a quick, awkward and very uncharacteristic hug.

“Please.” Miroku simply said, holding out the biwa.

“Please!” Rinnsaid, her eyes shining. Shippo just looked on smiling in anticipation

“Only a little and I am not at all good at it…”

Hesitantly and then with growing confidence Sango strummed the instrument. The notes seemed to purr from the strings, rich and satisfied. Even Janken ceased his querulous complaints and goading to listen. Ah rested his head on the ground, Un sat neck bolt upright, both mesmerised by the sound. Sango played warm up songs from her youth, songs they could clap along to, songs they could all sing along to, ballads she had long since forgotten came back to her, those that her grandfather barking out to mark time as they practiced their weapon forms as children. Finally, late in the night as the embers of the fire began to dwindle, her voice made older by unaccustomed fatigue, she heard her mother’s voice from her own throat singing a lullaby to the sleeping children. Tears streamed down Sango’s face as she plucked the last notes. Her fingers were raw but the pain felt cleansing. Miroku, who had been sitting beside her staring at the stars shuffled a little closer and, when she didn’t resist, pulled her into a comforting hug.

“Thank you.” He murmured into her hair and she wasn’t sure if he was wording her thoughts or praising her playing.

Chapter End Notes
A description used in Japan to describe people that tag along unwelcome – like goldfish excrement dangling on a line behind the fish.

For those of you who don’t know Ah-Un’s name actually derives from the mouths of the two temple dogs/foxes/lions that you characteristically see in and about shrines and some temples. The mouth of one is generally open, the other closed – representing the first and last sounds of the Sanskrit alphabet and so the beginning and the end of language.

内海（うちうみ）Uchi umi – the ancient name for Tokyo bay.

Bozu – priest.

Bachi – a plectrum* for those that have forgotten from the earlier chapter

plectrum – a device used to pluck the strings of a musical instrument.

紅葉（もみじ）Momiji for those not up on their seasonal symbols, are autumn coloured maple leaves.

Ginko is an archaic species of tree with simple, fan-shaped leaves. These turn a rich butter yellow in Autumn
Sightless, scissorless, stylist-less

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The cloud rolled slowly closer, a great unnatural cumulous form that shadowed the forest. The tower would definitely be submerged by it, that much was apparent. In the distance between them and the approaching miasma birds were beginning to fall from the sky. Below the tower the horse began to whiney in distress. Another wave of malevolence rolled across them making Kagome’s skin goose-pimple. She shivered and then realised just how impolitely close she and Sesshoumaru were as the two of them leaned out the window observing the cloud. She pulled herself back into the room, and moved away from his personal space before observing:

“We can out pace it on foot, or better yet on horseback but in here we’re sitting ducks!”

Sesshoumaru remained leaning out studying the cloud intently. Then something else about his situation became apparent. He was leaning out, unhindered. In a fluid movement he hitched the trailing end of his braid around the window hook and leapt from the tower. Kagome barked an oath behind him and surged forward, watching the loops of braid unwind behind him as he sailed down to smoothly land on the ground at the base of the tower. A glance up from him and she scrabbled onto the windowsill herself.

Sesshoumaru had left her his hair for her to climb down, he was waiting. He might even catch her if she did fall. Nervously Kagome wiped now sweat-damp hands on her shirt and began to shimmy down the braid, wishing that Sesshoumaru had simply offered to carry her as Inuyasha would have.

Half way down, and from below, her horse’s frightened whinny choked off into a panicked burling noise followed by the thump of its body hitting the ground. Kagome bit her lip and glanced down. Green smoke now roiled along the ground. Sesshoumaru seemed unaffected but she could see the dark, collapsed form of her horse. The main cloud was still in the distance but evidently its lower reaches travelled ahead. Kagome tried to call out to Sesshoumaru but as she had gotten lower the air had thickened began to burn her eyes and throat. She dashed away the tears on her shoulder and kept clambering down. Then the miasma began to work through the cords that bound Sesshoumaru’s hair.

The first one went with a ‘ping’ under Kagome’s hand, she could feel the weave of the tress loosenning, could imagine it giving way at the top of the tower. Almost blinded by the smoke now Kagome tried to move faster, her grip failed and, briefly, she was falling. Strong hands caught her, set her back on her feet. Through the dim watery blur she staggered towards the fallen form of her horse, trying to pull free from the sudden grip on her wrist.

“Little Idiot! Not that way!”

“Ten…” A fit of coughing broke her word in half “…saiga… on horse!” Kagome tried to writhe free of Sesshoumaru’s hold as even the Taiyoukai strode over, dragging her along. He seized the sword, snapping through the charring straps as though they were cobwebs. Behind him, though Kagome could no longer see it, his hair streamed, free of the cords that had kept it confined, a white banner on a turf that yellowed and blackened. Kagome’s hair, her clothing and his own began to smoulder. Hissing with irritation at the fragility of humans and their fabrics Sesshoumaru scooped up armful after armful of his hair, and impatiently pressing it into Kagome’s fumbling arms then, and surprisingly not against his better judgment, he also handed her Tensaiga. Throwing the girl over one shoulder he grabbed the last length of his hair up from the ground. Setting a foot against the
tower he tore the far end of his hair free from the tower window above. Before the strands reached
the ground he had launched into a run.

To his surprise, to his delight, here he could run! Not since travelling the under ocean had he had
the freedom to move as fast as he liked. Sesshoumaru stretched his legs, ignoring the coughs jolted
from Higurashi Kagome as he surged into the occasional turf clearing leap. The small tweaks and
catches of his irritatively long hair didn’t slow him as, for the first time in centuries, he really
flattened out and sprinted for the sheer joy of movement.

~o0o~

The cloud was no longer in sight, birds remained in the trees unworried, insects buzzed their
mating songs. But Sesshoumaru didn’t slow. If anything he ran faster revelling in the stretch of his
muscles and the crackle of brush underfoot. He knew it was unlikely to last but for the moment he
could imagine he could outrun the farce and the control of the human’s goddess.

It was eventually his hair that forced him halt. And somewhat more abruptly than he would have
chosen.

Kagome had been winding in the last lengths of it as he ran but eventually a span of evaded her
grip. The resulting loop of hair snagged on a tree stump, tearing it by the root from the ground to
wedge between other trees pulling Sesshoumaru up short by the nape of the neck. Kagome slipped
from his grasp and tumbled into the undergrowth like a rag doll, only partially cushioned by the
mass of hair she took with her. She struggled up onto all fours, searching the ground frantically for
Tensaiga with her fingers. Sesshoumaru picked up his fathers sword and stood directly in front of
her. Only when she glanced up and then frantically around did he realised her eyes were teary and
sightless, covered by a grey film.

“I can’t see!” A hint of panic tinged her voice as she stated what was obvious to him. “Are we
away from that thing?! Can you see Tensaiga? Sesshoumaru-sama?! I’m sorry- I dropped it. I’m
really sorry…” She mopped at her streaming eyes with a travel stained sleeve, further smudging her
cheeks with dirt.

“It must be here in your hair somewhere…. I held on until I hit the ground….” She continued to
ruffle through the hair around her, still searching for the sword he held. There was a sussuruss and
Sesshoumaru realised with a hiss of irritation that his hair had begun to grow again. At the noise
Kagome cringed, assuming it was either directed at her or at the miasmic entity. She could no
longer sense the malevolent ki but nor could she see if any sign of it was still visible.

“You… You’re not going to try to fight it are you…” Kagome’s worried expression made
Sesshoumaru snort in amusement. He grabbed her by the arm and hauled her to her feet.

In the past fleeing from a potential fight would have not been contemplated. The miasma had not
affected him personally, beyond the degeneration of his raiment. Yet some how fleeing had not
harmed his pride at all. In this topsy-turvy territory of human gods he was far from the most
powerful being and he felt no shame in that acknowledgement. It was liberating in some ways -
reminding him that he while had always chosen his battles, that he could also choose to not battle.

“No. We are well away and my father’s sword is in my hand.”

“Thank Goodness!” Kagome bent and fumbled, trying to pickup the hair she had dropped. This
was made difficult by the fact she was standing on it in places. The locks flowed over and around
each other and the surrounding landscape like somen* noodle in a vegetarian dish.

Sesshoumaru now stood with a small but growing snow-bank of hair around his calves. He briefly thought of the demon koi carp in his father’s castle and how their size was restricted by the size of their pond. Was his hair now trying to grow to fill the world with its length? Arrogant futile thing.

The thought of his own old arrogances remaining in the hair he had been growing from his youth amused him. If the goddess was only harassing him because of his arrogance then he would cut it off®. He unsheathed Tensaiga. The sword hummed a greeting, louder than he remembered it ever voicing before. Kagome stirred worriedly, her arms filed with a jumble of hair.

“Please- what’s happening?”

Sesshoumaru turned the blade to see his own reflection and then catching up a handful of his hair, applied the blade to it. The hair slid along the keen edge but did not cut. Sesshoumaru’s brow furrowed, his hair continued to grow.

“Please… What’s happening?” Kagome repeated, shuffling a foot forward awkwardly. “I’m sorry I can’t tell….”

Sesshoumaru sighed through his nose, quashing irritation and recognising the games within games of the Goddess. To assume that, alone, he could sever what had been turned into a symbol of his own arrogance was to be blind to the point of this puzzle and so to fail in solving it. He was beginning to perceive the deity’s methods.

~o0o~

“Higurashi Kagome.”

“Eh?!” Kagome dropped an armful of hair in surprise at hearing her name. She scrabbled to catch up the tresses as they fell. “Yes?”

“Leave that. Come.”

“Uh…yes.” Kagome placed the hair on the ground and cautiously stepped around it, feeling the way with her feet, hands outstretched. She prided herself on not stumbling. Though as she got closer to Sesshoumaru it became a little like wading through ankle deep water-weed. How much hair was there now that it was free from its plait?!

Sesshoumaru grasped her wrist, not roughly but with distinct authority. Tensaiga’s hilt was placed into her palm. Automatically her fingers tightened around the braided cord grip. The sword-ki and her reiki resonated at each other in a jostley sort of way – like two large cats on a small windowsill, neither particularly resentful but both wanting pride of place.

“Hnn.” That one syllable from Sesshoumaru contained surprise, interest and mild amusement, his own fingers buzzed with youki that made her skin itch. Before she had time to open her mouth to ask what was happening, or become self-conscious about what felt like very close proximity to him, Sesshoumaru dragged her hand sideways in a decisive cutting motion.

Kagome heard a weight of hair slump to the ground, heard Sesshoumaru’s sigh of relief, then felt his hand stiffen. Within moments she felt the fresh tips brush her hand as the hair continued to grow. Sesshoumaru clicked his tongue in annoyance and, wielding her hand, cut twice more.

“No third time lucky?” Kagome asked, brushing the shorter strands from her knuckles with her free hand, careful of Tensaiga’s edge. Even then she could hear the rustle as new growth tumbled over
Sesshoumaru’s shoulders.

“No.” There was a hiss of exasperation from Sesshoumaru, he released her hand and took Tensaiga from her grip. The hum of reiki and youki faded. “I though I had solved it.” His voice held a snarl and also a slight petulance. “I could not even cut one hair myself. Your hand at least could sever the length.”

There was a moment’s silence punctuated by no other noise than those of the forest and Sesshoumaru’s hair reaching the ground again in which time Kagome had a minor epiphany.

“That must be what this was for all along!” Fumbling at her shirt-front Kagome drew out a cord that encircled her neck. Tied at the end was a small red lacquer and ivory comb. The same one that Benzaiten had dropped it into her hand on the beach over a month ago. Despite multiple costume changes and losing pretty much everything but Tensaiga she had somehow managed to keep possession of it.

“She must play a very long go game...” Kagome mused as she blindly ran her thumbnail over the teeth of the comb and the carved wave motif before pulling the cord over her head and proffering the grooming tool towards the sound of Sesshoumaru’s hair. The taiyoukai hesitated then, instead of taking the comb from her hand the taiyoukai folded his own long fingers over hers and with a gentleness that Kagome, in her blindness, found frighteningly intimate. Using both of their hands he drew the comb down through a section of his hair. There was a static crackle and the smell of incense. Kagome’s reiki sparked and fizzed as the strands of hair brushed against her finger-tips. She tried to wriggle her hand from under Sesshoumaru’s to leave the combing to him but his grip did not shift.

“I…is it working?” Kagome asked. There was a pause as Sesshoumaru examined his hair.

“Hn. For those few hairs. Yes.” He continued the combing, stroke after stroke through the thick hair with the tiny comb. There became a meditative quality to his breathing that Kagome found herself emulating. She stopped struggling to free her hand and hesitantly attempted to turn the comb to a better angle to free a slight tangle. Sesshoumaru relaxed his grip and allowed it.

“It occurs to this Sesshoumaru...” The sudden voice made Kagome start from the meditative reverie the soothing rhythm of combing had lulled her. Her eyes, which had drifted shut flew open even though they remained sightless. Sesshoumaru’s hand tightened over hers in warning for a moment, beginning a new combing motion before releasing her hand to complete the movement on its own.

“...that you have not elucidated all the points of the tower story. Now would be a suitable as this task will take time and does not exclude use of your voice as you comb.”

Nervously Kagome angled her head listening to the forest. “There’s no sign of that Miasma?”

“None.”

“Does it still work with just me combing?”

There was a pause, a shifting rustle of his clothing and hair. The sense of close scrutiny

“Yes.”

Kagome released a breath she hadn’t known she was holding. Cautiously reaching out with her free hand she picked up another lock and drew the comb through it.
“You’ll have to tell me when it is all done… I don’t know if I’ll be able to tell…” Her voice became wry but she thought he would understand, “There is an awful lot of it.”

“Hnn.”

All the while combing her way through the hair, feeling it still piling at her feet, Kagome shyly related the entire Rapunzel tale from the witches vegetable patch and the mothers cravings to the parts she had earlier glossed over, that Rapunzel was thrown out because she was with child, that the prince was fooled by the witch and blinded by thorns. She could only sketch the outline of the story because it was not one she knew well.

If Kagome combed on for some time longer than was strictly necessary Sesshoumaru said nothing. It was not until she returned, musing, to how the prince, being blinded by thorns, had his sight restored by Rapunzel’s tears that Sesshoumaru caught her wrist and stilled her hand.

“Youkai cannot cry.” Sesshoumaru stated bluntly.

Kagome turned her head blindly towards the sound of his voice “But Inuyasha….”


Tensaiga was pressed into her palm a second time. There was a rustle of cloth as Sesshoumaru positioned himself before her. Holding her hand an awkward position, together they sliced through his hair one a final time.

“There. It is done.” Sesshoumaru stated flatly, his voice coming from lower than she had expected before her. She realised he must have been kneeling before her.

Kagome shivered uncertain. “I don’t like being blind…”

There was a soft snort and the sound of the taiyoukai rising to his feet before her. “This Sesshoumaru would call that an understandable concern.”

Kagome smiled despite her dilemma. She was a little regretful she couldn’t see his face to see if the mild humour in his voice was visibly there too.

There was another long silence. The afternoon… the evening…, Kagome couldn’t tell how much time had passed, seemed to be full of them. Her chin was grasped, her face turned upward. She could feel his scrutiny and, despite a rising blush, opened her blind eyes for his examination.

“This Sesshoumaru may be able to assist in restoring your sight… Close your eyes.”

Kagome complied before she could think to hesitate. She felt his breath on the bridge of her nose a brief second before something damp and warm brushed first one then the other of her eyes. Then the moisture began to sting. Youki prickled her eyelids, making her eyes water again.

Kagome jerked her head back, flailing with her hands to push Sesshoumaru away, nearly falling over in the process. The Taiyoukai caught her by an arm, stabilising her.

“Burn the Youki from your eyes Higurashi Kagome.” Sesshoumaru commanded, swiftly flicking his tongue across her eyelids again to restore the sheen of youkai and spit. The dust from the miasma that coated her eyes flared faintly through the eyelids in response.
Kagome flinched slightly as Sesshoumaru damped her eyes a third time, her mind filling in where his face was be from his voice, breath, and the sussuruss of his clothing. A blush made her ears tingle and she drew that heat into her fingertips, touching them to her eyelids. The grit of the miasma writhed, crumbling into nothingness, followed by the dissipation of Sesshoumaru’s youkai as her eyelids dried.

Unseen by Kagome a fine blue-grey smoke drifted from between her eyelashes and her tears turned black with the soot and the charred, purified grit of the miasma. Avoiding the tears and ash Sesshoumaru lathed her eyes a fourth time, feeling the twitch of the eye itself beneath the lid. Kagome shivered.

“There.” Sesshoumaru said, with some satisfaction, observing as the last of the miasma-dust burnt and washed away in the tears trickled from her eyes

Kagome tentatively opened her eyes and blinked, her sight clearing again, to find the Taiyoukai right in front of her, almost nose to nose.

Sesshoumaru wiped an ashy tear from her face with his thumb before cleaning the finger fastidiously on her shirt-sleeve. Made uncomfortable by his proximity Kagome stepped back only to see the rest of him. A gasp of horror erupted from her lips and her hands flew to her mouth as she realised what had been wrought. Sesshoumaru’s hair was a little shorter than his jaw line and cut in one straight, slanting line.

He had held the hand that cut it at that length. The long glossy locks that had always seemed a part of his image lay around both of them both in ankle deep coils, discarded. The loss of his hair in the ocean had been terrible but accidental. This act of vandalism had been intended. Sesshoumaru raised an eyebrow as if reading her thoughts.

“I’m sorry.” Kagome said in a small voice. The eyebrow twitched sardonically. “Even if you aren’t.” She added. Sesshoumaru seemed to give a minute shrug but the corners of his mouth tightened upwards fractionally.

“It’s kind of a waste to leave all of this lying here.” Kagome looked down brushed one of the locks with a toe. No longer attached to the taiyoukai the youki in the hair was beginning to dissipate. It was less lustrous and silvery, more just… hair. Awfully long hair. Her comment elicited a proper shrug from Sesshoumaru. He flicked his head as though trying to accustom himself to the lack of weight.

“Which way?”

“Does it matter?”

“Kagome looked up at the afternoon sky. “No, you’re right I don’t suppose it does really… But away from that miasma please.”

Sesshoumaru inclined his head, the slight smile quirked and, stepping over his shed hair, he began to walk from the glade.

~o0o~

They had come across some sort of abandoned garden. Here and there rose bushes, straggly and small struggled out of the healthier Japanese plants. Sesshoumaru had paused to inspect what appeared to be a cement garden gnome half hidden in a thicket of yamabuki.* Taking the presence of roses it as a sign of another impending story Kagome warily pushed aside the curtains of
glorious wisteria, glad that they didn’t seem to have any bees or thorny plants amidst them.

As she reached through to push her way into the space beneath the old trellis arch she bumped into a wooden frame, almost knocking it over. As she lunged to catch it before it fell she felt a sudden sharp stabbing in one of her fingers. A small wooden spoked wheel spun forlornly and she swore. Loudly.

Chapter End Notes

*You guys have no idea how tempted I was to put in Kagome saying “Yokatta!” (良かった!). It is such a lovely breathy rhythmic emphasis on “thank goodness for that!” . But I’ve found the work of ffic writers who excessively and unnecessarily jumble in Japanese words into English sentences obnoxious and so avoid it myself. Feel free to imagine her saying it. After all they’re really are speaking Japanese in this story, and most of it archaic Japanese. It can be easy to forget given we are reading (and writing) it in English.

*somen noodles are one of the finer diameter noodles you’ll find in Japanese cuisine. They are about the equivalent of angel hair pasta in the West.

*Here I am playing with several cultural elements – in Japanese tradition the cutting of one’s hair is often used to indicate a break with the past – one is turning over a new leaf, they are repentant (or punished) or beginning a new chapter of their life. I believe it stems from a practice of individuals shaving their heads before going into a monastery.

For ladies the saying is “A woman’s hair is her life.” This in part stems from the length of noble ladies hair and its associated beauty. Commoners would never have the luxury of having really long hair. Hair is also something that marks our past. Arsenic poisoning, good and poor health all leave marks on our hair as it grows.

*Yamabuki – 山吹 (kerria japonica) Sometimes written in English as ‘Mountain Rose’, is a thickly flowering yellow blossom rather like a large buttercup or dog rose in appearance.

"Flowers bloom sevenfold and eightfold, but the kerria laments, for not a single fruit does it bear."

七重八重花は咲けども山吹の実の一つだになきぞ悲しき
(Nanae yae hana wa sakedomo, yamabuki no mi no hitotsu da ni naki zo, kanashiki)

Attributed to the Imperial Prince Kaneakira (914-987) in the waka anthology Goshui-Wakashu 後拾遺和歌集
Chapter Summary

I am a cruel woman - here is a small nibble, a tiny cake marked "Bite me! Savour me, hunger for more..." and then the rest of the icing gets a bit smudgy because it really is small chapter and that's a lot of words to fit on it in icing, and after you botch one letter with the piping nozzle why bother writing neatly anymore anyway...

So... there's a kiss in here but if you squint you'll miss it.

"Ah Damn it!" Kagome clutched her hand as blood welled from her fingertips and stared at the broken tangle of wooden struts. "I think that is... was a spinning wheel."

"You do not know?"

"They aren't really used where I come from and look at it - it's in pieces. I saw a picture when I was five. So sue me if I'm not sure." A foolish hysteria tinged her words. She could hear it and quashed the panic as much as she could. After all this was one she had been expecting – they could deal with it...surely.

Sesshoumaru ignored the unfamiliar word, certain that it was another foreign idiom. "And this means?"

"Ah." Kagome stammered, well aware that the shoe might well be on the other foot, Her Foot, this time. "I might fall asleep: then this place is going to grow over with rose bushes and..." Kagome fought to keep from blushing. Sesshoumaru calmly but intently watched her, waiting for her to finish.

Dammit HE was meant to be the focus of the curses, not her. In fact if he'd been acting as he once had, ignoring her and pushed on ahead then he would have been the first to encounter the spinning wheel... it would be him sleeping a thousand years on a bower of roses with her having to k... She quashed the idea. She'd avoided it last time, she would have been able to avoid it in this one... had she a choice.

"Um. The story is called "Sleeping Beauty", is a lot like the first thing that happened to you, with the dwarves..."

"Then I must strike your chest and you will wake?"

Oh Gods. No....

"Um. That's not how either story originally goes. I was lucky that there was that bit of apple that caused the sleep in that case... in the original story it was the prince's kiss that dislodges it."

Sesshoumaru stared at her and Kagome's ears burned.

"Kih-su?" Sesshoumaru questioned, cocking his head slightly at another unfamiliar word. "A Kih-su is a...?"
Kagome back-pedaled mentally, suddenly remembering a snippet of text she'd once read that stated kissing had not originally been practiced in Japan but had been a foreign innovation and considered very unhygienic when first introduced. "Uh… a kiss is an affectionate touching of lips."

Sesshoumaru's brow lowered very slightly at this and she could almost see his lip curl at the thought.

"Chest compression worked fine for the apple though." Kagome hastened to add, hysteria rising again in her babbling. "At least in that case. I don't know what would work for a pricked finger... amputation?" Her mind shied away at *that* memory, she babbled on, "Tetanus inoculations don't exist yet… though I've had mine recently…"

Her words trailed off helplessly and they both stood a moment looking at the blood welling from the pricked finger.

"What if this Sesshoumaru were to administer this kih-su you before you fell asleep? It would be quicker and waste less time on complications." Sesshoumaru asked pragmatically, taking a step closer.

"I'd rather not."

"You would rather not...? Undertake kih-su or be conscious for it?" Sesshoumaru's regard unnerved her and he suddenly seemed a bit too close.

"Either?" Her voice was a panicked squeak.

Sesshoumaru caught her hand and raised her bloody finger to his mouth. His tongue had rested, not that long ago, on her eyelids. Now, in one smooth motion, it lapped the trickle of blood up from her knuckle to her fingertip, his eyes not leaving hers his lips brushed the puncture mark. Kagome shivered at the intense curiosity they held, uncertain of how to interpret the sudden change of behaviour.

"Then you had best endeavour to stay awake." He said.

Her heart flip-flopped as her finger burned slightly from contact with his saliva and as Kagome jerked her hand away, she woke up….
Sesshoumaru suddenly found himself alone in the glade. A blink before he had been inspecting the girl, watching for the onset of the enchanted sleep she had described. The taste of her blood remained on his tongue, salt, human skin and a spark of purity that stung the back of his nose like fresh wasabi*. He wasn’t entirely certain he had carried out the action correctly, if it was his mis-application of ‘kih-su’ or his proximity that had appeared to provoke Higurashi Kagome into a further panic. He had touched his lips to the puncture mark as she had instructed. He had overcome revulsion to do so, it was not with ‘affection’, he could hardly have ‘affection’ for any creature so beneath him, but his regard for her had, he admitted to himself, developed into something fractionally more than simple tolerance. Was tolerance enough to break the spell? It would have to be.

He turned to look at the garden again, the roses did not appear to be growing any faster than they had been. There was a soft rustle of the ground just beyond his peripheral vision and Sesshoumaru turned, half expecting to see Higurashi Kagome, conscious or otherwise, return. Instead the Lady stood by him, tall and arrayed in wisteria patterned kimono. An indulgent smile creased her lips and Sesshoumaru tensed, fighting an ardent wish to claw her face, and waited. Her affectionate regard off balanced him, all the more confusing was the praise in her following words.

"You have pleased me child. It has been too long since your hand drew any voice from the strings of an instrument. I shall give you a gift. Here:" Benzaiten drew a bright woodsman's axe from her sleeve and placed it on a cloth that appeared on the ground.

Its edge was keen and Sesshoumaru could almost hear the metal's hunger whining as the very air split along it's blade. "It is your turn to save the girl... if you can find her."

"Save her… from…?" Sesshoumaru found the question voiced itself almost before the thought had manifest in his head.

"Saaaaa. Will you find out?" The Goddess turned and evaporated in a cloud of tiny grey-blue butterflies.

~o0o~

Kagome was in darkness again and the Lady stood there, a delicate Chinese fan in her hand that she opened and closed absently as she spoke. She wore a black kimono embroidered with yamabuki, as lustrous as a lacquered vase.

"The dog-child is showing promise. He begins to attend to these lessons of mine. I am pleased with the tribute he has begun to provide. But you, child, You are not Listening very well. You are so afraid of the responsibility of wielding power that you eagerly throw it aside, even that which is your own. For that to change, You must Change. Then let us see if you can learn to embrace power if you can not simply cast it aside."

She leant down and brushed Kagome's forehead with her lips then gently touched the girl's nose with a finger.

Kagome reeled backwards as the faint scents surrounding her grew stronger, blocking out any other
The goddess watched passionlessly as Kagome's form heaved and buckled, growing large and covered in glossy thick black fur. A negligent wave of the goddess’ fan ensured that the girl lost unconscious. Benzaiten was, in general, a merciful goddess, and transformation was unpleasant for those unused to it.

She waved the fan again in Kagome's direction when the creature the girl had become was roughly the size of a carthorse.

"That will do. Let us see if the Youkai pup has truly learned to look beyond the surface yet. And if you can understand and accept the responsibility of Raw Power."

Chapter End Notes

*kiritsu-rei-chakuseki : Heard at the beginning of most Japanese school classes – kiritsu – rise, rei – bow, chakuseki - seat yourself. This is the formal acknowledgement of the teacher entering the classroom, bowing in respect and teacher giving the students permission to sit again. The alternate title for this chapter is “Kagome’s first lesson”

*Wasabi わさび（山葵）(Wasabi japonica) If you don’t know what this I demand you go to the nearest asian grocery aisle of a supermarket and buy a tube. Squeeze out roughly the amount you would of tooth paste and stick it in your mouth. You’ll get an idea of how Kagome’s blood tastes to Sesshoumaru (minus the blood flavour).

I did state in the previous chapter that I am a cruel cruel woman. [edit] If you don’t live in Japan this stuff is actually most likely to be just horseradish with green food colouring in it - but it at least gives you an idea.
She was so hungry…

Kagome rolled over, her head aching, her stomach churning for want of food. She could barely put one rational thought before another. Hunger over rode everything else.

She struggled onto all fours, spots dancing before her eyes and her breath seemed loud to her ears. Her limbs felt heavy and unwieldy, but all this was secondary to a hollowness that twisted her stomach and made her ache.

Distantly she noted she was somewhere surrounded by green. Close thickets and dense undergrowth hemmed her in. There was a savory scent in the air, the rustles of the vegetation around her spoke of food and then there was nothing but hunger and movement.

The doe that stepped from the thicket did not have time to turn let alone run as, Kagome launched herself towards the animal, ravenous. A blow from her fist broke the deer's neck and she was ripping into the meat before it even hit the ground.

Voraciously she tore at the carcass, bolting down chunks of hot flesh. When the skin got in the way she burrowed her nose in under it – desperate to feed.

It was not until her belly was near full that Kagome came back to her senses. There was no nausea, though she felt there should have been. She had hungered and was now satiated. The girl shivered, looking down to see great black paws where her hands should have been, her arms now forelegs, covered in thick jet fur.

There was a rustle nearby and Kagome's head jerked up, muzzle dripping gore, as she searched for the cause.

Was it a scavenger come to steal her kill? She shook her head, trying to clear unfamiliar instincts that warred with her own nature.

No. A very young fawn staggered out of the grass bleating, pathetically it stilted towards the carcass and Kagome swallowed bile. She had killed a nursing doe and the fawn was now orphaned.

"I’m sorry! I’m so sorry!" She wept, her words came out as a savage whine. The fawn staggered sideways yawling in distress at the noise and she reached out for it, to hug it close, to comfort it – but she reached to fast, hugged to hard. There was a wet crunch of bone and the squeal of fear and pain was cut short before she realised what she had done.

She was too strong.

The remains of the fawn dangled limply from her paws, blood trickling from its muzzle. Kagome shrieked in terror, flinging the tiny body from herself and ran. Faster and faster she pelted through the thick undergrowth, headless of direction, thorns and thickets, vines and roots grabbed at her but she pushed past them, tore through them, running until exhaustion caused her legs to collapse under her. Barely conscious she dragged herself into the shelter of a hedgerow before falling into a dead faint.

~o0o~

Hunger gnawed again at her innards and Kagome sniffed the air for food.
Ahead was an old wooden house – perhaps she could find food. Not meat. The thought of tearing into a chicken made her stomach growl. She shuddered and drooled at the same time. Cheese, rice or even bread. She hated bread but she would gladly eat it now.

Cautiously she circled closer to the hut, twitching like an alley cat at any unexpected noise. A small waft of smoke twirled from the chimney and Kagome drooled at the underlying smell of vegetable stew. Her huge paws thumped like wheat sacks whenever she placed them down but she grit her teeth and skulked across the open ground like a jackal, pushing at the door with her nose. It was not fully shut and she shouldered her way in.

Inside the room was dominated by a bed containing an old lady, wizened and propped up against a pillow, a red hooded cloak lay on the end of the bed. What big eyes she had. Filled with terror and hatred. Kagome’s own eyes widened and she drew a frightened breath in, shaking her head frantically. She knew where she was… she knew what she was.

The old woman screamed and pointed at Kagome. “Wolf!”

There was a sound from the yard behind her and Kagome leapt further into the room, not willing to risk backing into an attacker. Her heart dropped when she saw who it was.
No Stomach for Stones

Sesshoumaru stood in the doorway. A sharp bladed axe in his hand, the edge of it caught the light and gleamed like a living thing. Kagome's eyes widened and she began to pant in fear.

She knew where she was now. Where Benten had sent them next: she was the Wolf and he the Woodsman from one of the crueler tales of Grimm.

"I didn't eat her! I haven't even seen her" Kagome cried, though the words transformed in her throat into nothing but a defensive snarl. "I swear I didn't touch her…"

She backed away as Sesshoumaru advanced looking from the old lady to the great black, lupine monster that crouched at the foot of the bed. Its long teeth were exposed, face spattered with dried blood, sharp talons drawing curlies of wood shavings from the floor-boards.

The Taiyoukai did not know the tale. He saw not just wolf but a large powerful youkai, coiled in the corner, ready to lash out.

With a wail part terror, part bewildered confusion as to why she was being punished Kagome tucked her haunches in under her and threw herself at the shutters of the nearest window, easily breaking them open and scrabbling through to escape.

Not waiting to see if Sesshoumaru would follow Kagome ran.

~o0o~

Through thicket and bramble, over stoney ground and marsh. Her great lungs bellowed but she did not pause, she did not seem to tire either now. The only pain she felt was her hunger and this she now found she could push aside. The night held no darkness for her new eyes and her paws seemed to swallow the ground as she fled. A feverish energy, almost like her reiki, seemed to buoy her and carry her onwards as she attempted to out run Benten’s cruel ‘lesson’.

Eventually, finding shelter in a crumbling moss and rubble strewn ruin that may have once been a castle, Kagome decided she had found a sanctuary and curled up to cry.

~o0o~

Somehow there was always bread.

Loaves appeared the keep several times a day but always in a different place. Kagome learned to differentiate the smell of old crumbs with not-quite-so-old-crumbs. In a cupboard, on a shelf, behind a pile of ruined furniture. Always stale but never so rotten as to be inedible. She had never been fond of bread but it was filling enough to keep her from the frightening hunger that had driven her before she came to the castle. Birds cleared up her crumbs and she was free to wallow in self-pity, mull over what Benten wanted her to learn or explore the ruins of her lair as the mood took her.

Deer occasionally wandered through the ruins and browsed on the fruit trees that grew in one of the courtyards. Kagome had taken to hiding from them in the remnants of the rose garden – there the briars were so thick that they formed a tight barrier against her guilt. There she could burrow in under the thorns, her thick coat protecting her from scratches and pretend she was at home, hidden under a quilt. She tried not to think of Inuyasha and company. There was no way they would recognise her and no way she could communicate with them. She was a monster now.
Time passed and the world grew cold again.

~o0o~

The chill of frost bit in the air.

Careful of her claws Kagome reared up on her hind legs and tugged at the top of the curtains, they fell easily, the wooden supports rotted from the moisture in the stonewalls.

Like a puppy with a blanket she dragged the curtain by her teeth, head held high to keep it from getting underfoot. Finding the driest corner in the keep she curled up, hiding her face under her paws to block out the afternoon light.

Before her transformation Kagome had assumed Benten's retribution had been entirely directed at the Youkai lord. She had been wrong. She was certain what she must have done something wrong. She kept turning her past actions over – had she become too independent? Too confident? Not so humble as she had been? Should have been? Benten said she should accept power - but look at what had happened on the two occasions when she had.

Again and again the drowned girl and the shinigami returned to haunt her dreams, as did the cuckoo-youkai, shrieking as they were burned by words alone. And as the dream-youkai collapsed into the flames, most nights, their faces had become her own.

~o0o~

Snow had coated all the stonework and courtyards in sparkling white. Kagome’s breath hung on the air before her muzzle in great clouds of vapour as she prowled on her evening lookout for bread.

And then He was there.

Standing in the gate-less arch that lead to the main yard. She had smelled him well before he stepped into sight. Her human nose had never been good enough to recognise it, the few panic stricken moments in the old woman’s house she had not noticed it, but she knew it now. His sharp-scent a mixture of apple-green acid, canine and self.

Kagome cringed in the shadows, her mottled dark coat blending her in to the charcoal scarred walls. Irrationally no relief ran through her thoughts at his appearance, no thought that he might solve her curse– only shame and self loathing at what she had become what she had become – a monster.
The Taiyoukai looked around. He was still in the hunter’s leathers she had last seen him wearing. Somewhere along the way he had refound Tenseiga and now leading a brown horse with a commonplace green harness. No noble role this time. Still playing a commoner’s part in this tale Benten had chosen to inflict upon them.

"Oh Gods. He's come to finish the job…"

Kagome found herself shivering. Some small part of her brain tried to remind her she was a great and terrible beastie now. She had more chance of defending herself from Sesshoumaru than she ever had before.

_Slayer of fawns, terrifier of old women. How frightening._

The demon cast a glance around the courtyard of the gutted castle and sniffed the air once, audibly.

"I know you are here."

Kagome began to back away, hunched and trying to be as small as a possible. Her talons scraped the stone and Sesshoumaru's gaze flicked where she stood.

"There will be no more axes. I am not so fool as to be deceived by that. That tale is over, brief and pointless as it was. Show yourself."

Kagome hesitated a moment then slunk from the shadows, her tail tucked and her head low, trying to be as unthreatening as possible. Sesshoumaru seemed impossibly small to her as she approached. Her heart sank. It was SHE that was impossibly large.

~o0o~

The Taiyoukai assessed the large creature that skulked towards him. The tragic grey eyes that looked out of the fur-matted face were slit pupilled and dilated wide in distress but there was no mistaking that this was Higurashi Kagome. Despite her belly dragging crouch Sesshoumaru noted that she would now stand taller than his humanoid form if only she were not cringing. She would not nearly match his own true form in size though.

Something akin to agitated youki roiled off her like a stench, hazing the air with energy that was neither celestial, youkai or nor human but an uncertain mixture of all three. Despite this he felt no threat from her.

As the large black creature dragged its feet forward he became aware of a subtle wrongness to her. Not to the physical shape she inhabited: that was well formed enough. He had spent a life-time interacting with Youkai, if only to subjugate or exterminate them, to know the range of deformities she might but did not have. No there was nothing wrong externally.

Higurashi Kagome had been somewhat fractured in spirit when she spoke to him at the tower, now she was broken inside. He would learn why.

“I do not care for any more folly. I have spent long enough searching for you.” Sesshoumaru strode
past her, entering the ruined keep. “What is this place?”

Kagome, knowing she had no voice but that of a beast to answer, miserable trailed after him. He thrust open the double doors she had only ever slunk through and entered the main hall. Kagome followed, belly low. She paused ears pricked and eyes wide in surprise as she got far enough into the room to see past him. Where before there had been only cobwebs and broken furniture there was now a banquet hall, polished and laden, complete with table covered in cloth of gold, huge and silver steaming tureens. A vision straight out of a children’s book illustration. A fire crackled welcomingly in the immense grate and a large chair, just the right size for the Taiyoukai, had been pulled out ready for occupancy.

Sesshoumaru turned and looked at Kagome. She flattened apologetically, flicking her ears trying to find some sound of who had altered the hall in the half hour since she had been there. She could smell no one. In the far corner, half hidden by shadows, her nest of mouldering banners remained piled in a corner. However the entry way and around the table where the Youkai might sit or move had been scrubbed spotless. Kagome swallowed the drool that accumulated in her mouth at the smell of the banquet. The food was not for her. That was evident by the single, stubbornly Japanese style, place setting.

He inspected the table and then turned on his heel to find a place for the horse. It was gone. The hoofmarks in the yard had simply vanished. Scowling slightly he returned to the hall. Higurashi Kagome had disappeared, so had the pile of musty fabric laced with the scent of sleep. Testing the air he found her… aroma… everywhere in the corridors, there was no indication of the direction she had taken or where she might have holed up for the night. Clenching his jaw only slightly Sesshoumaru returned to the banquet hall, ignoring the food on the table he sat in the proffered chair and settled down to wait for her return.

~o0o~

Kagome slunk back in late in the morning, again apologetically. Sesshoumaru noticed the way the miko had avoided looking at the food that night. She now averted her eyes from the breakfast that appeared at dawn on the table and found himself curious as to what she was eating instead. There was only one setting on the table and the small cups and chopsticks clearly indicated it was meant for him.

In the short time he had been at the castle he had yet to see any sign of Higurashi Kagome eat anything at all. A beast of her size had to have an appetite. She did not radiate the ki of a higher youkai.

Her stomach certainly growled enough to indicate that she wasn’t gorging on some other source of food. Though the long ragged fur made it hard to tell her condition she had the look of an alley cat from a poorer part of a human settlement. Sesshoumaru scented the air. No fresh flesh or indeed any food existed within the keep bar what was in that dining hall. And then a waft of that fusty smell, only known once but never to be forgotten. It made his nose wrinkle in disgust. Pan*!

He could smell it on her breath as she hesitated by the doorway, avoiding looking at the heavily laden table. He could see the few white crumbs caught in the bib of fur beneath her chin.

Why was Higurashi Kagome eating that revolting stuff when he was pointedly leaving the banquet dishes untouched?

Was it because he was leaving them untouched? Were they poisonous?

Sesshoumaru frowned and strode to the table, surveying the steaming, glistening, fragrant and
elegantly arrayed dishes. With the lacquered chopsticks from his place setting he sampled from the many dishes. No poisons, nothing objectionable at all. If he were a lower cast of youkai, one who needed physical sustenance all the time rather than only occasionally the feast would have tempted him. He turned on the miko, pointing rudely* with his chopsticks.

“Why do you not eat from this bounty if you hunger?”

Kagome’s ears flattened and she flinched from his gaze. Then she scurried from the room as though stung. Her feet slipped on the floor as she tried to turn and he banged heavily into the door, shaking the frame and buckling the door it on the hinges. Bemused Sesshoumaru placed the chopsticks back on their rest and stalked out to find the Miko and shake the foolishness out of her. He didn’t know how she managed it but try as he could, as with the night before, Sesshoumaru couldn't find the miko. It bemused him as much as it irritated. He did, however, find the bread.

Kagome had been in the habit of slinking to wherever the bread had been left, collecting the loaf in her mouth and then retreating out beneath her rose bush to slowly eat it. That evening Sesshoumaru found the bread first. Kagome hadn’t exactly been avoiding the taiyoukai but she’s been doing a good job of not being wherever he thought she might be. However this time she had been intent on dinner and missing the signature of his scent, rounded a corner to find him holding the loaf. She waited for him to lose interest. Apart from that one display in the dining hall he himself never seemed to eat.

Sesshoumaru looked at her for a long minute, then at the loaf in his hand. Abruptly he turned and walked out the door. Kagome hovered, dithered, and then finally, body and tail held low in shame, crept after him, stomach gurgling like a down pipe during Tsuyu*.

The taiyoukai strode through the halls of the castle and she was forced to break into a trot to keep up, her large paws slapping on the stone floors like wet hessian sacks.

Out in the garden-courtyard he turned, his hands a blur, tearing the bread into a mist of crumbs. Sparrows and starlings burst from the bushes, eager to snatch up the fragments of bread. Kagome watched her supper disappear into the greedy beaks of the birds.

“You will not eat these leavings when there is better food going to waste.” Sesshoumaru stated, brushing the crumbs from his hands.

Kagome averted her eyes. Every time she looked at the dishes on the table untouched she remembered the fawn and it’s blank eyes. She didn't deserve to eat human food. She was a beast now.

Kagome spent the night hungry.

Sesshoumaru beat her to the bread again the following morning.

Unlike the youkai lord Kagome’s monstrous form did not sustain her without food. She skulked the halls, looking for her bread before dawn – and he was there again, loaf in hand.

Driven foolish by hunger Kagome rashly attempted to take it from him.

He seized her by the whiskers and forced her to look him fully in the face. His eyes were sharp with annoyance and his brow, for the first time she had ever seen it, was perceptibly furrowed.
“Enough of this stubbornness. You will not eat this muck again.”

He released her whiskers as he turned and threw the loaf out an arched window. Without thinking Kagome launched herself after it, unwilling to give up what she saw as both her meal and her penance. The taiyoukai grabbed her by tail as she passed him, throwing her back against the wall. She hit the stones hard, the wind knocked from her lungs with a startled “Whuff” but Kagome was bewildered to find that she was completely unhurt. Blinking rapidly she rose steadily to her feet then shook herself. Grit and leaves fell from her matted coat. For the first time she stood at her full height. Sesshoumaru wrinkled his nose but his gaze was calculating as he sized her up.

Without standing on her hind legs she was as large as his human form at the shoulder. Yet he founds no threat in her. Musing as Kagome shook herself a second time, her overly long claws clutching at the paved floor Sesshoumaru found he approved of her new shape. It might be said to suit her. But she was so rank, could she not smell herself? She was all dreadlock and nastiness. Sesshoumaru would have found her pathetic if he hadn’t some strange sympathy for the fear the girl had of her own skin. Higurashi Kagome had turned inside herself with self revulsion. Steeling himself against the grime he reached up and seized her by an ear. He dug his fingers into the soft thin flesh and twisted. Kagome squeaked in shock and hunkered down as low as she could without putting weight on the point he held her.

“You will come and you will eat now. There will be now more of this cowering and sniveling in the shadows.” Giving her no opportunity to do anything but follow he pulled her by the ear and with the ruthlessness of a nanny. Under his watchful eye he directed her at the banquet table of morning repast. He did not flinch at the spilled cutlery, most of it western and so unfamiliar. His eyebrow barely twitched at the sodden mass her bearded jaw became drinking miso from one of the tureens. He even pried her jaws apart and rescued her from the fish bone that caught in her back teeth without word. But he made sure she ate everything.

Only releasing a strangely tired and irritated sigh when his new charge, her belly distended through the matted hair, slithered under the table and fell asleep. She had over gorged but it would do her good. He remembered the hunts and feasts of excess in his extreme youth even as he plucked a napkin from the table and distainfully wiped his fingers. She had weighed far to little for a creature of her size. A muffled whimper came from beneath the table and Kagome’s immense paws twitched as she restlessly dreamed. Sesshoumaru spent another few moments critically observing her before finally he left the room to do more exploring of his own.

~o0o~

Kagome woke blearily but with more energy that she had felt in a long time. Crawling out from under the table she found the surface had been cleared.

An ornamental fruit bowl now rested in the middle of the table. Her stomach still felt unpleasantly tight but it had never, in this form, truly felt full before. There was no immediate sight of Sesshoumaru but the hall door remained ajar. She could hear something out of keeping with the noises of the castle as she had known it. Curiosity tweaked she went to see what it was. The sound of music came from one of the rooms. Attempting to walk as softly as she could Kagome shambled towards it, her talons grating on the tiled floor, leaving scratches across the ceramics.

There, sitting in a shaft of sunlight by an iced rimmed window, was Sesshoumaru bent over a lute like instrument, his slender fingers plucking experimentally at the strings. The room appeared to have been once dedicated to music. The plastered walls were papered over but peeling, broken bits of viola and odds and ends of Western sheet music littered the stained and cracked floorboards. Kagome had never noticed the place before. She poked her head a little further into the room.
He had to know she was there – she couldn't move without making a noise – but Sesshoumaru ignored her, concentrating on his fingerling and his own thoughts. Somehow the afternoon slowly rolled past. Bit by bit Kagome crept into the room. Self-consciously She settled back on her haunches near the door and listened, then dropped down to her turgid belly, finally resting her head on her forelegs. The sounds Sesshoumaru plucked from the strings seemed to be drawn from the sunlight that washed over him and warmed her fur. She slept again. And for the first time since the incident, she slept without dreams of the fawn.

When she woke he was gone and the music room empty and dark as if the afternoon had never been.

Kagome shook herself and circled in the middle of the room, looking up at the embossed plaster ceiling. The wallpapers were peeling and the corners dusty but this room seemed in better repair than anywhere else in the keep except for the main hall. A place of dusty elegance that seemed designed to hold Sesshoumaru and his music.

~o0o~

That night snow fell heavily, creating deep banks that somehow inferred that it was expected that the two would remain in the keep for some time. After that first force-feeding session a routine seemed to establish naturally: morning and evening the Taiyoukai would find the stale bread that had once been Kagome’s fare and crumble it for the birds or throw it in the moat for the fish. On the first day Kagome watched from afar before Sesshoumaru found her and, with his glare, herded her to the hall and the then-cold food.

But the following day she drew closer, and by the third it had become a silent but almost companionable ritual.

First she would accompany him as he disposed of the loaf then they would attend the table together. Not that the Taiyoukai often ate. But he watched her eat and she could feel his gaze sharpen if she left anything unfinished. Including the natto*. Having said that, anything was better than bread.

Over the course of those three days also Kagome noticed the music room change. Each time she looked about the wall paper seemed to be less and less peeling, brighter in colour. Less papers littered the floor, more instruments lay on the slightly less dusty shelves and the very air seemed clearer. And then suddenly it was not peeling at all and the place was as though new. Not only this room.

All of the rooms Kagome saw Sesshoumaru using had begun to alter. If the thought passed her mind that a room seemed too gaudy then the next day it would have become subdued. Her own bed-nest of rags and personal lurking places remained the same. Though with Sesshoumaru’s presence the castle fleas had all met an acidic end.

~o0o~

Lost in abstraction on the fourth morning Kagome listened to Sesshoumaru play tune after tune and, only half consciously, she inched closer across the floor. Finally at his feet she leant very slightly against his ankle. Kagome shivered at the slight warmth of another being she could feel through her fur, yearning for closer company and fearing it in the same breath. She found herself wishing for the easy acceptance and physical-forms of comfort she had in the past with the inu-tachi. She could dearly do with a hug. Sesshoumaru certainly wouldn’t care that she had brutally murdered innocent animals. But he would also not salve her conscious even if she could talk to him about it.
Sesshoumaru noted the slight trembling of the matted black monolith at his feet. He could hardly miss it as the top of her shoulders were level with his chest when he sat. The room was warm enough for them, it wasn’t the cold that had caused it. She had evidently been thinking again. He poked her in the snout with the toe of his boot. “Well?”

Kagome started at the sound of Sesshoumaru's voice. It had been a long time since any word had been spoken. She had gotten used to the quiet. Too ashamed of her beastial noises to open her own mouth Kagome had become content to share Sesshoumaru’s silences.

"Well Higurashi Kagome. We have waited here some time with little change.” He gestured dismissively at the room, beyond the window frame where, against nature, the briar-roses had continued to bloom. Tiny white petals and the occasional snow flake, radiant in the sunlight.

“What needs to be done here?”

Kagome looked up and him, flattening and raising her ears as she tried to think beyond moment-to-moment habits she had developed since wearing her current form. She found herself distracted wondering where in the castle-keep Sesshoumaru had found his supply of clean clothing, most of it was starched linen or silk and of a simple traditional cut. He looked like an alabaster and slate statue in the light.

In comparison Kagome felt like a tatty shadow. Her black fur sun-faded at the tips to a dirty red-brown. Dreadlocked matts of fur rattled around her throat and her tail tuft was ratty and bedraggled.

The taiyoukai clicked his fingers at her, and Kagome's ears flattened as her attention returned and she awaited some sort of censure. There was no anger or impatience. If anything he did not seem eager to leave this place. It felt strange seeing the Taiyoukai so at peace. Strange and yet special, Kagome treasured the moment – she hadn’t forgotten the loneliness that had reigned before he came.

She looked away, unwilling to hear the beast noises her throat made. Sesshoumaru did not ask again.

~o0o~

It was late evening. Outside the weather had turned absolutely frigid with a thick black frost covering the garden. Even the rose had ceased to put out it’s enchanted roses. Dirty wet snow pile in the edges of the courtyard uninvitingly. The window shutters were tightly shut. A fire crackled in the grate of the music room, recently swept, stacked and lit by an unseen hand. The light flickered over the glossy wooden instruments on their racks and the tranquil face of Sesshoumaru as he gazed into the flames absently, one arm draped bonelessly down the side of the chair. An Italian lute rested, half forgotten, in his lap, the strings occasionally plucked by a drowsy finger.

Kagome lay sprawled beside his chair, glad of the recently appeared thick rug that now lay on the floor. Spring had yet to come to the keep and the stone floors were cold.

"You have changed again miko. Did you realise that? You were wolf-like when I first saw you at the old woman's house… Now you are more like a lioness…"

His lax fingers tentatively touched the top of her head and she stilled then shivered as they sank into the fur, his claws lightly scratching her skin through the matted hair.

She whimpered very very softly and suppressed the urge to lean into the unexpected physical contact. Sesshoumaru wrinkled his nose and withdrew his hand to inspect his soiled finger-tips
"But you remain filthy."

That casual, fastidious, remark struck like a physical blow Kagome. A stark reminder of how she had changed. Demons of self reprove that had been lulled and dulled by proper food and company reared up to spit poison in her ears again: In the past she had always prided herself on cleanliness, when she was human. Shampoo and soap aplenty were collected every time she went home. She had always associated her purity as a miko and understanding of hygiene as setting her apart from the masses in the feudal period. Some how it hadn't seem to matter when she found herself in a beast's body. Hadn't cared because she didn't feel she deserved to be clean after killing the fawn, after becoming an Animal. Because some where in the back of her mind Animals were beasts and beasts were dirty.

And yet: Kirara was a beast and she was meticulous with her grooming, even Kouga's wolves had more cleanliness than she had now. Kagome had no excuse but a pathetic self-punishment. She had thought herself less than a beast and so had mistreated the form she had been force to wear. Sesshoumaru had silently endured the smell and appearance of her all this while. Sesshoumaru was a beast, Inuyasha was half a beast. Had her human self felt so far above them too?

She barely saw Sesshoumaru sit upright with an sharp exclamation, the Taiyoukai had been surprised at how she had flinched. She was backed away from him now, away from the memory of his touch, stumbling on the carpet. Kagome fled the music room in shame, suddenly aware of just how rank her own scent was. She had blocked it out all these days... for weeks. She couldn’t block it out now that a truth had been spoken aloud.

Tears made her nose run as Kagome barrelled out through the hall, shouldering through the wooden doors and out into the icy courtyard. Despite the flurry of snow the fountain still flowed and Kagome flung herself in, desperate to find some measure of cleanliness. Of body, of spirit.

Oh! The water hurt! The sheer frigidity of the water knocked the air out of her lungs with a loud bark and made her teeth chatter. She clawed at the matted hair on her chest, trying to break up the worst of the snarls, tearing through the tangles mercilessly. Lumps of fur floated on the surface of the water, were washed over the sides of the fountain, as she lathed herself, rolling on her side to splash water over her back.

She was panting from the cold now, her nose bubbling with snot and tears. Her paws were numb, but still she couldn't seem to get clean. The water wasn’t just becoming dirty. She could see the fawn’s bright red blood swirling out from her across the surface of the fountain's pond now but she could not seem to clean it off. Desperate she dunked herself under the water again.

When Kagome surfaced again, Sesshoumaru was standing right next to the fountain, watching with furious eyes. She shied from him, her frozen paws slipping on the marble floor of the pool as she scrabbled for purchase.

I can't get clean Kagome wanted to wail. I can't wash away the blood.

But fear of her own voice silenced her tongue.

"Enough of this!" She had never heard him shout before. In her surprise her numb feet fully shot out from under her and she submerged, face first, again.

Sesshoumaru grabbed her two-handed, by the scruff of the neck, and hauled her from the water. She was so much bigger than he and, it seemed, some-what heavier than he had been expecting for
he staggered slightly but he did not loosen his grip.

"Towels and hot water, a tub of it, in the hall now." Sesshoumaru demanded of the air, adjusting his grip on Kagome's sodden nape as he dragged her, tail tucked, back towards the keep. He wrinkled his nose and added grimly. "And soap. Lots of soap."

Chapter End Notes

* pan - just reminder if you'd forgotten the ash child chapter and if you hadn't guessed on your own. This is the Japanese word for 'bread'. Based on portuguese. If you haven't seen the manga or anime 'Yakitatte' go and investigate - it's all about bread and the main characters goal to make Ja-Pan! the ultimate Japanese-style bread. It is as nuts and as fun as it sounds.

* Pointing with chopsticks is terribly rude. Etiquette lesson for the day: achieved.

*梅雨 tsuyu or Plum rain - another name for the monsoon season- when there'd be a lot of water rumbling down a water pipe.

*納豆 Nattou is a fermented bean dish that is... strongly odoured and not to everyone's taste.
Kagome squeezed her eyes shut as the suds washed over her face again. Sesshoumaru was not a gentle hand at washing. She was grateful he seemed so intent on getting her clean though.

The bath water was fragrant with soap that stung in the shallow cuts on her chest.

The fresh blood in the fountain had come from her catching her own flesh on her talons—she had been too cold to feel the tearing of skin. Now Sesshoumaru used his own claws to neatly cut out the matted locks of hair from her mane, adding each to the growing pile of nastiness that lay beside the huge copper bath in which she soaked.

The water had been changed three times already with her wearily dragging herself from the tub each time and Sesshoumaru emptying it from a window before refilling it from the pitchers of hot water that continually appeared beside them.

She shivered slightly despite the warmth and had to suppress the urge to lean into the solidity Sesshoumaru's chest. She had been mad for a moment out there in the fountain. Even before then. Since the doe perhaps... But she was coming back to sanity now... though she was so exhausted that Sesshoumaru had to keep propping a hand under her chin just to keep her head above water. She gave in to temptation and sagged against his torso.

"Out." Kagome jolted to wakefulness, unsure if she had actually slept or not. Sesshoumaru, his shirt still saturated from hauling her out of the fountain, picked up a huge fluffy towel as she clawed herself up over the edge of the bathtub and onto the floor, resisting the urge to shake herself. Her legs felt so weak that she wasn't sure if she could remain standing if she tried it.

Water ran from her in rivulets and she tried to imagine what she must look like—a giant black lion, soggy as a kitten in a thunderstorm.

Sesshoumaru didn't give her a great deal of time to stand contemplating the water dripping from her chin before he began to pummel her with the towel, buffeting everywhere but her injured chest with impersonal zeal. When one towel was sodden he threw it aside, picked up another and repeated the process.

Kagome submitted to having her face scrubbed dry with a suppressed sense of relief and true happiness. She was clean, she was almost dry and she wasn't really alone... she wasn't evil... just a beastie-that-was-still-Kagome... but she was so tired...

Her hind legs began to sag beneath her.

"Not on this wet floor." Sesshoumaru snapped. Though she tried to obey her body wasn't fast enough to respond. An arm caught her heavily under the ribcage, twisting to hold her bulk upright. As she faded out of consciousness she heard the Taiyoukai speaking to the invisible servants of the keep again. "Take her to a bed. A Real bed. And have this floor cleaned."

~oOo~

Kagome woke to find her self lying between clean sheets in a gorgeous, brocade quilted bed. She was clean and dry. Only a few black hairs marred the whiteness of her bed linens. A basin of warm water rested beside a pitcher on a table beside the bed, as if ready for a human to wash her face. Kagome stiffly pulled herself to her feet and, still standing on the bed, drank from it instead. Grateful to have a bowl rather than having to find a puddle or use the fountain. Especially after last
night.

Weakly she slithered off the bed and found herself facing a full-length mirror. Soft morning light shone through an open balcony window and for the first time Kagome really saw what she had become.

A small-horse-sized black feline stood reflected in the glass, overly long scimitar shaped claws buckled sideways on the rich carpet, too long to sit straight. Kagome straightened and looked at herself.

Great luminous grey eyes stared out of the black fur of her face, the pupils contracting into slits in the brighter light. Long hairs tufted from her broad ears, Her coat was longer at throat, shoulder and belly and ragged from Sesshoumaru’s ministrations but the cuts on her chest had faded back to scars. The thought that her youkai-like form came with accelerated healing occurred to her but she wasn’t keen to test it. Black on black leopard spots were half visible in the smoky fur of her flanks and belly. In places her fur whorled into little rosettes. It wasn’t a monster’s body really, just that of a very large carnivore. Seeing what she had become Kagome found she had forgiven herself.

A combination of long white and black whiskers bristled from her muzzle out as she took a tentative step towards the glass to look closer. They were still flecked with drops of her water from her drink. Kagome remembered Sesshoumaru grabbing them and licked her lips reflectively. The great ruffle edged pink tongue that emerged startled her and she grinned despite herself. A carnivore’s grin – all teeth and gums. Terrifying, but also hers for the moment. Kagome resisted the urge to spend more time pulling faces at herself, after a few moments, and went to find the Taiyoukai.

~o0o~

Cautiously, unsure of how she could express her gratitude for Sesshoumaru's assistance the previous night, Kagome sidled into the hall where they usually took breakfast.

Sesshoumaru was standing at the fireplace watching the flames crackle.

There was another setting at the table to the right of Sesshoumaru’s seat. A larger chair – more of a long sofa than a chair really. Nervously Kagome looked at it.

Sesshoumaru turned in time to notice her furtive glances.

"You are not an animal. It is time you remembered that Miko. You are not a dumb beast, nor are you a pet. I will not treat you like one any longer. It was foolish of me to do so in the first place. From now you will eat at this table like a cultured being. Come."

The table between them held a full array of cutlery, carafes, fruit dishes and an elegant spread of foodstuffs.

Sesshoumaru took his customary place at the table and sat waiting. Self-consciously Kagome climbed up onto the chair, the wooden legs groaning under her weight. She shifted her weight to sit upright and rested her paws gingerly on the side of the table. Her great wide feet with their claws looked powerful but out of place beside the delicate chopsticks and silverware that were arrayed before her.

"I do not expect you to use any of these items with those." Sesshoumaru waved a dismissive hand from the cutlery to her altered hands. "Tea?"
"P…Please." Her own voice startled her, it was coarse from lack of use but it was her own.
Sesshoumaru raised an eyebrow, smoothly lifting a teapot and pouring a generous measure into a
bowl for her. Kagome was grateful that he ignored the delicate little teacup.

"Good. You remember that you can speak. Do you know where we are? What task this tale
ensues?"

Kagome lapped at the tea, her great tongue set the bowl rocking wildly and she frantically tried to
stabilise it with a paw, nearly knocking the crockery flying. Sesshoumaru was faster. His slender
fingers caught the rim of the bowl, turned and steadied it. The tea swirled inside but did not splash.
Kagome dropped her head shamefaced and licked at the drops on her whiskers, trying to hold back
tears. Sesshoumaru was unperturbed.

"Try again miko. You are large and strong. This world is small and weak. You must think in small
movements."

Kagome bobbed her head awkwardly and dipped the tip of her tongue into the warm tea. Little sip,
little sip and suddenly the bowl was near empty and it had not moved. She looked up delighted and
Sesshoumaru's blank expression was approval enough as he refilled her bowl and then took up his
own cup and waited for the reply she had yet to give.

"I….I know the first part of this tale was about a little girl in a red cape. She and her grandmother
were eaten by a wolf and a woodcutter rescues them." Kagome ran her tongue over her sharp teeth
nervously. "I didn't see any girl though…. and this castle doesn't fit in at all…"

"And the wolf?"

Kagome cringed. "It had its belly sewn full of rocks and was thrown in the river."

"It is well that you ran then isn't it."

Kagome's ears flattened then pricked, uncertain of Sesshoumaru's uncharacteristic show of humor.

"Th… thank you. For the tea. For… helping me be clean."

"It is time you realised: This is your castle miko. Your keep. You allowed it to remain in this state
just as you allowed yourself to remain in that state. It is time you faced yourself and what that
means. You are master here and your intent commands the castle."
Take good care of your feet…

Chapter Summary

The title shows my occasional perchance for the Beach Boys

Kagome sat awkwardly on a small settee that afternoon and watched Sesshoumaru tune yet another stringed instrument. He now insisted that she not sit on the bare floor like a dog— but must either find a large enough cushion or use a seat. She had broken several chairs so far but he had not relented.

This also meant she could no longer find any excuse to brush against him as she had those few occasions she had lay on the floor. Uncertain of whether or not the sensation was linked to her beast-shape Kagome found herself time and time again wishing she could rest her head on his lap and feel his fingers scratching across her crown. The thought embarrassed her as much as it tantalized.

From outside the distant rustle of deer browsing in the overgrown meadow was audible. She was learning to really Listen to her surroundings and the greater nuances and distances she could now. Kagome flicked her ears trying to ignore them, the skin on her spine twitched, a movement that dominoed down her back to make her tail flick, despite her resolve and she got up to glance out the open window.

Sesshoumaru watched her watching the deer a moment. “Do you hunger for venison?”

Kagome jumped as if stung. “No! No I…” Her stomach growled a denial to her words even as she said, the remembered succulence that set her mouth watering was imagined. At the time she’d not been conscious of anything but hunger. “I… I killed one… And then its baby. It was horrible!”

“The meat was rank?”

“No. I was too hungry to think. The killing was so quick I don’t think the doe even knew what happened…. but I didn’t mean to kill the fawn… it was awful. I felt so bad.”

“Yet you have happily eaten flesh before, cooked and raw, fish, fowl and the four legged. At the table here with myself and in the past in the field with the half-blood.”

Kagome’s ears slanted at the reference to his brother. Gods she’d not thought of her friends in days! “I never killed them myself.”

“And so it is better to not know the way in which they died, to have no hand in their termination?”

Kagome’s whiskers dropped and her ears flattened. “I don’t know. Probably not. I’ve not really ever wanted to think about it.”

“This Sesshoumaru will teach you how to be certain and merciful.” Sesshoumaru stated decisively, placing the musical instrument down and rising with decision. “Come.”

“What now?!” Kagome rose to her feet automatically even as she questioned his words.
Sesshoumaru arched an eyebrow at her. Kagome’s whiskers twitched as she remembered and, unable to help herself, she commented on how he had been thoroughly *unmerciful* in the past.

Sesshoumaru shrugged as he reached the door, showing the barest hint of tooth he replied, ”To perfect one thing one must also fully understand it’s opposite.”

~o0o~

Kagome was sunning herself in the last rays of sunlight, stretched out on a day bed beneath a window. She had spent the afternoon frantically, and only slightly successfully, trying to learn how to hunt, following the Taiyoukai’s instructions and demonstrations.

Kagome had limped home wearily through the soft snow after that first hunting session while Sesshoumaru had carried the five rabbits he had caught. The one she had flattened, mercifully quick but with excessive force, in pouncing from ambush, had been not been buried under a small cairn as she had first suggested. Sesshoumaru’s derision at her squeamishness and sentimentality hadn’t exactly stung but it had straightened her spine. They were hunting for food he had remarked, even though it was a lesson they were not killing things to inter them in the soil. Prey was killed because it was wanted and deserved to be recognised as such. She had eaten her rabbit then and there, uncooked but neatly skun and gutted by the Taiyoukai’s hand. It had been at her own insistence when she saw it dangling flattened and mangled in the same hand as his own glossy, plump, snap-necked brace.

Sesshoumaru’s boot connected, lightly but intentionally with the side of one of her paws, stirring her from her drowsing.

He tapped her foot again, this time with a hand, and her brief glance at him brought her to full wakefulness. Sesshoumaru had crouched and was inspecting her toenails. She resisted the urge to curl them out of sight. They were sore from running around as much as she had that morning.

“You must keep these much shorter.” Sesshoumaru stated as he prodded one of Kagome’s claws with a narrow finger. Kagome winced and flexed her toes, waving the scimitars of her toenails.

“Do they retract at all?” He asked with practical interest.

Kagome looked down at her own feet and realised how little she knew about them, about the form she wore. “I don’t know.” She wriggled them again, a little lazily, “I don’t think so.”

“Then they are certainly too long. That will be amended now.”

Kagome sat bolt upright. “What?”

Sesshoumaru turned and sat on a low chair, proffering a hand expectantly. “They hindered your hunting this day. They will be shortened and you will find it more efficient to catch prey and will be less likely to trip over them. It should have been done long ago.”

“Is this going to hurt much?” Kagome asked as she pulled her feet in under her like a large house cat, despite their soreness. Sesshoumaru gave her *A Look* and her ears flattened.

Stiffly she stepped down and limped over to sit beside the Taiyoukai with care, tucking her tail out of the way. Carefully, almost gracefully, for she was learning to fit in her skin, she lifted a huge paw and placed it on his lap. Her feet were broad and, under the short dense fur, powerful. Sesshoumaru ran a hand over her knuckles in a way that Kagome could only read as admiringly. She resisted the urge to lean her paw on him more heavily to absorb as much ‘human’ contact as she could.
“This situation reminds me of an old woodblock called “The Tiger Tamed.”” Kagome remarked dreamily, a little drunk on Winter sunlight, meat and physical contact. Sesshoumaru made no sign of heeding her as he finished carving back the talons on her third foot and turned his attention to the last. A large pile of nail parings lay on the ground before his feet.

“It depicts a beautiful woman distracting a tiger while her servants trim away off his claws and tie it’s legs together.” Kagome continued.

“Foolish tiger to let himself be incapacitated. Don’t let it happen to you. There: it is done.” Sesshoumaru said briskly, dropping her last foot. Kagome arranged her feet beneath her and sat back mildly disappointed at the loss of contact.

“They will serve you better now.” Sesshoumaru prompted and taking the hint Kagome rose and took a few cautious steps. She blinked, looked at her feet and, and made an experimental pounce on the spot. Sesshoumaru leaned casually out of the arc of her tail, parring the very end with his forearm as it swung past as she turned in delight. The shortened talons neatly rested on the ground, they no longer pushed up and sideways, making her toes crabbed. Already the stiffness in her paw joints was fading and her wrists, elbows and shoulders relaxed, no longer having to compensate for an awkward stance.

Kagome shook herself, enjoying the grip she could now take on the paving stones.

“They appear to grow swiftly, you will need to strop them daily to keep them sufficiently short.” Sesshoumaru stated, demonstrating with his own talons and leaving scratches in the stonework, “and tomorrow we shall see if you can do more than flatten one arthritic rabbit.”
The trimming of Kagome's claws the previous day was making a vast difference in her ability to move. She had not been aware of the extent the had been crippling the forced distortion of her toes. In compensating for being unable to stand correctly her spine and hips had suffered. Now the muscles and joints crickled, crackled, and when stretched they settled into their correct alignment as though manipulated by the compassionate hand of an invisible but competent chiropractor. This morning, as she stretched and flexed in the pre-dawn light of the courtyard to warm up she felt positively lithe. A tatty winter-moth fluttered by and Kagome bounced after it, batting at it in emulation of her family cat Buyo. It startled her how fast and fluidly she when she exerted herself despite her size. Just before she flattened the hapless insect in the air, Kagome remembered her strength and reined in the motion, twisting her still moving paw to brush under the moth's legs, sending the tiny insect tumbling in a dizzy summersalt, no worse for wear that the loss of a light dusting of wing scales.

Elated but still uncertain of her control Kagome left the winter-moth and set to stalking and attacking the thick leaf litter that heaped along the wall of the courtyard. She scooped up great paw-fulls, clawed individual twigs out of the the shower, dodged the raining fragments, pounced, twisted and sprang away. She kicked off the wall, somersaulted in mid air, twisted and landed only to jump again, increasingly reaching further, springing harder and digging her claws into the stone.

~o0o~

In the battlements above, unnoticed by the black feline shape below Sesshoumaru watched Higurashi Kagome invent her own games, growing increasingly bold with her movements as she explored the capabilities of her large beast-body. The taiyoukai noted the exact parallels between her actions and the play of very young predator youkai cubs, such as he, long long ago, had once been.

Sesshoumaru narrowed his eyes at his ally as she leapt across the width of courtyard in one smooth controlled arc, snatching at an arbitrary drop of snow-melt falling from the roof. She missed it, catching it between the eyes rather than on her tongue but the distance she in that one movement had been substantial and, for the greater part, controlled. She appeared distinctly more competent than yesterday, her tail now being brought into use as a counterbalance rather than flapping along behind her like a goldfish dropping.

Sesshoumaru had intended to continue the lesson with small prey that he had begun yesterday but her visibly improved physical movement and his own impatience with coaching on the chasing rabbits made him reevaluate his plans.

He had become aware over the course of the previous day that he had not been a particularly effective teacher. He was not so full of hubris as to attribute all of Higurashi Kagome's inability to follow his instructions to her own stupidity or inability to listen, most of it certainly, but not all.
Translating into human words the nuances of hunting skills he had developed through centuries of practice did not come easily to him. Fortunately Higurashi Kagome had appeared to learn best when an action was demonstrated and then she was directed to follow the example. It had required less words on his part and more action which suited him well. Sesshoumaru was beginning to become twitchy again. There had been several days of, by his standard, boneless relaxation as he explored the odd musical instruments of the castle and coaxed, again by his standards, Higurashi Kagome back towards mental and physical health.

The opiate-like lethargy of the underwater kingdom had not been subtle. This place, with its quiet corridors and large windows, with its musical instruments, had temporarily lulled him into quietude despite captivity. Perhaps it was Higurashi Kagome's smaller, intensely personal cage that had made him seem free by comparison. Now she was shedding the perception of being trapped in her own skin he was once again aware of being trapped in this story-place. It made the hair on his nape, much shorter now, prickle and he was more than ready to find a way out of the place.

~o0o~

The ground was still dusted with frost where it wasn't spattered with paw prints and Kagome was toasty warm and steaming like a plough horse when Sesshoumaru appeared in the courtyard.

He eyed her critically. "Higurashi Kagome be aware you have handicapped yourself. You now smell strongly of sweat."

"Oh… I'd not thought of that," Kagome shook herself, scattering the fragments of leaf and bark that she had not successfully dodged, "is there anything I can do about it?"

Sesshoumaru eyed her fastidiously "Stay downwind."

"Oh. Um… Ok… which way that is again?"

Sesshoumaru unbent enough to tweak the curling tuft that grew from her nearest ear. "Listen for it, feel it."

Kagome flicked her ear free from his grip recognising that his action had conveyed advice rather than malice. She cocked both ears. The tufts in her ears flexed slightly in the breath of air that was currently moving around them. She turned her head, ears and whiskers pricked, feeling them bend ever so slightly against the air currents. "Eh! Wow! That is cool… What next?"

"Practice," was the reply as Sesshoumaru turned away, heading through the castle grounds.

As they passed the ornate though one of the overgrown external garden Kagome's nose twitched as she recognised the content of one of the straggly little hedges. Catching Sesshoumaru by surprise she let out a whoop and threw herself into the small clump of rosemary bushes, knocking snow from the branches and crushing both those the and leaves beneath her weight. rubbing herself against it on her back and sides with all evidence of enjoyment. Sesshoumaru looked on non-plus until the aroma of the smell of now crushed foliage tripled in strength, obliterating Higurashi Kagome's own odour. She rose, shaking the needle like leaves from her coat, her eyes watering from the strength of the aroma but evidently self satisfied.

"Better?"

Sesshoumaru raised a slight eyebrow but it was in amusement "Hnn."
"Now I really feel like eating roast lamb…"

Sesshoumaru twitched an eyebrow. "That white furred creature?"

Kagome jaws parted in a leonine grin, "Irritating enough to sliver and serve as shabu-shabu* wasn't it"

"If you desire to eat hoofed prey -then we will hunt venison"

Kagome's smile fell from her face, "I don't know that I can…"

"Do they differ so greatly from rabbits?"

Kagome mulled over the question, recognising both it's validity and her own inclination to shy away from thinking about it. "No… I think it's that I never needed to catch any of them. Someone else was always eager to do it for me." The spoken words hung in the air, both of them knew to whom she referred. Sesshoumaru's lip twitch provided an unspoken reply: You were never encouraged to fend for yourself and you never pushed for to be allowed the chance.

Kagome dipped her ears and pushed the subject back to deer and away from herself "Deer are a lot bigger though it must be harder to catch one…"

"They are no more challenging than rabbits and no more sapient if that is your concern, less, for their predators are fewer. We will not return until you have caught one." Sesshoumaru stated, making the decision for her. He read the cant of her ears and interpreted her first thought correctly. "If you cannot consume all of it this Sesshoumaru will finish it. Venison is not displeasing to me. There will be no waste."

The opportunity to share food, something she had long missed, foolish as it was, was what prompted her agreement to the scheme.

~o0o~

As they approached the verge of the forest Sesshoumaru surprised Kagome with an almost loquacious description of means to stalk and take down deer, to hear him speak they were easier than rabbits. Deer could not disappear down a burrow and, he inferred his belief she was large and swift enough to catch up with all but the fleetest even if it became a chase through the close forest. Kagome took this almost-compliment with a grain of salt. Chasing rabbits over a short distance was a world away from sprinting through close undergrowth after an animal with long legs and an evolutionary history of flight from large predators.

With Sesshoumaru silently trailing a few yards behind her, watching critically, Kagome set out to follow his instructions, constantly testing the wind direction and placing her massive feet with care. Felines were usually ambush predators, canines chased their prey down. Sesshoumaru's instructions combined a variety of both methods.

They passed through three glades before she came across any fresh deer spoor. The first glade was huge and she skirted around it. The second very small and she trotted across it quickly, Sesshoumaru strolling along at her heels as though on a morning ramble. The third glade was a good size for large animal to romp in and from it's fringes, through the trees, she could see a number of adult deer browsing on tree bark and the remaining leaves of some of the lower bushes. She flicked a glance back at Sesshoumaru. He quirked an eyebrow and stayed put, crossing his arms and leaning ever so slightly against a tree.
Evidently he felt he had given her enough information for her to make an attempt without example. Kagome crept forward, focusing. She picked her target, a grey muzzled buck that was not in quite so good a condition as the others. She would have to be quick because the others would flee as soon as her presence was known. She checked the breeze, checked the area, thinking of what possible direction this animal, the other animals, herself, might move in shortly and crouched. Her vision began to tunnel without her realising it and she launched herself forward as silently as she could, springing for her prey. It seemed as though time slowed down around her.

She had misjudged her pounce, the deer seemed to shy in slow motion as she landed beside it, she launched again for the next moving object in one smooth arch, caught the slow seeming kick of the second deer in her side but twisted away from the force of the blow to catch it by the throat and administer the sharp shake Sesshoumaru had shown her the day before. The neck was broken with a sharp crack, the weight held in her jaw went limp and time resumed it's normal march. The deer exploded away into the undergrowth, bleating shocked noises.

"Better than acceptable. Barely a challenge." Kagome looked up and saw Sesshoumaru had come closer.

She looked down at her prey, barely believing that it had been as easy as it had been. It was another elderly deer, one slightly more spry than her intended target. It hadn't been a mercy killing. She wasn't going to try to lessen what she had done by telling herself the animal would have died anyway, possibly of starvation or infection. She had killed her prey and she would eat it and be grateful for both it filling her stomach and for having proven to herself that, in this form, at least she could dispatch prey quickly and efficiently. Kagome looked up, hoping to see again that subtle indication of approval on her instructor's face. Sesshoumaru was conspicuously absent.

"Sesshoumaru?" Her voice seemed small in the suddenly quiet of the forest.

There was no sound, she sniffed the air, flicking her ears and scanning her surroundings. In the distance she could hear the other deer still fleeing through the undergrowth. A slow breeze sprang up, setting the leaves and twigs brushing against each other in a susurrus. She couldn't catch Sesshoumaru's scent, the air was rich with the blood of her kill, crushed grass and the scent of deer droppings but the Taiyoukai had surreptitiously burned his scent from the air. Kagome dropped into a crouch. He wouldn't have disappeared for no reason… was there a threat? He would have said something surely…

As Kagome began to straighten to look around better Sesshoumaru exploded from the foliage, stealing her kill from below her nose with a sharp tug at her whiskers to add insult to injury as he passed.

"What?!" she yelped, a unmade sneeze soured her nostrils from the whisker ears flattened barely believing she'd heard the words he threw over his shoulder - "If you want your prey - take it back."

Kagome stood thunderstruck for a moment, as much by the fact that Sesshoumaru had almost been grinning as by the fact he had just stolen her kill. There was a mocking and challenging bark from the direction he had disappeared into the trees. Kagome dug her claws into the loam and barrelled after him.

~o0o~
*Shabu-shabu is a dish where very thin slices of meat (often beef or pork) are quickly broiled in a broth with various cooking is done in a hotpot resting in the middle of the dining table so people can eat the food almost straight from the cooker and add what they like to eat to it as they go. The name 'shabu shabu' is an onomatopoeia for the bubbling noise of the broth.*
A second attempt at a plan

“One if the first lessons every pup learns, be it toys or treats: If you can't retain your prey then it's not yours.”

Sesshoumaru heard his father’s voice in his head. The words had been spoken as a prelude to the simple game of “catch-and-keep-if-you-can” when he was very very small and had involved a chase similar to this. Like his father had, he didn’t fully exerting himself to outrun his protégée but rather set a distance that encouraged her to strive to catch up rather than abandon the chase. And, he admitted to himself, in ceasing to consider the leonine form of Higurashi Kagome as a pet, he had slipped into the role of mentor. He was also coolly aware that when she shed this youkai-like appearance, and the abilities it granted her, that his interest in her development would surely drift back to indifference. However here and now, the sharing and directing of her first efforts hunting, with their minor triumphs, the childish joy of pranking Higurashi Kagome, and the game of the chase elated him in a way that made him feel centuries younger.

As he darted through the forest he maintained a straight course, only occasionally varying his direction to include obstacles to challenge his temporary student. Higurashi Kagome had begun her pursuit smashing through the vegetation behind him in an uncouth fashion but, far faster than he had expected, her pursuit had become quieter and more nimble, dodging around the bushes and picking a clear path rather than shouldering through by strength, though she had a more than sufficiency of that for a human turned youkai-like.

His reason for not laying false trails or doubling back and changing direction lay in his intention to test the boundaries of the story-place. He did not expect to be able to out run the small forest of the rose-entwined keep any more than he had the glade where the dwarves had laid him out in the crystal-box but he intended to check none the less.

Sesshoumaru slowed his pace slightly having recognised several of the the landmarks repeat themselves multiple times, in particular an array of boulders. They had reached the boundaries of this place then, and were being made to rerun and rerun the last half mile. He was processing what this meant when Higurashi Kagome suddenly leapt out of a thicket of undergrowth before him, having somehow gotten ahead of him and settled into a place of ambush. He dodged instinctively and she missed by a whisker width of space, passing by him as he whirled, to land in thicket to his right. Sesshoumaru couldn’t help himself, a short laugh of pleased surprise barked from his lips, the first he had uttered in over a century. She too had recognised their repeating surroundings, and made use of it.

Higurashi Kagome appeared to be swearing, but good-naturedly, as she extricated herself from the hedge, lithely turning to come at him again. He waited, feet planted for her attack, the deer still tucked under his arm. She came directly at him focusing intently on his torso but, to his surprise it turned into a feint, she suddenly ducked aside, grabbing the hind legs of the deer as she went past. She almost had it out of his grip but he twisted and got a double handed grip on it before she got it free. A brief bout of Tug-of-War ensued. The both growled at each other a moment, tussling. Sesshoumaru, never one to play fair when in such a rare and effervescent mood poked Higurashi Kagome fiercely in the nose with two sharp fingers. She gave a snarl, more of shock than of pain, but held on and then surprised him by throwing herself backwards, pulling both he and the deer after her. Her hind feet were ready as she rolled onto her shoulders, kicking out at him while tenaciously holding onto her prey. Sesshoumaru tumbled over both, considered exerting his strength but instead he ceded the prey to her… for a moment. He let Higurashi Kagome believe in her victory for the length of time it took for her to begin readjusting her grip on the carcass and
then tackled her, twisting the deer’s legs from her grip and then, with it under his arm again, he bounded away again through the forest, this time with an audible and feral whoop of mocking triumph.

~o0o~

“Damn the man!” Kagome wasn’t sure whether to roar in frustration or laughter as the taiyoukai disappeared into the trees again with her kill. When he’d said they would not return until she’d caught one it hadn’t occurred to he might prolong the lesson. With a mixture of exasperation and exhilaration she shook the leaf litter and loam from her back and set out after him again.

Kagome had almost lost the trail at the point where, somehow without breaking stride, Sesshoumaru had gutted the carcass. The gory mess of entrails had been flung to some distance to the side of his trail but she had ignored it, instead following the the faint but crisp acid-apple scent of his Youki which continued to cut across wind in an almost straight line North-East. In passing, the newly educated Kagome had realised that this meant that there would be no risk of the meat from being tainted by the innards bursting if they did tussle over it. She had also realised that since stealing her prey Sesshoumaru had not changed direction. She had weighed up whether this meant she should expect him to suddenly backtrack or lay a false trail. But then she had kept him in sight most of the time, could see glimpses of him ahead still and he didn’t look like he was going to change direction. He also hadn’t looked back at all as he ran.

A plan had occurred to her and, revelling in her newfound ability to run, Kagome veered off to the right, up wind of Sesshoumaru’s path, pushing herself to close the distance as quietly and quickly as possible, to get in a position to ambush him even as he was ran. And then she had realised that she kept running through the same patch of forest. She had stopped and, to her bemusement, watched Sesshoumaru run past two more times, fortunately not spotting her, before she realised that the place was looping them back. Slinking through the undergrowth, keeping down wind for she was well aware he knew the smell of rosemary didn’t belong in this place, she had set up her ambush.

It had been a pretty good plan for a first attempt and Kagome prided herself on the thought she had probably, at least slightly, surprised the taiyoukai with it. Granted he was more than pulling his punches, he wasn’t moving as fast as she knew he could, and the trick she’d played wouldn’t work a second time. Kagome loped along following Sesshoumaru’s trail. He was no longer in sight and she had a distinct certainty that they were no longer playing a game of speed and chase. Here and there the trail broke off and Kagome cast about with all of her senses, playing hot and cold. Sometimes she found a spot or two of crimson from the deer carcass. Other times, for the fraction of a second she caught a tang of his youki, obviously intentionally, that gave her a direction before disappearing again. She was fairly certain these were no accident. She shook her head, blinking back the peripheral vision that adrenaline of the chase had blotted out. She felt she’d won some points of regard in Sesshoumaru’s eyes and she was damned if she was going to muff it by making a really stupid mistake in what, she sensed, had become a stalking game. The tang of his youki brushed her senses again and reminded her of her own reiki, something she hadn’t sought in… well… in this form.

Still scanning her surroundings Kagome drew in a slow breath and turned some of her attention inwards, seeking her own ki… it was there deep in her core. At first she thought it was repelling away from her skin. Cautiously, still keeping an ear cocked on the forest around her in case Sesshoumaru had an ambush of his own, she mentally tugged at the tight ball of spiritual energy, teasing it loose, intending to draw on it just enough to better focus on the sparkling wisps of
Sesshoumaru’s youki that she could almost make out along his trail. But, like a bath ballistic, it
didn’t so much unravel as crumble outward in a fizzing surge of energy, tingling from her nose to
her tail tip to fill her body with radiant light. It wasn’t the beast form that had suppressed it, but
some part of her unconscious mind had held it tight in control, now she had reached for it she
hummed with reiki.

The air around her sang and she noted with exasperation that she had accidentally stripped the air
of Sesshoumaru’s spoor. Her very toes tingled and Kagome drew in another deep breath. She was
about to attempt to quash her aura - which must have blazed out like a beacon when another
thought occurred to her. A slow grin split her whiskers. A second cunning plan… and it might
work too…

Focusing, as she had with the reiki needle, with the fire for the swan maidens, with, gods forgive
her, the words she had thrown at the cuckoo youkai, Kagome drew on her reiki and imbued as
much of it as she could into the nearest fallen log. She charged that timber up with glowing pink
spiritual energy until it glowed like something out a television advertisement for girls-toys-up-to-
the-age-of-eight. And then she clamped down on her personal reiki. She could still feel it tingling
through her system but was fairly certain she no longer broadcast it. Or if she did hopefully the tree
would mask it out. There was a rustle in the foliage of a nearby tree Kagome started but saw
nothing but a bird darting through the trees. She’d created a huge sign post of spiritual energy -
with any luck Sesshoumaru would assume it was her but it wouldn’t move so she had to move
quick before he figured it out. Still grinning Kagome headed in the direction the youki had
indicated before she had obliterated it.

It seemed too easy. Ahead the deer was wedged low in the crotch of a tree on the edge of the
largest glade. The scattered blood trail lead right to it. Sesshoumaru’s youki was not to be sensed.
The carcass wasn’t in a very good state after their earlier tussling, Kagome was rather glad it wasn’t
facing towards her as she looked around warily, circled the tree in a spiral, on the lookout for the
trap. She has just balanced herself on her hind legs and was about to reach up with both paws to
work the limp body free when there was a sequence of rustles moving rapidly through the upper
branches of the trees from behind her and Sesshoumaru crash-tackled her, head over tail three
times, out onto the open turf.
Sesshoumaru was mildly impressed. He had felt the first jolt of reiki and had caught himself almost flinching. It had been an abrupt and powerful burst that had rolled over the forest, snuffing out the trail of youki he had scattered behind him. His immediate thought was that Higurashi Kagome had been accosted by something that had triggered her protective barrier. He had also all but combed this wood over the last three days. There was nothing here but game. A second, smaller pulse of reiki, one which did not dissipate but broadcast its presence, flared. Sesshoumaru efficiently stashed the body of the deer into a tree, wondering if the foolish cub had injured herself and was seeking his attention.

Curiosity piqued and senses in full focus he made straight for the source of the energy and, reaching a safe distance to identify it, found that was not Higurashi Kagome after all. It was a blind, rather clever given Higurashi Kagome had not, to his knowledge, ever used her power in this way before. It had succeeded in distracting him, though briefly, from his own plans. Sesshoumaru turned and sprinted through the treetops back to the deer in time to see the miko-lioness reach up for the deer.

He judged she had won her prey, he would not take if from her again but he also decided that they weren’t done for the day either. Adrenaline still tingling from the chase, and unconsciously in reaction to the earlier surge of reiki, Sesshoumaru allowed himself to abandon his usual detached and remote complacency. He shed his usual jaded dismissal of all beings as beneath his notice, well aware that there was no one else to see his next actions. Digging his booted toes hard into the soil, dropped his shoulder Sesshoumaru launched himself at the giant, predatorial form of the lioness, knocking her over and tumbling them both out into the clearing in a sprawling wrestling tangle.

~o0o~

Kagome staggered to her feet expecting to be dazed. She had tumbled over twenty meters and should have been, if not actually damaged, at least in some minor pain from bruising. However, her furred hide had absorbed the impacts as though the ground were a futon. She rose easily to her feet to find Sesshoumaru circling. She was not given the opportunity to decline from what rapidly became apparent as a impromptu bout of sparring as Sesshoumaru rolled nimbly to his feet, circled and launched himself at her again, attempting to flip her onto her back.

At first, confused, she had tried to apologise, to evade his attack and run away. But Sesshoumaru had, somehow, gotten her in a headlock and when she went limp and submissive, he had told her succinctly “Protect yourself.” And *Then*, when she had remained limp, he had forced her to furiously writhe out of his grip by plugging her nostrils with his fingers. She’d gotten free and attempted to flee again, only to be caught again and this time he tugged her eyebrow whiskers and when she ignored it (loosing three in the process) he attempted to get a hold of her tongue. Small dirty, taunting moves calculated to infuriate rather than harm. Far from what she would have expected from the icy taiyoukai.

When Kagome found herself squeaking “Hey! Quit it!” at Sesshoumaru as if he were her younger brother Souta, as she trying to get one of her massive paws between his digging fingers and her ear whiskers, Kagome realised that this was exactly what it was - The same sort of rough and tumble-sibling jostling she and her brother often indulged in - only this time it was on a youkai scale and, while she wasn’t the one with the advantage of experience and strength, she wasn’t helpless either. This was play - pure and simple puppy-play that Sesshoumaru had instigated - for gods knows
what reason. She twisted in his grip and hooked her hind toenails into his tunic to kick at him like a
cat. As Sesshoumaru twisted aside to evade her claws she caught the pleased “Hnn” he uttered. As
soon as she started fighting back rather than simply trying to escape the dirty tricks ceased and the
grappling really began.

This was not like the circling, death intent blows that she had seen between Sesshoumaru and
Inuyasha or either of them and Naraku - This was a case of “stacks-on”, “tippy-go” and “tag-the-
tail” and all manner of other games rolled into one. Sesshoumaru darted past cuffing her by the ear
but while it was a solid tap there was no malice. There was also no tit-for-tat. They didn’t take it in
turns to chase or be chased, but changed-out the game as they went. If one had advantage (usually
Sesshoumaru) they used it, if one spotted a weak spot or opening they took advantage of it (again
usually Sesshoumaru) but, as the meadow turf began to churn under boot and claw Kagome began
to, occasionally recognise opportunities of her own. She didn’t care if they were carefully place
there by the taiyoukai, she didn’t read them as pity-openings, as Inuyasha might have, but as
couragement and when she saw them she damn well went for them.

~o0o~

Kagome Higurashi slammed into a tree with more force than he’d intended to exert, knocking
loose branches and snow down from above. Sesshoumaru hesitated a fraction of a second, a briefly
and unfamiliar pang of concern that his ‘lesson’ had become too rough. But she was back on her
feet in an instant, not only back on her feet but digging her toes into the ground, circling him, intent
on counter attack. She wasn’t hurt, she wasn’t frightened, she was barely out of breath.
Sesshoumaru narrowed his eyes, lips quirking into the slightest smile. He would have to try
throwing her further next time. But Kagome didn’t make it absolutely easy, she was thinking as she
fought, something his half brother had yet to learn.

Sesshoumaru flexed his claws and realised that he was playing, had been playing whole-heartedly
for the last half hour without putting a name to it! He hadn’t played in centuries. This really was a
game, one without malice, without a prize, without any competition but exploring the capabilities
of his opponent, of helping them discover their abilities. Unable to help himself Sesshoumaru let
out the second barking shout of true laughter he had made in centuries as he evaded Kagome
Higurashi’s attack. He sank his feet into the soft loam and he launched himself back into the fray.

~o0o~

The odd sound made Kagome hesitate, even as she realised that it was a laugh, and that it had
come from Sesshoumaru. He tackled her, taking advantage of her distraction. She was bowled over,
losing most of her breath in a whoosh. Instinctively she twisted, getting her hind legs against his
torso and shoving hard. Her newly trimmed claws caught in the fabric of his clothing, snagging it
and tearing slightly, but she could control their pressure despite the speed with which she moved.
She wrenched her head around as she did so, a tactic he apparently hadn’t expected because she
managed to catch his wrist in her mouth even as she writhed upright again.

“Un! Tsu! Tsr..” Kagome began to count around his forearm, focused on keeping control over how
hard she clamped her teeth down and vocalising the count around his arm. Sesshoumaru snorted
and stuck his fingers up her nose. She let go, sneezing.

“This Sesshoumaru is not ready to be caught yet.” He stated arrogantly as he wiped his fingers on
her tail tuft. His face then, amazingly, split into a grin “Try harder”

“Gods forsaken…” Kagome sneezed again violently and saw, through watering eyes,
Sesshoumaru’s actual real-honest-to-crazed-goddess-smile before he sprang out of reach of her
swiping paw and circled towards her undefended flank. Passing a paw over her snout she huffed a
disbelieving laugh of her own and twisted back onto her feet ready to meet his next attack. Crazily, she realised, she was having fun! She was fighting with Sesshoumaru and it was a ball!

~o0o~

Higurashi Kagome was learning. Every time he tried to repeat a trick on her or a piece of tactics she caught on faster, she was beginning to develop her own ways to evade and counter his simpler attacks. Despite himself he found himself mildly impressed. It was a shame she would not remain so interesting. Of that he had no doubt - she would return to a weak human form soon enough but for the moment he eyed her, trying to decide how to get her off balance for another attempt to throw her out of the glade.

And then, somehow and without his intent, she got under his guard and he found himself slammed backward onto the broken turf, her broad paws pinning his shoulders down, teeth to throat, weight squarely on his chest preventing him from rising without exerting some effort. For a brief moment his pulse beat calmly beneath her lolling tongue, canines resting on either side of, and her breath hot on, his throat. He was about to counter her attack, a chuckle just beginning to reverberate in his ribcage, when her confident stance seemed to shatter. She all but threw herself sideways in her haste to disengaged, ears low, tail tucked, body hunched in apology.

Sesshoumaru sat up, perplexed and more than a little irate at the lion shaped figure. “You give away an advantage like That?! What foolishness is this?!”

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I promised I wouldn’t! I forgot.” The foolish words tumbled stupidly off her tongue.

“What promise?”

Kagome Higurashi sank lower, trying to be a small, harmless creature, as she had when he first found her in this form. The behaviour irritated him immensely. How dare she try to reduce herself to nothing when he had put effort into drawing out and identifying her strength and abilities these last two days, when she had been so pleased at learning to fit in her larger skin. He glowered at her and she stammered, trying to explain.

Her words were garbled but he picked out the gist of her apology: “…when you were a swan… when I pulled out that arrow… I promised I wouldn’t use strength against you ever again. I forgot! I’m sorry!”

Sesshoumaru snorted, a full and undisguised noise of derision as he stood and dusted the two huge paw prints from his front.

“You belittle me to think I would I ask for such a promise. Challenge me Higurashi Kagome - I demand it. You have proven I need not go easy on you any longer.” With that Sesshoumaru’s hands tensed into claws with a crackle of the joints and launched himself at her.

~o0o~

Kagome resisted the urge to flee the same way she had when Sesshoumaru had instigated this bout of sparring.

Instead she half-heartedly dodged and swiped at the taiyoukai with a large paw but no enthusiasm. He huffed irritably and physically picked her up by the forearm, flinging her across to the far side of the glade. Kagome found herself appreciating his action as she struck the ground and lightly tumbled back to all fours, slashing grooves across the sward with her claws as she slid to a stop. He
had given her a bit of distance, a few breaths to think, a chance to re-find her headspace. She recognised, and acknowledged, in herself the fear that had sprung from her sudden realisation of the capacity she had for destruction in this form. She also acknowledged that Sesshoumaru didn’t care - didn’t fear her, wouldn’t be broken by her, wanted her to try her hardest - to challenge him. To challenge HIM. He was far more destructive than she, but Kagome also realised that she didn’t fear injury at his hands.

She turned to face him across the glade. He stood poised, ready, waiting for her to reengage. There was something in his stance that she could almost read - she didn’t think he would chase her if she did decide to turn-tail into the forest - but she could almost feel the disappointment that would absolutely not be visible on his face. And she found she didn’t want to disappoint him - this demon who had gone from an awkward ally to someone who challenged her to expand beyond what she had thought she was, what she thought she could do.

He evidently believed in her even if she didn’t entirely herself. It felt odd, frightening, horizon breaking. To have Sesshoumaru to expect her to be more than she had thought she could be. A shiver ran over her fur and she drew in a deep breath, standing up tall in her black fur, feeling the strength of her four muscled legs, the weight of her jaws, breathing in to the bottom of her lungs and feeling herself fit into and fill her huge body. She was capable, and strong and Sesshoumaru had, in his round about way, just voiced something akin to respect. She breathed out as she crouched and then launched herself back towards the taiyoukai.

~o0o~

The morning sun had brightened into midday and the sparring went on.

In her first reengaging bout, when Kagome swatted full force at Sesshoumaru’s head with her claws fully extended, she had briefly thought she was actually going to hit him and begun to pull her blow. The Taiyoukai had looked at her with such contempt that Kagome been taken aback. He had immediately bopped her on the nose. “Whelp.” At some point in the tussle that followed Kagome stopped holding back altogether. She threw herself into the challenge determined to remove that look of distain from his face.

“I swear!” She thought to herself, “I am going to keep at him until he raises a sweat or I dropped down dead!”

A rare smirk touched the the taiyoukai’s lips as if he could hear her promise to herself and she gave it her all, pushing her strength, her speed, her flexibility against him, learning to fall and return with more efficiency each time he flung her across the glade. His blows rocked her but did not harm her. She wondered, in a corner of her mind, if this is what immortals felt like. When Sesshoumaru realised she was immune to his claws he did not stint on trying to use them. Only her own claws, it appeared, were capable of breaking her flesh but they could cut other things. She had caught Sesshoumaru with them twice, slicing through his sleeve and lightly scoring his skin. She would have stopped then and there but he visibly he noted the marks, caught her eye, smiled very slightly, his own eyes narrowing as he doubled his attacks. After the second slice she was more careful of her claws and Sesshoumaru more careful with his evasions.

~o0o~

Sesshoumaru had become complacent he realised, as he glanced at the raw welts on his forearm where Kagome Higurashi’s claws had caught and raked cross the skin. He hadn’t had the opportunity to spar in too long and because his claws made no impact on her he had foolishly assumed hers would be the same. He had become soft, in this story-place. Higurashi Kagome had now marked him twice, shallow scratches as they were, and she was barely a novice. Even as he
dove for her foreleg with the intent of flipping her across the glade again as far as he could, he savoured the spice of risk.

~o0o~

Some time later, as the sun was beginning to sink towards the forested horizon, Sesshoumaru drew himself up and glanced at the sky. Despite his own healthy surplus of ki Sesshoumaru noted the fatigue that had increasingly hampering Higurashi Kagome’s attacks. He also noted the slight hollowing of her gut behind the ribs. She had not yet eaten today and, though she had gained weight since he had arrived at this place she was still underweight, as his flinging of her about all morning had highlighted. Regretfully it was time to stop, with a sharp hand gesture he stated “Enough.”

Kagome relaxed out of the crouch she had just begun and sagged to her haunches with, he was smugly pleased to note, both gratitude and disappointment. In the forest shadows, the abandoned deer carcass would be half frozen in the snow.

“You will eat now. A fire will be needed to thaw your prey. Whether you wish to wait for it to cook or not is your decision.”

Kagome began to open her mouth to ask if he would build the fire and then remembered using her reiki to create the small bonfire for the swan-maidens. She glanced at Sesshoumaru- he had not forgotten, possibly reminded by her display of reiki earlier.

~o0o~

Kagome flopped down onto a carpet of pine needles not far from the dead deer, intent on a breather before worrying about her dinner, though her stomach was beginning to make itself audible. The pads of her feet and underside of her claws felt raw from all of the twisting, sliding and running she had done. She could feel them tingle as the accelerated healing of this form took charge, aided by her now fizzling reiki. Her coat was rank with sweat and snow-slush now, her mane a tangle of small branches, dirt and bark from impacts with trees. There was not the slightest hint of rosemary around her any longer.

Sesshoumaru hadn't broken so much as a faint sheen of sweat though he was still, ever so slightly, out of breath. Her own sides were bellowing as she lay, eyes half shut keeping watch on the Taiyoukai in case he decided to break their truce and start the melee again. To her surprise he blew lightly on the palms of his hands and sank with a very slight sigh into his signature sitting posture at the base of a nearby tree.

“You are more capable than I had initially expected.” He allowed, directing a second breath across his palms.

Kagome covered her surprise at this unexpected praise by rolling onto her back, scratching her shoulders on the gnarled roots that jutted from the carpet of pine needles, shedding clumps of damp fur. "Damn it. I was sure I could get you raise at least a little bit of a sweat"

"This Sesshoumaru does not sweat."

Kagome’s eyes flicked to his hands, now palm down and at rest, his forearms resting on his knees and a piece of trivia popped into her mind, explaining that slight saline aroma that had mingled with his usual scents.

"Dogs and cats only sweat through their paws… but I'm a cat and I certainly sweat."
Sesshoumaru crinkled his nose very slightly and Kagome was about to pull a face when he surprised her by saying, "You look like a feline but you are not one. This form you wear Higurashi Kagome, is a part of this place-story. I begin to wonder if you wish to leave it."

"I did! I mean I do! I.. I’ve just never been this… capable before. Not having to be protected, or at fault, or being a burden of some sort… it’s not something familiar…” She said, recognising this as a truth even as it rolled off her tongue. “I… I kind of like being capable…”

“Hnn.” Sesshoumaru rose. Kagome realised he would never do anything so graceless as pant but, in his way, he had just subtly indicated not once, but twice, that she had pushed him to exert himself in their sparring. “Perhaps you are expected to make it familiar. Eat and we will discuss methods of escaping this story-place as we return to the keep. I think there is no longer purpose in remaining here.”

Kagome blinked at his distinct omission of referring to himself in the third person. Awkwardly, proudly, she offered him a share of her kill and was stupidly elated when he inclined his head, passing one final subtle breath over his palms.

~o0o~

It was strangely exciting to be the one drawing out these abilities in another. To watch what was almost unformed clay take form, and through his intervention. Sesshoumaru wondered if his own father had felt the same way about his own childish achievements. The incongruous thought of the human child Rinn suddenly popped into his thoughts. She too was growing and changing… how long since he had thought of his own responsibilities…. He began to the count the days he had seen end and realising how many there had been. Sesshoumaru rose to his feet as Kagome finished her last piece of semi-cooked venison, holding the large wooden spit it had cooked upon between her forepaws in a very doggish fashion.

“Come. We have tarried too long.”

Kagome whuffed an agreement and then groaned as she rose, abandoning the remnants of her dinner, belly lightly bulging. Sesshoumaru eyed this with a degree of satisfaction and set a slightly slower than usual pace back.

~o0o~

Kagome walked alongside Sesshoumaru in lazy long strides as they headed back to the keep. She hoped Sesshoumaru would agree to help her break up the worst of the snarls when they returned to the keep and was trying to think of a way to broach the subject before she opened her mouth when a glint of light from the rank long grass that hedged the deer-path they followed caught her attention. Sesshoumaru had already noticed it. He glanced at her once and caught her eye, then they both approached the object, moving apart to flank it as though it were prey.

~o0o~
Through a Looking Glass

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It wasn’t prey or a weapon. The light was sunset reflected on a very large traditional bronze hand mirror* that rested on a weather-stained and cracked wooden cosmetics chest, half obscured by the long grass and the rotted remnants of a fabric cover. Investigating the back of the mirror Kagome noted that it was decorated with a snake curling through a piece of inlaid coral. She flicked a glance at Sesshoumaru - both of them had seen the white snake in Benzaiten’s hair. The sunset flashed bright orange on the tarnished surface again and Kagome blinked, looking closer. The mirror brightened and cleared, reflecting the sunset over a scene somewhere else.

The mirror revealed a bronze tinted beach scene, strange, multi-eyed serpents boiling across the sand in a tangle of aggressive agitation.

For a moment Kagome thought it was a novelty television and it was the image being broadcast rather than the medium that held her attention. Sesshoumaru however was fascinated by the object, he began to crouch, began to reach out a claw to tap the surface, the words “A moving painting?” on the tip of his tongue. And then Rinnran past the field of view, crying in alarm. She was rapidly followed by Ah, sans muzzle, who snatched her up, lifting her from the ground while Un spat flames and stomped furiously on something that writhed in the sand at its feet. Inuyasha pelted across the beach sand, silently shouting something to someone behind him and gesturing for them to follow. Wind whipped his long white hair and flattened his ears to one side. Audible anger escaped Sesshoumaru in a hiss and he finished his motion of reaching to touch the surface of the mirror.

To the surprise of both onlookers, instead of his claws clinking on the surface, they passed through it. On his fingertips he felt the spatter of wind-flung sand and shell grit. Sesshoumaru pulled his fingers back, rubbing them together. Tiny grains dusted from his fingers.

Kagome gasped, “It’s a pathway out of here! Can they hear us?!” Her last words were a shout to her friends but if they could potentially hear her they were in no place to be distracted from the actual threat before them. The writhing snakes seemed to be convulsing and growing scuttling crab like legs. The amount that could actually be seen through the mirror was incredibly limited and both of the viewers leaned in.

Miroku and Sango now hastened past, sweeping demon-snakes out of their path as they ran with Shippo carrying a long, fabric swathed bundle close to his chest and silently wailing, following close behind them.

Kagome sat back a moment, tearing her eyes from the scene and looked at the portal, the mirror was huge, for what it was, but still no more than some two hand-spans in width. Sesshoumaru would be able to squeeze through, though it would require him to abandon his dignity, but there was no possibility of Kagome passing through, her face might just fit but her shoulders wouldn’t and she didn’t like the idea of the window suddenly closing as she stood looking through like a taxidermied head on a wall. Sesshoumaru glanced at her, sized up her frame and briefly tried to stretch the edges of the mirror but without success.

Taking in a deep breath Kagome voiced the facts quickly and quietly, her eyes still glued on the battle occurring in the mirror: “They need help right now. There’s no way I’m going to be able to get through there and we’ve still no idea how to turn me back into my own shape.” She trailed off,
dragging her eyes from the scene, taking in Sesshoumaru’s flat expression she continued “You can go through, help your ward and retainer, doing that would also save my friends, which is what I would do if I was there. I’ll find my own way home. I’m not helpless. I’ve learned a lot, you’ve taught me a lot. Who knows maybe that will finish this story and the whole thing.”

Sesshoumaru glanced from her to the limited scene visible in the mirror, Janken ran past with several of the youkai pursuing him, the staff of two heads was missing from his hands. None of the humans he could see appeared to care whether the imp came to harm or not. His ward, though out of reach of the attackers was attempting to escape Ah and Un to reach Janken. His half brother stupidly flailed at the creatures doing very little damage and sending cuts through the air in directions that that threatened his ward, her mount and his retainer.

“Hnn. Your analysis is sound. The Sesshoumaru will assist your friends, once the safety of my responsibilities are assured.”

And then, because it seemed somehow important, he quickly took one of her forepaws and turned it over. The black leather pads of her paws formed an asymmetric flower, petalled with the steely grey of the five sharp talons of her claws. He brushed his fingers over it and then placed his lips briefly on what would have been her palm had it been a hand. Kagome flinched and attempted to pull away, her nostrils pinching shut and her eyes wide in distress, whether from his action or from the fact she came close to slicing his face with her claws. He refused to relinquish her paw, keeping eye contact.

“Kihsu appear to hold power in this place. On this I will return and free you if you have not done so yourself in three days.”

A tiny word worked it’s out from between her large, sharp teeth. “Please.”

Sesshoumaru nodded briskly and turned. He unbound Tenseiga from his hip and pushed it through the small space, following it with his head and shoulders, wriggling through as quickly as he could, already calculating how best to combat the threats on the other side of the mirror. Kagome set the broad top of her muzzle to his boot soles to hasten him thorough.

She watched as his booted feet disappear the last of the way through the mirror and then as he quickly rose to his feet on the other side of the mirror. She kept her kissed paw clenched tightly against her chest and shivered. Beyond the reflection, without any sign of concern the Taiyoukai surreptitiously dusted himself off and strode toward the battle.

Kagome flared out her whiskers and measured them against the frame of the mirror, they stood out inches beyond the boundaries of the view. Her nose nudged the surface and she found the surface to be cold and thoroughly solid. Either only Sesshoumaru could pass through it or there had been a chance for her too, had she been dis-enchanted. Too late now. She really would have to figure her own way back…

Chapter End Notes

* Silver backed glass didn’t exist until the 16th Century. In Japan bronze mirrors were imported from China from at least the Heian period. These small personal mirrors were kept covered when not in use to prevent them from attracting evil spirits.
Sesshoumaru drew out his energy whip even as he strode down over the dunes. His boots sank into the fine grey sand as he advanced assessing the writhing lesser youkai, their behaviour and their targets. Unexpectedly, at his approach the creatures turned as one and fled back towards the sea with more speed that they had shown in attacking the Inutachi. Despite his efforts Sesshoumaru did not manage to swat more than a few of them before the rest were out of reach, wriggling through the waves and rapidly disappearing towards the horizon. Those that he had struck crumbled into paper scraps that scattered over the sand. Closer to the water Inuyasha swore and sent a final Windscar at the stragglers, briefly cleaved the tide. Then there was no sound but that of his half brother cursing the unexpected turn of events over the sussurus of wind and tide.

Sesshoumaru drew a slow breath in through his nose, bracing himself for interacting with his father’s abrasive offspring and weighing up whether the creatures had been a ploy to lure him back. He quashed the irritation that that thought engendered. Dispelling his whip he approached Higurashi Kagome’s companions and his own retinue. Rinn was the first to notice him.

“Sesshoumaru-sama?!” Rinn's shrill voice rose like a seagull and she writhed free of Ah’s grip to scramble up the beach towards him. “Sesshoumaru-samaaaaa!”

Jaken followed close behind, trying to hook her with his staff, shouting for her to slow down, to show some decorum, to not shame their lord, he did not look up.

The Party turned, almost as one, from watching for the snake-things.

The next words fell from almost all of the Inutachi’s lips simultaneously:

“It’s Sesshoumaru… Sesshoumaru?! Your hair?!”

Jaken stumbled to a halt and looked up at his master and, for once, was completely speechless. His eyes however became wet with distress and he stuffed a fist in his mouth.

“Sesshoumaru-san! Rinn has missed you!” The child bounced around him like a puppy, “You look very different, is it a special day? Should Rinn have her short too?” Sesshoumaru let her frisk, satisfied to note she looked healthy and undistressed.

The youkai-exterminator was the first to find a rational tongue, emboldened by Sesshoumaru’s lack of aggressive behaviour, she shouldered her bone boomerang and asked, “Sesshoumaru-sama. Where, might we ask, did you come from so suddenly? I was certain this area was empty of…” She trailed off.

*Other Threats.* Sesshoumaru could hear the sentence she did not complete.

Sesshoumaru inclined his head and began to gesture back to the crease between sand dunes where his boot prints began, there the sunset reflected in a sharp glint off something and the Taiyoukai narrowed his eyes. He had not seen any objects when he had squeezed through the mirror. Abruptly he turned his shoulder on the group and strode back to the spot.

The light had come from what appeared to be a circle of silvery ice set in a pink lacquer frame with a handle*. It appeared to have fallen from the pocket of a large, overstuffed and garish yellow bag.
Sesshoumaru fastidiously picked up the lacquer item between finger and thumb. The surface reflected his face with a clarity that no still pond surface or bronze mirror ever had.

“Oi! Put that down! That’s Kagome’s! What the F-” Inuyasha’s obscenities were overridden by Shippo’s high pitched exclamation “That’s Kagome’s Bag! How did you fit?! You can’t have come from there!” Even as the kitsune cub said this the child was circling the bag and Sesshoumaru, eyeing the footprints with uncertainty, “could you?”

Sesshoumaru held up the mirror, twitching it out of reach of Inuyasha’s grasping hands. “This device belongs to Higurashi Kagome?”

“Oi! How do you know her whole name?!” Inuyasha lunged for the item again and Sesshoumaru calmly swatted him aside, looking to the youkai exterminator for verification.

“Uh… Yes - that’s Kagome-chan’s… do you know where she is?”

Sesshoumaru gave a half shrug which, to someone familiar with him, indicated uncertainty. The inutachi were not familiar, Jaken was still catatonic and Rinn was not the sort to consciously recognise or translate subtleties. Sesshoumaru let out a short snort and elaborated simply: “Higurashi Kagome is on the other side to the device.”

~o0o~

Kagome watched as the Taiyoukai advanced on the creatures, everything seemed to flow in slow motion across the mirror surface. She watched the snake-things flee and the brief interaction between Sesshoumaru and her friends. She let out a breath she hadn’t known she was holding when it became apparent there would be no hostilities between them. And then he was striding intently back towards her, the field of view giving her a close look at his boots before he pick up his side of the mirror.

Sesshoumaru looked blankly into it and she could tell he couldn’t see her. But she could see him, and the others, and they were all ok. It was comforting, even when the view was suddenly obscured by fabric, yellow fabric. And Kagome had to laugh, a queasy homesick laugh, because she recognised that it had been put in her bag and she could guess what the other side of the mirror had looked like. Very Pink. Carefully she broke the bronze mirror free of the stand and carried it in her mouth back to the keep.

~o0o~

On the first day Kagome took Sesshoumaru’s challenge to escape the story-place on her own to heart. She picked a different direction from the one they had taken in their hunt the previous day and had loped as straight as an arrow for an hour, only to find herself back at the keep. She tried this six times in different directions. Each time the snow thawed more and the air became warmer but nothing else changed. Finally exhausted, Kagome crawled back to the keep and slept through the night.

On second day she searched the castle from attic to cellar for a secret door, a portal home, some indication of what was expected of her. There were no other mirrors, only windows and Kagome climbed through every single one she could through, in both directions, including those on the second and third floors. She had set the small mirror in the feasting hall, periodically returning to it to prod it and see if anything had changed. As the sun dropped behind the horizon on the second day Kagome crouched on a divan before it, watching avidly. Occasionally she saw one or two of her friends pass by in agitated conversation. They appeared to be concerned but not frantic. The background appeared to be a temple and the other mirror propped on a low surface. Probably steps
by the look of it. Kagome could just see the edge of her yellow bag beside it and wondered if putting the mirror out had been Sesshoumaru’s doing. The surface remained solid and cold. No one responded to her calls.

The third day Kagome searched through the castle gardens - She squeezed through anything vaguely resembling a doorway. The roses had returned in a wild riot of blossoms, their heavy musk redolent on the air. Kagome sniffed for any sort of incensey-magical-smell until she sneezed but couldn’t find any trace of magic to guide her search. She became hungry and went the banquet hall. There was plain rice, and soy sauce*. She would have been satisfied with that alone but Sesshoumaru’s contempt haunted her and she returned to the forest and, between wriggling through arched tree roots and searching for potentially magical caves, she practiced hunting until she had caught three rabbits. Remembering that she was the mistress of her castle she carried them home and demanded of the hall that they be cooked. She had tempura rabbit, soy sauce and rice for supper which slightly salved her sense of defeat at self-rescue. Lacking any other idea of what to do with herself Kagome carried the bronze mirror out into her basking spot in the rose garden. She sat and watched hopeful of seeing her friends, watching the surface long into the night and falling asleep still in the garden.

On the fourth day the mirror shattered.

Chapter End Notes

* Rice and soy sauce, I have been informed, is another pot-noodle equivalent for poor Japanese university students.
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from China from at least the Heian period. These small personal mirrors were kept covered when
not in use to prevent them from attracting evil spirits.

I need to retroactively go through and find all mentions of modern style glass and either remove
them or have Sesshoumaru react to them - it’s something we take for granted here and now that I
didn’t think of it at the time.

“Sesshoumaru-sama! Your hair!!? What has happened to your noble hair?!?”
Rinn clapped her hands over her mouth, inuyasha swore and automatically clutched his own white
locks, the others simply stared. Sesshoumaru’s glance flickered over their faces distainfully.
Despite his attention being on the skirmish ahead of him Sesshoumaru noted wryly that his passage through the mirror had come with yet another change to his garb. At long last he was clad in his customary apparel and familiar armor. Bakusaiga rested again at his side in sullen obedience, ever jealous, he now realised, of the sheathed sword held in his hand. Tenseiga buzzed arrogantly and possessively back at the possessed blade. Now far more vocal, far more smug, than before. Curling his lip at the blades competing for his attention Sesshoumaru thrust his father’s sword through his sash and drew Bakusaiga intending to removed the threats to his ward, his mount and his vassal. His boots sank into the fine grey sand as he advanced, drawing Bakusaiga and assessing the writhing lesser youkai, their behaviour and their targets.

At his approach the creatures unexpectedly turned as one and fled back towards the sea with more speed that they had shown in attacking the Inutachi. Despite his efforts Sesshoumaru did not manage to slice more than a few of them before the rest were well out of reach, wriggling through the waves and rapidly disappearing beneath the deeper water. Those that he had struck crumbled into paper scraps that scattered over the sand. Further along the beach to the water Inuyasha swore and sent a final Wind-scar at the stragglers, briefly cleaving the tide. Then there was no sound but that of his half brother cursing the unexpected turn of events over the susurrus of wind and tide. Sesshoumaru drew a slow breath in through his nose, bracing himself for interacting with his father’s abrasive offspring and weighing up whether the creatures had been a ploy to lure him back. He quashed the irritation that that particular thought engendered. Dispelling his whip he approached Higurashi Kagome’s companions and his own retinue. Rinn was the first to notice him.

“Sesshoumaru-sama?!” Rinn's shrill voice rose like a seagull and she writhed free of Ah’s grip to scramble up the beach towards him. “Sesshoumaru-samaaaaaa!”

Jaken followed close behind, intent on his attempts to hook her with his staff, shouting for her to slow down, to show some decorum, to not shame their lord, he did not look up.

The Inutachi turned, almost as one, from watching for the snake-things to see where Rinn was running with such loud elation.

The next words fell from the kitsune child’s mouth, clear and carrying, “It’s Sesshoumaru?… But what happened to his hair?!”

Inuyasha swore and automatically clutched his own white locks protectively. Jaken stumbled to a halt and looked up at his master and, for once, was completely speechless. His eyes however became wet with distress and he stuffed a fist in his mouth.

“Sesshoumaru-san! Rinn has missed you!” The child bounced around him like a puppy, “ You look very different, is it a special day? Should Rinn have her hair cut short too?” Sesshoumaru let her frisk, satisfied to note she looked healthy and undistressed.

The youkai-exterminator was the first to find a rational tongue, emboldened by Sesshoumaru’s lack of aggressive behaviour, she shouldered her bone boomerang and asked, “Sesshoumaru-sama. Where, might we ask, did you come from so suddenly? I was certain this area was empty of…” She trailed off.

Other Threats. Sesshoumaru could hear the sentence she did not complete. Sesshoumaru inclined his head and began to gesture back to the crease between sand dunes where his boot prints began, there the sunset reflected in a sharp glint off something and the Taiyoukai narrowed his eyes. He had not seen any objects when he had squeezed through the mirror. Abruptly he turned his shoulder on the group and strode back to the spot.

The light had come from what appeared to be a circle of silvery ice set in a pink lacquer frame with a handle*. It had fallen from the pocket of a large, overstuffed and garish yellow bag. Sesshoumaru fastidiously picked up the lacquer item between finger and thumb. The surface reflected his face with a clarity that no still pond surface or bronze mirror ever had.

“Oi! Put that down! That’s Kagome’s! What the F-"Inuyasha’s obscenities were overridden by Shippo’s high pitched exclamation “That’s Kagome’s Bag! How did you fit?! You can’t have come from there!” Even as the kitsune cub said this the child was circling the bag and
Sesshoumaru, eyeing the footprints with uncertainty, “could you?”
Sesshoumaru held up the mirror, twitching it out of reach of Inuyasha’s grasping hands. “This device belongs to Higurashi Kagome?”
“Oi! How do you know her whole name?!” Inuyasha lunged for the item again and Sesshoumaru calmly swatted him aside, looking to the youkai exterminator for verification.
“Uh… Yes - that’s Kagome-chan’s… do you know where she is?”
Sesshoumaru gave a half shrug which, to someone familiar with him, indicated uncertainty. The inutachi were not familiar, Jaken was still catatonic and Rinn was not the sort to consciously recognise or think to translate subtleties. Sesshoumaru let out a short snort and elaborated simply: “Higurashi Kagome is on the far side of this device.”

~o0o~

Kagome watched as the Taiyoukai advanced on the creatures, everything seemed to flow in slow motion across the mirror surface. She watched the snake-things flee and the brief interaction between Sesshoumaru and her friends. She let out a breath she hadn’t known she was holding when it became apparent there would be no hostilities between them. And then he was striding intently back towards her, the field of view giving her a close look at his boots before he pick up his side of the mirror.
Sesshoumaru looked blankly into it and she could tell he couldn’t see her. But she could see him, and the others, and they were all ok. It was comforting, even when the view was suddenly obscured by fabric, yellow fabric. And Kagome had to laugh, a queasy homesick laugh, because she recognised that it had been put in her bag and she could guess what the other side of the mirror had looked like: Very Pink. Carefully she broke the bronze mirror free of the stand and carried it in her mouth back to the keep.

~o0o~

On the first day Kagome took Sesshoumaru’s challenge to escape the story-place on her own to heart. She picked a different direction from the one they had taken in their hunt the previous day and had loped as straight as an arrow for an hour, only to find herself back at the keep. She tried this six times in different directions. Each time the snow thawed more and the air became warmer but nothing else changed. Finally exhausted, Kagome crawled back to the keep and slept through the night.

On second day she searched the castle from attic to cellar for a secret door, a portal home, some indication of what was expected of her. There were no other mirrors, only windows and Kagome climbed through every single one she could through, in both directions, including those on the second and third floors. She had set the small mirror in the feasting hall, periodically returning to it to prod it and see if anything had changed. As the sun dropped behind the horizon on the second day Kagome crouched on a divan before it, watching avidly. Occasionally she saw one or two of her friends pass by in agitated conversation. They appeared to be concerned but not frantic. The background appeared to be a temple and the other mirror propped on a low surface. Probably steps by the look of it. Kagome could just see the edge of her yellow bag beside it and wondered if putting the mirror out had been Sesshoumaru’s doing. The surface remained solid and cold. No one responded to her calls.

On the third day Kagome searched through the castle gardens - She squeezed through anything vaguely resembling a doorway. The roses had returned in a wild riot of blossoms, their heavy musk redolent on the air. Kagome sniffed for any sort of incensey-magical-smell until she sneezed but couldn’t find any trace of magic to guide her search. She became hungry and went the banquet hall. There was plain rice, and soy sauce*. She would have been satisfied with that alone but Sesshoumaru’s contempt haunted her and she returned to the forest and, between wriggling through arched tree roots and searching for potentially magical caves, she practiced hunting until she had caught three rabbits. Remembering that she was the mistress of her castle she carried them home.
and demanded of the hall that they be cooked. She had tempura rabbit, soy sauce and rice for
supper which slightly salved her sense of failure at self-rescue so far. Lacking any other idea of
what to do with herself Kagome carried the bronze mirror out into her basking spot in the rose
garden. She sat and watched hopeful of seeing her friends, watching the surface long into the night
and falling asleep still in the garden.
On the fourth day the mirror shattered.

Notes:
* Rice and soy sauce, I have been informed, is another pot-noodle equivalent for poor Japanese
university students.

~ Chapter 53 - A third exchange ~

The Inu-tachi took Sesshoumaru’s words and digested them in silence for a long moment. He stood
watching Rinn until she grew bored of watching them all watch each him and began to collect
seashells. Jaken still stared at the Taiyoukai’s crookedly shorn hair. Occasionally his mouth would
half open, twitch as though he wanted to say something and then snap shut again. It was Shippo
who, at length, asked: “Why didn’t she come back when you did?”
Sesshoumaru’s jaw tightened fractionally and he focused on the child. Shippo’s ears dipped
deferentially but he held his ground. “Please,” the child added.
Sesshoumaru’s gaze flicked over the assembled humans, half humans and youkai before returning
to the young kitsune.
“Higurashi Kagome could not return through that means. She asked that this Sesshoumaru to see
you protected while she finds her own way back,” he said, choosing to put his own interpretation
on the agreement between Higurashi Kagome and himself.
“You just left here there?!“ Inuyasha shouted. “How could you?! She can’t look after herself! She
needs to be protected!”
Sesshoumaru gave him a disdainful and dismissive glance. “You do not know her very well.”
“And you think you do you f-”
Sesshoumaru spoke over the hanyou’s descent into profanity, not raising his voice, “She is not
what she was when this Sesshoumaru first met her. And, when last seen, she was far more
formidable than you could hope to be. Higurashi Kagome has never been weak. She was just not
aware of it previously.”
Shippo’s mouth was not the only one to have dropped open at this unexpected statement. His was,
however, the only one to produce comprehensible words, “You really mean that?”
Sesshoumaru inclined his head. “She has learned to be formidable. However if she is not back in
three days of her own accord this Sesshoumaru will find her and ensure her return.”
Shippo smiled uncertainly, glanced at Sango, back at Sesshoumaru, reading the seriousness of his
statement and then grinned. “Thank you!”
The taiyoukai inclined his head again to the child and the others, sans Rinn and Ah-Un, boggled at
the unexpected courtesy.
“Would… would you care to wait with us for her return Sesshoumaru-sama?” Miroku asked
politely. “We had an errand to the holy island there,” he gestured to the shape out in the bay, “But
have been informed that it will not be accessible for the next three days as there is sacred cleaning
and rites being carried out and none may cross the water until it is completed. If it is not
disagreeable,” a glance was flicked at Inuyasha who turned his back sulkily, and Rinn who
beamed, “We might await Kagome-chan’s return together.”
Sesshoumaru gave the barest inclination of his head and Rinn, who by this time had returned to
show Shippo her findings, whispered loudly to the Inu-tachi, “That means yes.”

~o0o~

The Inutachi and Sesshoumaru’s retinue chose to camp outside of the settlement, which was small,
decrepit, and strongly redolent of fish. The teahouse and lodgings that serviced pilgrims to the area had been dismissed now that the party was almost fifty percent youkai. The three days were quiet, uneventful. Sesshoumaru roamed in an increasing spiral around the town each day, senses alert for Higurashi Kagome’s return or some threat he could obliterate. Neither eventuated. Each evening he returned to the Inu-tachi’s campsite, blank faced and inwardly irritated.

On the dawn of the fourth day, as Inuyasha rumbled in Kagome’s pack on the optimistic chance of finding any overlooked snack foods the mirror broke.

It occurred with a sharp retort and then a high splintering noise reminiscent of ice hitting stone that was audible at the far edges of the campsite. Inuyasha started cussing, kicking the bag away as he clutched at his cut fingers. Sesshoumaru stiffened at the scent of blood and snapped to attentiveness.

“What happened” Sango called from where she was supervising Miroku make breakfast. Her eyes narrowed as she saw the blood, vivid spatterings on the fabric of the yellow bag.

“I didn’t touch the damn thing! I was just looking under it and it went and exploded on me! The mirror’s busted. The bag’s full of shards.” Tucking his injured fingers under his arm Inuyasha upended the bag with his other hand, scattering broken pieces of mirror and random sundries across the ground.

“You may have just destroyed the only way to get the Miko back Hanyou.”

The words, when they issued from between Sesshoumaru’s teeth were soft, almost bored, internally he was furious. He had given his word to Higurashi Kagome he would help her return if she did not do so and now he had no idea of how to begin finding his way back. The mirror had ceased to work for him but it had been his own escape from that place and some part of him had expected it to be the key to get her back.

Shippo’s shriek of distress at this statement was followed by a avalanche of weeping mushrooms that buried the hanyou in a fungal mass of wailing. The hanyoukai’s muffled voice issued from the pile “Get these off a’ me I swear I didn’t do it!”

Rinn stayed back at a glance from Sesshoumaru but Shippo frantically ran forward, heedless of the shards and his bare paws. Scrabbling for the largest pieces Shippo crouched trying to put the pieces back in order. At the first scent of the kitsune cub’s blood, caused by a small cut to his fingers, Sesshoumaru hauled him up and away from the broken pieces by the collar, dropping him beside Rinn who automatically took his uninjured hand and tugged him over to Sango for inspection. Sesshoumaru smoothed knelt and rapidly arranged the fragments back into their original circle. They remained fragments but no longer reflected his face. Sesshoumaru hissed and the others sidled closer to look over his shoulders. The shards now revealed a different scene, though only Sesshoumaru understood it’s import: a giant, heavily set black feline youkai stood hunched amidst a spangle of broken glass and rose briars. The beast staggered, attempted to shake itself and then collapsed in a heap with an inaudible cry of distress.

The shards then seemed to ripple and began to melted like ice, sinking into the dried summer grass. Sesshoumaru spat a curse that made all of the others turn, startled.

“This Sesshoumaru must return to that place. Now.”

“What? Where?”

“How?”

“Why? Who was that?”

“What the f..”
“Well… As for how.” Miroku said, “You are at Enoshima - perhaps you could petition the goddess Benzaiten- it is her temple on the island. She had something to do with Kagome’s disappearance. Perhaps she will be willing to help you bring her back…”

There was an surge of youki, sharp and tingling through the air. Sesshoumaru hissed a breath in through his teeth and suppressed his furious energy, “Benzaiten?”

“Benten, Benzaiten or Saraswati. She is the goddess of music and good fortune.” Miroku clarified. “Kagome disappeared when she visited us. She gave us a shamisen to bring here - we are hoping Kagome will return when we deliver it.” Sango clarified.

There was a moment's silence as Sesshoumaru turned this information over. All eyes were fixed on him. He realised he had bared his teeth and consciously relaxed his face.

“You will show this Sesshoumaru the shamisen .” The Taiyoukai snapped imperiously. Miroku’s eyes flickered to the long fabric wrapped bundle that was carefully stashed with the groups shared belongings and then back to Sesshoumaru’s cold visage.

“We were given it by Benzaiten sama herself to bring here to Enoshima. I believe she wanted us to deliver it in person.” The monk hedged.

“This Sesshoumaru has had dealings with this… Benzaiten,” Sesshoumaru’s lip curled very slightly in cold distain. “No harm will come to the instrument. It will be delivered to the main hall of the goddess’s temple if that is what is needed. Higurashi Kagome cannot be left where she is any longer and you are all too slow.”

“Will this get Kagome back? Can you get her back?” Shippo asked, eyes wide but trusting. Sesshoumaru gave his half shrug but the kit was quick and recognised it for what it was - uncertainty but an intention to attempt the action.

“This Sesshoumaru gave his word to assist her if she had need of it.”

Wordlessly Sango picked up the shamisen and handed it to the Taiyoukai. “Bring her back for us Sesshoumaru-sama, if it is possible. We will follow to temple as soon as we can.”

The taiyoukai inclined his head and then snapped to his vassal: “Jaken. Guard Rinn. Take her and Ah-Un to safety, await my return.”

Turning on his heel, the Shamisen in hand Sesshoumaru gathered his youki. His first stride was a step, his second a leap and by his third he was a small bright globe of light that shot across the short stretch of water towards the ornate temple rooftops of the island.

As Sesshoumaru reformed into his humanoid form above the courtyard of Benzaiten’s temple he resisted the urge to call on his acid and melt the instrument in his hand, he resisted the urge to smash the sounding box on the nearest stone and he resisted the urge to snap the strings, to fashion them into a garrotte to use on the goddess. None of these actions would achieve his purpose.

He would swallow his bile and petition the goddess of music with music, to ensure he kept his word to Higurashi Kagome.

Sesshoumaru landed silently on the broad cedar steps of the temple and tasted the air. It was heavy with rich pine resin, incense and, beneath it, the silvery bite of divine power. Sesshoumaru closed his eyes and drew in a deep, grudge-laden breath and then let it out slowly, with as much of his simmering anger, resentment and bitterness. Instinctively he knew there would be no use in carrying those emotions in with him to negotiate for the release of Higurashi Kagome. He toed out of his boots and left them, neatly lined up by the door of the temple, made sure his temper was thoroughly tamped down as he stepped inside.

The floor was freshly polished and the painted walls of the temple gleamed with recently cleaned
gold murals. Incense, newly lit, wafted over offering tables piled with arrangements of seasonal fruit and blossoms. The taiyoukai walked across the floor to the alter where a carving of an elegantly limbed woman sat cross legged on a coiled dragon’s back, a lotus in one palm and a biwa* held in the other. He stopped squarely before the altar dais and knelt slowly, unfolding the indigo dyed wrapping cloth that cradled the musical instrument. Setting the fabric aside he turned the shamisen over in his hands once, appreciating the fine workmanship that had gone into it’s crafting. It was an instrument worthy of a deity, the mother of pearl reflecting like the ocean surface seen from below.

He brushed the strings lightly with his claws to check if the shamisen required tuning. They made no sound at all. Sesshoumaru could feel the vibration of the strings beneath his fingertips, though he couldn’t hear a sound they felt sweet and right. Gritting his teeth and reining in his temper at being denied full control over the music he was playing the taiyoukai began to play, silently. This was another test, he was certain of it. He would not be tricked into behaving as a enraged pup - by destroying the instrument or refusing to play it. The goddess has said at the very beginning of this farce that she wanted tribute from him, she had indicated again and again that it was music she wanted. He chose to provide it.

He could almost hear the music his fingers pulled from the strings. Thick and rich as honey, nourishing as broth. That they were soundless irked him. But if the human’s goddess demanded a tribute of music in order for him to demand she return Higurashi Kagome then he would not stint on the tithe. As he found his hands tracing the well practiced ballad his mother had taught him, the silence of the hall pressing in around him, Sesshoumaru opened his mouth and sang out the words that accompanied the inaudible music, his voice, a little hoarse from lack of practice soon warmed and filled the hall, echoing off the roof and resonating lightly in the papered walls.

At his side Tensaiga buzzed it’s own counter-melody as if chiding the strings for their silence. On his other hip Bakusaiga resonated silently in resentment.

A gust of salt laden wind swirled around the closed hall. Sesshoumaru ignored it until he had finished the piece and then he looked up at the alter. The statue was gone, replaced by Benzaiten herself in a kimono of soft grey and green wave patterns. Around her shoulders, almost weightless as the scarf of a heavenly maiden, the white snake coiled. Her face was set in a small satisfied smile.

“You have my attention Little Hound. I am willing to hear your petition.”

Sesshoumaru stilled the strings with his fingers, “This Sesshoumaru… I ask that Higurashi Kagome be returned to this place and her human form.”

The goddess examined her sleeve casually, picked at an invisible thread and darted a sly glance at the taiyoukai.

“Why should she be any concern of mine? She is not under my jurisdiction. She plays no instrument, sings no songs, is part of no trade I support. Her family has traditionally followed the ways of the shamans*. Her past offerings have always been to the native gods, not those of the buddhist parthenon.”

Sesshoumaru shook his head slightly, irritated despite himself and uncaring of the differences of human religions. “You used her as a tool to inflict your lesson upon me.”

“She has gained much from the experience.”

“So you owe her nothing.” Sesshoumaru translated flatly.

Benten sniffed and looked up and into the distance, as if she could see into that story-place. Very likely she could. “Well that is pretty speech on her behalf but you may have dallied here too long. I don’t know if she will survive what you have left her to.”

“What I have left her to…” Sesshoumaru clenched his jaw. “The mirror has shown me some of
what has befallen her in my absence - I vowed she would be freed of that place.”
“A very fetching sentiment. Do you, like your ancestors, your word in so high,” the goddesses eyes
hooded, “what would you offer me Little Hound? What value is this promise to you?”
Sesshoumaru stiffened. “What would you have?”
Benten’s eyes glittered, she moistened her lips with a brush of her tongue, hungrily, “Music. Music
from you own hand at every full moon from now until your own first child is born and old enough
to understand and provide my tithe.”
Sesshoumaru’s eyes widened as he sensed the repetition of other, older promises; those made by
how many of his ancestors and most recently by his father.
“And in return?”
Benten’s lazy smile was infuriating but Sesshoumaru quashed his fury. He didn’t know enough
about this creature. She had demonstrated her power again and again in the story-places. He was
not fool enough to challenge her here and now. Not until he had found some weakness of hers and
some way to shield himself and his wards from her apparent ability to shape existence. He
remained silent, waiting, schooling his face to remain unperturbed while inside he ran back and
forth between fury at the goddess and an unaccustomed concern for Higurashi Kagome.
“In return I will allow you to keep your promise. I will show you how to return to that place and
promise that the way back will no longer be barred to you. Provided you keep your promises,”
Benten purred. “But you must leave your armor behind, and that angry blade. Neither can travel
with you.”
At his hip Tenseiga hummed smugly and Bakusaiga’s aura roiled viciously.
Sesshoumaru inclined his head in acceptance.

~o0o~

Moments later the Taiyoukai knelt in seiza* before the small square bronze mirror the goddess had
directed him towards, his closed fists resting firmly on the tops of on his thighs as he looking at the
scene through it. Before his eyes castle began to crumble, the thorny flowering vines crawled over
the walls like snakes, blossoming in thick clusters. He remembered Higurashi Kagome’s words
when she had been cut by the su-pinin-gu-uiuru*, of her description of rapidly growing flowers and
the necessity of “kihsu” to wake the sleeping person. He had given her kihsu with his promise to
return. A vague worry that his action had caused some irrevocable change to the story-place flitted
across his concious but he dismissed it as now irrelevant.

Drawing a breath in through his long elegant nose Sesshoumaru grit his jaw and, under the
indulgent gaze of the goddess Benten, crawled through the mirror-gate. The other side of the portal
was a small hatch set at the base of the wall of the keep entrance, barely more than a drainage
grate. Sesshoumaru fastidiously dusted his fingers as he rose and strode into the main building of
the keep. The tapestries and banners were dull and crumbling into heaps of wooly lint piled on the
floor beneath them. There was no sound but the susurrus of growing plants and the occasional
rattle as mortar or stone-work broke free and tumbled to the ground. The mirror had shown
Higurashi Kagome collapsed in the small solar garden at the heart of the building. With no one
around to mark his action and make assumptions about his motives Sesshoumaru ran.

Chapter End Notes

*Shaman - Benten is referring to Shinto, the indigenous religion of Japan which has
shamanistic underpinnings that includes the worship of ancestor spirits and nature
deities. It is fascinating. Kagome lives in a shrine ergo she resides in Shinto focused
house-hold (not these two religions are mutually exclusive) Shrines are Shinto, Temples are Buddhist - something very useful to be aware of when looking at travel maps in Japan. And no they aren’t the same things! Go educate yourselves further with googlefu.

*Seiza - a formal kneeling position. If you’ve seen a samurai movie or anime chances are you’ve seen at least one person in seiza.

*Su-pin-in-gu-uiru my japanglification of “Spinning wheel” broken down into the phonetics of the Japanese language.
Broken mirrors and kept promises

Chapter Summary

And with this AO3 is now up to date with the fanfic.net version. I'm still trying to chew out how to get to the next solid nodule in the story.

There were flat shards of ice everywhere. Rich stained glass and the mullioned windows had all shattered and their remains scattered the floors amidst roof tiles, winking like gems where the cold winter sun brushed them through the now broken roof. They crunched like frost under Sesshoumaru’s booted heels as he loped through the corridors, headed for where he had last seen Higurashi Kagome in the mirror.

The ornate wooden door that lead to the garden had sagged on its hinges and Sesshoumaru had to physically tear it out of place to get into the garden. The roses had grown in a thick hedge around the area and the air was almost choking with the aroma of their blossoms. Here too the ground was liberally spattered with glittering broken glass. Sesshoumaru payed it no heed. Lying in the middle of the courtyard, deep beneath thick rose briars, was a large, black, hairy and silent form, dusted with pale white and pink petals, and yet more shards of glass. The small wooden frame that had once held the mirror case lay buckled and tangled in the encroaching briars.

Sesshoumaru stood perfectly still a moment, then he heard the faint in-drawn breath, noted the slight movement of ribcage. Striding forward the last few paces Sesshoumaru grabbed her by the tail tip, the only part protruding from the thicket of brambles, and pulled her out with a degree of force that would have shocked any romantic onlooker. There was no tenderness in his motion as he dragged her free of the thorns and laid a hand against her ribcage, seeking a heart beat. It was there, though erratic. Her flanks fluttered with breath too, but Higurashi Kagome did not rouse. Impervious to the glass he knelt by her and worked his hands underneath the limp form, hampered by the flaccid looseness of her skin and the folds of fur, and lifted her large head onto his knee.

With unusual gentleness he patted her face, trying to wake her. She stirred, her throat worked, Sesshoumaru patted harder and was weighing up whether to actually slap her face when the giant black lioness’s grey eyes drifted opened and she tried to focus on his face, her front paws stirred feebly.

“Oh.” She blinked muzzily, “Oh… I hadn’t figure out how to leave yet… I can try again. S-sorry you had to come back. I did mean to try again but…” she seemed to be trying to remember, “… only something happened and now I can’t seem to think straight. Thank you for coming back though.”

Sesshoumaru flicked the end of her nose lightly with a finger.

“Higurashi Kagome You have made and kept many promises without being asked, you asked only one of this Sesshoumaru and he has not broken it… he was only somewhat late.” Sesshoumaru picked a piece of glass from her ruffled forelock, awkward in his next words. “Will you forgive that of this Sesshoumaru? Will you forgive me?”

She trembled, her eyes squeezing shut. Then she was growing thinner, smaller and far lighter than she had been a moment before. The huge lion-form seemed to shrink in on itself, the skin getting looser and baggier by the moment. The mask of the lion slipped back like a hood to reveal Higurashi Kagome’s pale human face within the mouth, the huge teeth glinting, a large ivory necklace against her black hair and bare throat, her eyes were glassy as though with a fever.

“S’ kay I wasn’t really waiting, I did try to find my own way but I knew you would come back if I
couldn’t… your word is very dependable…”
The human girl snuggled against his side through the huge lion-skin, unconscious of her temerity, barely conscious at all, and now shivering violently.
"S awful cold… Why's s’cold?"
Sesshoumaru looked down at Higurashi Kagome. She was not well. His eye fell on the shards of glass that bespangled the fur of her coat, they suddenly seemed to writhe like maggots. Hastily Sesshoumaru tried to brushed them away but they seemed to be burrowing through the fur, towards her flesh. They were cold as ice.
Kagome Higurashi let out a small muffled noise of pain and curled in on herself. She fumbled for his hand with her own through the giant limp paw of her coat. Sesshoumaru attempted to grasp it through the soft suede of the paw there was a hiss of air, a sharp and heavy swirl of snow and rose petals that temporarily blinded him and he felt Kagome’s fingers tugged away from his grip and he was left alone in the garden, holding the empty skin of a huge black lioness.
Chapter Summary

Authors Note:
Over 111K WORDS! This is more than 2.5 times the size of my PhD exegesis now!
And somehow I’ve garnered over 250 reviews! When did that happen?! Thank you everyone for your feedback and comments.
I’ve finally figured out how to get to the end from here. I was stumped for a good long while - and then three additional tales leapt out and mugged me with lovely visuals and a way to bridge to the end of the tale.
The synapses for this story have started sparking again and today, as I was out walking the dog, I was scribbling down the outline for the next three sections on an envelope with a pencil.
To my 17 or so subscribers - your optimism has been rewarded - look update!
And the next chapter may even be out in the week. Dis-tressed is also making sheep eyes at me though so I may alternate.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

He was furious. And bewildered. And uncertain of what to do. And that last part, perhaps, more than anything else, made him particularly angry.

Caught in these places of ‘fah-ri-tai-ru’ Sesshoumaru had continuously had his agency stripped from him, had been directed by existing narratives to perform particular tasks. He had been so certain that he need only get to Higurashi Kagome, collect her and return to the point he had reentered this place to ensure both of their freedom and an end to this farce.

And now?

Now he was kneeling in the thrice cursed place with no idea where the miko had gone nor how to re-find her. His claws clenched in the still-warm fur of her beast-skin. Rising with it still in his hands Sesshoumaru glowered around the small garden. Already the roses were shrivelling, the magic that kept them blooming was gone. There was nothing to indicate Kagome had not been whisked to some other distant place, as had happened so many times previously. No scent, no footmark, no trace of reiki or unusual sound met his search.

A growl built in his throat and he barked at the empty garden, the crumbing castle, the cloudless sky, “What is this?! You gave me your word! Is it worth so little?!”

There was a sharp breeze, bitter with the scent of drying seaweed, that whipped a swirl of petals from the bushes and cleared the air of the cloying aroma of the blossoms. Benten stood before him looking more than a little bemused.

“I had not expected this Little Hound. This last twist was not my doing. Someone else has taken an interest in the shamaness - one of her own parthenon I think - not of mine. You will have to find a way to win her back yourself. As I said - I have no dominion over her. I said I would do nothing to prevent your return, with or without her. I created some of these Realms, ” she waved a hand at the
surroundings “but not all of them and someone else has been tampering…”

“Who?!”

Benten shrugged fluidly “There are so many little gods from before I came to this island, I can hardly be expected to know them all.”

Sesshoumaru bared his teeth slightly at her and she smiled indulgently but with an underlying steel to her voice.

“Showing your milk teeth will not gain any favour.”

The Taiyoukai schooled his face back to an impassive mask, forcing his breath out slowly as he reclaimed his temper and unclenched his jaw.

“How do I find her from here and how do I return, with or without her?”

Benten pursed her lips in thought and glanced aside as if searching her memory. After a beat she reached into her sleeve and drew out a narrow white cylinder and held it out to Sesshoumaru.

“What is it?” He asked, warily taking the item.

“Gofun*”

“The paint powder?” Sesshoumaru turned the small stick over in his hands, a fine powdery residue dusting his fingers like the charcoal stick had in the prince’s palace.

“Something like that. It comes from the miko’s memory,” Benten flicked her fingers outlining a large rectangle as she continued. “To use it draw a doorway and you will be able pass through - but be wary - there is only so many times it may be used - and each door will only carry so far closer to your own realm. This is a tama-negi* place: there are many layers and you only have enough gofun to return in a straight path from the core, should you need to go so far. I recommend you use it as little as possible until you are certain of wanting to depart.”

“And Higurashi Kagome? How do I find her?” Sesshoumaru could not keep all of the growl out of the back of his throat but the Goddess ignored it.

“Much as you have done in the past: look for her,” she cast a glance down at the lion skin in his hands, “she will help you if she wishes to. If indeed any part of her wants to go home at all. Beyond that I suppose you will have to use your nose.”

Sesshoumaru drew in a short breath, about to retort despite himself but Benten was gone. The pressure of divine power lifted with her disappearance, taking with it the solidity of the keep. Around him the stone seemed to be sloughing into mist. Even the rumble of falling masonry that had been a background noise during their conversation had become muted and unreal.

Sesshoumaru glowered and clenched his fist in the thick black fur, trying to settle on a direction. There was a twitch under his fingers and then a shudder. The lion skin tingled in his hands. He lifted it up and it shivered again, there was a tug, slight, like a small hand had pulled on the far side of the skin, another small tug, in a distinct direction. Sesshoumaru narrowed his eyes and stared into the mist in that direction. The tug came again, just as faint. He hesitated one more moment, looking at the skin in his hand. One direction was as good as any other at the moment. He shook the last few tattered petals from the lion fur and swung the pelt over his shoulder, where his mokomoko usually rested so that the front paws draped down his chest. There was a settling feeling, as
though the empty skin had sighed and then he felt it again. A gentle, almost imperceptible push in that one direction - like a hand resting in the small of his back. That way.

“Hnn.” Sesshoumaru strode out into the mist.

Chapter End Notes

* 胡粉  Gofun - powdered chalk or calcium carbonate
* 玉ねぎ  Tama negi - ball onion. Gratuitous Shrek forelock tug there - if you hadn't noticed it let me point it out [big neon sign].
Chapter 56 - Old faces and new games

Within five paces the flagstones beneath his feet had melted into a dusty grey road, the last traces of the keep disappeared into vapour and reforming as a dense forest. Insects whirred in the undergrowth but no birds called. Sesshoumaru paused and spun to look back along the path behind him - it looked no different from that which wended ahead, disappearing into the trees where it bent.

Once again there was a soft tug through the fur urging him to continue forward. Sesshoumaru had not travelled for more than a half hour before there was a sound ahead. At first he thought it was crows. There were hoarse croaking chuckles and soft squabbling noises that rattled through the otherwise quiet forest.

Loosening Tensaiga in its sheath he strode around the small bends in the roadway expecting to find a carcass or some tidbit that the birds were arguing over but instead he found his way partially blocked by a low wooden table and three old women in worn farming clothes sitting on indigo zabuton* playing some form of game using squares of heavy paper marked with geometric designs.

The scattering of low denomination coins and acorns in the middle seemed to indicate that it involved some form of gambling. As he neared the one facing his direction glanced at him and rapidly sized him up.

“Ah,” the first said, looking up and scratching her chin with the card in her hand, “You are the one she was looking for eh…. Weeell the getta* is on the other foot now isn’t it.”

The other two women looked up and then glanced at each other knowingly.

“You know Higu…” Sesshoumaru bit off the full name, realising that perhaps he had been sharing it too freely. Names, he had been reminded time and time again, had power in this place. It suddenly struck him that no one but Higurashi Kagome had ever called him by name here. “You know of the miko?”

“We met her,” the second old woman agreed, “she gave gifts without prompting…”

The third woman continued her sentence smoothly, “and was repaid with seeds for curse, property
for someone else…” Her eyes rested heavily on Tenseiga a moment and Sesshoumaru found his hand gripping the sheath a little possessively.

“…And to be left hungry,” finished the first. “We would repay her with better fortune - if you are willing to act as a courier for it.”

“Do you know where she is?” Sesshoumaru pressed.

The first woman sucked air in through her teeth and waggled her head noncommittally, “maah - Well.. Yes and no.”

“What do you mean by that?” He demanded. Again they answered as in turn, picking up where each left off.

“The way to find her lies West, so far West it becomes East and then turns back again.”

“Far further than your four long legs could carry you in a human life time.”

“Over more salt water than even the gods could drink in an eternity.”

“How do you know this?” Sesshoumaru curbed his tone as much as he could as the last word flicked from his tongue, realising that it was in his interest, and Higurashi Kagome’s not to antagonise these creatures.

“How does anyone learn anything?”

“We listen and ask.”

“Spirits are such terrible gossips when they can travel. And there are many spirits in this place.”

“Are you willing to be our courier?”

Sesshoumaru inclined his head, “To the best of this Sesshoumaru’s ability, should it enable me to escort her back where she belongs.”

“Good.” The women produce from their sleeves a golden persimmon, an emerald yuzu and an amber pumpkin no bigger than his fist and presented them to him. With a polite inclination of his head Sesshoumaru accepted the items, storing them in the sleeve of his kosode.

“You may trade those to further your journey. We can speed you on the first leg of the journey though and to someone who owes us the right sort of favour.” The first woman lifted a hand and the second stayed her with a look.

“One last thing before you go,” said the third woman. “Take this.” She proffered the deck of cards. “And, for her sake, may it never lose for you.”
Sesshoumaru took the proffered stack of smooth heavy paper pieces, fumbling it briefly when they attempted to slip out of his fingers. They all appeared to have a matching pattern on the side facing up. He flipping the first card to look at the reverse - on it was painted a stern empress holding a dripping heart. There was a tingle of power through the cards and Sesshoumaru felt a frission of uncertainty about even holding them. “I do not know how to use these.”

“Does it matter?”

“I do not know.”

“Wise lad.” she said. “Make the best of it if and when you need them.” The words felt like they ought to have been accompanied by a reassuring pat on the back of his hand. She made no move to do so, Sesshoumaru would not have welcomed the familiarity, but it hung in the air, an unmade action.

“Now off with you!” With that the three women waved their hands sharply and his surroundings twitched like a started cat and he was elsewhere.

Chapter End Notes

* 座布団 ざぶとん Zabuton - square cushions that are used for sitting on the floor.

* 下駄 げた Geta - two toothed wooden sandals worn out in the field and with yukata. Their name emulates the noise that they make when you walk in them.

I’ve not actually figured out who these three ladies are - they aren’t the usual maiden-mother-crone combo and they are too complacent for furies. These ladies look Japanese here but I don’t know of any asian equivalent of the Western triumvirate - which exist from Egypt to Europe so maybe they’ve just assumed asian appearances for meeting Kags and Sesshoumaru. IDK.

Also to my OC’s: Guuuuys! Why do you have to keep giving Sesshoumaru stuff?! Do you not realise every time you give one of my main characters something I have to figure out what the hell they need to do with it. Kagome’s bad enough, buying that box of rice-balls and pickles and insisting on clutching onto it even when it wasn’t relevant any more. I had to make her drop it in the swamp to get rid of it.
Chapter Summary

Gadzooks guys!
I sat down to draft out some arts grant applications this morning but the rough draft for this came out of my fingers instead and then I sat up until midnight local time typing the damned thing out so I can get some work done tomorrow. It's been a long time coming but reading Pagination's Hobbit/fairytale adaption "Tale of the Birds" has somehow dissolved my existing writers block like shortbread dipped in a cup of tea.
Thank you to my subscribers and those who are sticking around - the next chapter is half written and "He" is a lot of fun.
Also! So many educational notes at the end for your edification!
#Sorrynotsorry for #footnotespanmage as #terrypratchtettismyidol.
Also also: I've edits to the previous two chapters I'll be uploading in a mo - so you might want to duck back two chapters to reread them - it's just a little cosmetic stuff - nothing major or plot changing.

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Sesshoumaru blinked at the sudden change in the clarity of the light and then nearly lost the deck of cards to the sharp breeze that whipped past him. Beyond his boot tips was nothing but sky. Below a ragged stone cliff face fell away sharply, the full extent of the drop obscured by roiling cloud. In the distance other mountain peaks rose like islands. Across his shoulders the lion skin dragged backward slightly, as if to pull him away from the edge. He heeded it, though he did not fear falling, and turned to see that he stood on the first of many stone steps that lead up to a ornate building set into the mountain side and carved of what appeared to be white jade. Despite the apparent altitude finely manicured lawns bordered the stairs and spotted across them were many weathered old apple trees in blossom. Beneath one of them a man, or something that wore that form, stood watching him.

He appeared elderly and of Chinese descent, dressed in blue and yellow courtly robes, his white beard, moustache and eyebrows, lustrous as moonlight on white sand, reached down to his waist where they were tucked into a red sash.

Seeing Sesshoumaru’s attention he bowed slightly and gestured towards the building in invitation. The taiyoukai stared another moment longer in consideration then inclined his own head in acceptance and began to make his way up the stairs, the old man bowed a second time, deeper, and made his way in through the entrance without looking back.

Sesshoumaru maintained his grip on the cards, unwilling to tuck them into his clothing for fear of them becoming scattered or damaged and unsure of what else to do with them.

Inside the building was more comfortable than the outward decadence had lead the taiyoukai to expect. The floors were wooden and the entry corridor walls were plaster panels painted with
plum, bamboo and pine motifs. Beyond them most of the walls were covered with shelves of scrolls and books. As he followed the man further in to the building Sesshoumaru angled closer to one of the shelves to glance at the book covers. Those that he could read appeared to be predominantly lineages and family histories.

The corridors soon gave way to a room that was evidently well used and possibly a study, the man unceremoniously shifted a few stacks of books and a small loom out of the way and gestured for Sesshoumaru to one of delicately embroidered cushions beside a low table. Sesshoumaru sat and placed the deck of cards on the floor by his feet and studied the table top before him. It held a delicate Yixing teapot* decorated with five little bats* and a peach bough for a handle.

Neither spoke yet but Sesshoumaru’s host placed the little teapot and a pair of cups in hot water collected from a large kettle on the room’s hearth. He tipped a small amount of white tea leaves into a bowl so they could both admire the mulberry silk lustre of the fine down on each of the silver needles* and the subtle dry aroma while they waited for the vessels to warm. The silence stretched comfortably as the elderly man folded back his sleeves and set out the pot with two cups, spooned tea leaf into the teapot and with neat accuracy poured a ladle of water from shoulder height into the pot. The soft clink of the lid being replaced on the teapot was the only sound in the room, followed by the soft slosh as a second dipper’s worth of boiling water was poured over the ceramic surface.

The two continued to sit in silence watching the fine wisp of vapour drifted off the teapots surface, twining like incense before dissipating. As the last of the water evaporated from the pots surface the elderly man deftly lifted the pot and neatly poured it out between the two cups, back and forth in equal measure. Sesshoumaru drew in a deep breath tasting the fresh-cut-hay aroma of the tea, it tweaked a memory and he looked again at the face of the old man across from him, trying to recall the last time he had scented a tea such as this one.

The flicker of recognition must have shown on his face for the man spoke at last.

“Yes I remember you as well Tōga’s Child. Though you and your father visited me but once.”

Ah…yes.

The vague memory rose from long ago, back when Sesshoumaru was still very young. He remembered the offering of this tea, having to sit still and act grown-up while the introductory pleasantries were made in a building far more grand than this one. At the time, being barely a few hundred years of age and had been shortly directed to play in the garden while the adults conversed. He had made use of his freedom that afternoon.

Much later he learned that his father had been to seeking some form of immortality for his latest human lover. This was long before Inuyasha’s mother had been born, she had been just another in a long line of short-lived human bed mates. His father had been loyal to each in turn but they were like mayflies to the lifespan of a youkai. Sesshoumaru had not known the reason for the trip, only that his father had come away disappointed, as he had at numerous other temples and hermitages long after he had ceased caring to take his son travelling with him.

“We let you out of sight and lo! Like any other child you raided my apple trees and ate half the crop,” the old man reminisced with a half smile, “I saw your expression at that first taste of apples, stolen from my best tree I might add, and the evident joy it evoked in your little heart well repaid the theft.”

Sesshoumaru’s thumb unconsciously brushed his lower lip behind his teacup as he remembered the sweet, tart fruit. His father had had him soundly thrashed him for the destruction he had
wrought on the orchard, thought their host had been magnanimous about the damage. Sesshoumaru had not managed to find such fruit again in his youthful explorations and had eventually given up on seeking them all together. The name returned to him along with the flavour of the apples.

“Yue Lao,” The Chinese moon god.*

The deity inclined his head in acknowledgement, finished his cup and refilled the teapot, pouring a second cup for each of them.

”You have grown to look very like your esteemed parent. Now I am by no means easy to find Tōga’s child, something or someone has sent you to my mountain for some reason. Tell me your tale.”

A month ago he would not have responded to such a request from this almost stranger, a season ago he would have been incensed, a year ago, if that is how long had passed in this fah-ri-tae-ru place, he would have attacked him for the insult. But now he was not who he had once been.

Against his usual inclination and strangely comfortable for being in the company of one of his father’s old associates, Sesshoumaru briefly summarised his experiences with Benten and Higurashi Kagome.

~o0o~

An hour later and no small amount of tea Yue Lao sat back and eyed Sesshoumaru speculatively.

“Benzaiten has expended a great deal of energy on your behalf. I may have been secluded for a number of centuries but even I know that she borrowed much power from her kin to create this place.”

At Sesshoumaru’s twitch of expression Yue Lao inclined his head, elaborating “Yes, this is not the Middle Kingdom* but a reflection of it. Many of us immortals sensed Benzaiten’s creation and were drawn to investigate what she had wrought. Many of us have found we like this place better than the old world and have followed her lead to carve and craft our own spaces here, giving shape, depth and strength to the original soap-bubble shell.”

Sesshoumaru took yet another sip of his tea as he digested this. It explained the numerous other Japanese deities he had encountered in his travels. Evidently more than just Japanese ones.

“Ah but the Indian gods can be so intrusive and demanding of attention! There’s a number of reasons I moved from the city to seclusion in the first place and they were were one of them! Pah!” Yue Lao said waving a hand dismissively. “And so you say three women sent you on to me. Did they give any name or idea of what they expected me to do for you. I owe Tōga no favours that you might seek to claim.”

“There is this.” Sesshoumaru set the deck of cards in the middle table.

“Hmm?” Yue Lao lifted the first card and looked at it. He snorted and jabbed it back in the middle of the pack before Sesshoumaru could see what the image was. “Of course it would be.” He said sourly and then picked up the deck and his finger over the ornate pattern that decorated the back of the new topmost card “These came from the lands of the lonely god - the one who would consume all others.” Sesshoumaru felt the skin on his nape prickle at Yue Lao’s bleak tone. The elderly man shook himself out of his dark thoughts and returned his attention to the deck of cards.

“And who am I meant to send you on to?” He turned the top card over, this time placing it on the table. The picture depicted a silhouette of a man dancing on the edge of a cliff with some sort of
mottled hound at his side he seemed to be reaching for the sun in the top of the image and oblivious of the drop below him.

“Oh Him. Well I can certainly send you on to Him. And if he’s in a good mood he may even be of use to you.”

Sesshoumaru snapped his attention back from his non-informative perusal of the card “Who is this? And if his “mood” should be poor?”

Yue Lao waved dismissively again, “Oh if his mood is sour he will do something to make himself laugh and all will be well - though it will perhaps be at your expense. My recommendation will be to keep your temper. Did the three women give you this?” he asked, fanning out the cards and then shuffling them with sudden experience

“Yes, and these.” Sesshoumaru withdrew the three jewel-fruit from his kosode and placed them on the table and the old man sucked the shorter part of his moustache into his mouth with an amused hum as he returned the deck of cards to Sesshoumaru.

“Oh. The Three Sisters have decided to intercede have they? That is interesting. Your island is no small distant from their homeland I must say. Benten’s distraction has managed attracted attention from very very far afield… Did you do them some great service to earn a boon from each of them?” Sesshoumaru tilted his chin to indicate the negative. “The one I am seeking apparently earned their favour and I am sworn to aid that person. I am directed to go “So far West that it turns East again” by them and that you owed them a favour.

”Hmm.” The old man picked up the persimmon. In his hands it shimmered and became a long, green and strangely fibrous leaved fruit that Sesshoumaru did not recognise. It smelled somewhat similar to the tea.

“And is your word the only reason you seek this person? Is it obligation alone?”

Sesshoumaru frowned slightly at this - it was another impertinent question and yet at the same time he found himself considering it. So much of his life had been built on duty and the obligations of his blood-line that he barely knew where it began and his own wishes, if any existed, began. Silence stretched a while as he weighed both his thoughts and whether to answer at all.

“She had done me many favours, and while I acknowledge I owe her a debt of honour, I would see her returned safely for her own sake as well.” If felt odd on his tongue, to say such a thing but it also tasted as right as the apples had when he was a child.

“Fu. I will assist as much as I can in return for this,” Yue Lao held up the leafy bud, “It’s been long centuries since I chanced to have corn on my plate and from this cobb I will be able to grow my own for long centuries. Now to find what you will be wanting, and what you will be needing…”

The deity rose and went to one of the camphor boxed well away from the hearth and rummaged a moment before he drew out a long robe that fluttered as he lifted it. Sesshoumaru realised was made of paper, numerous pages and sutra and scraps stitched together with book binding thread. Its rustling reminded him of his swan-feather cloak for a moment and another shudder rippled under his skin - he wasn’t sure if it was longing or disgust. Yue Lao folded it over his arm, closed the chest and gestured for Sesshoumaru to follow him. The taiyoukai scooped up the two remaining fruit and the deck of cards as he rose.

Yue Lao lead him into another room, narrow looms and spools of thread neatly filled every raised surface. On the most prominent loom was a long white woven band. The god ran a hand over it for
a moment and then took up a pair of bronze shears, cutting it from the warp and unwinding the length, some three gofukujaku* in total, from the warp roll. Sesshoumaru’s nostrils flared as he recognised the scent of the fibre.

Sesshoumaru stared at it at first not believing what he saw and then Yue Lao proferred the cut end of the weaving and asked the Taiyoukai to hold it while he severed the other end. Sesshoumaru looked closer at the silky woven material, surreptitiously drew a breath in to roll its scent over his tongue. Yue Xia Lao noticed and his face creased deeper in amusement. “Yes - woven from your own hair. Zhinü’s magpies* collected it for me. Such a waste of so power and left behind for anyone to pickup - they recognised it’s value.” In the low, angular light Sesshoumaru could almost make out a woven pattern - white on white feathers perhaps. The hairs on his nape shivered slightly but he scowled. “You knew this was mine.”

“Did I?” the old man’s face was politely interested but unconvinced, “well perhaps in the back of my mind I might have. It’s yours again regardless. You probably won’t want or need it - but I have always found it is best to have some sort of string in hand - it can be used to bind all manner of necessities.”

“Now Tōga’s Child, I think it is time I send you on your way.” Yue Lao picked up a fine blue gauze fan in the stylised shape of a butterfly and lead Sesshoumaru back out onto the cliff. The wind seemed to be picking up and it swirled apple blossoms around them. “You’ll need to pull that jacket on - over that fur of yours I’d recommend. Other wise you’ll probably lose it.” Sesshoumaru obeyed, the paper seemed to flex and stretch to fit over his bulky layers and taller frame.

As he tied the woven paper cords down the front he noted that the sleeves were full of flaps and oddly angled pockets. Yue Lao stepped forward and paused as he raised his fan.

“One last thing to take with you,” Yue Lao pulled out a small apple from his sleeve and placed it in Sess’s hand with an elderly wink before he drew his fan down hard once. That single waft of air scooped Sesshoumaru up like a giant hand and flung him tumbling away into a different sky.

~o0o~

Chapter End Notes

*Yixing teapots are a slip-cast type of pot. They are a rich dark brown, are unglazed and porous. I’ve been told that they should never be scrubbed, just rinsed and that over time they absorb and retain the tea flavour to an extent that you can brew tea from them by simply pouring boiling water into an empty pot.

*Bats are symbolic of good luck in china, their name having the same sound as the word for fortune: “Fu”. If you look at Chinese designs - especially the white rice bowls with blue designs - you will often find five bats hidden in the pattern - they stand for the five fortunes: health, wealth, long life, virtue, and a peaceful death.

*Peaches are symbolic of immortality and represent the wish for a long and peaceful life.

*Baihao Yinzhen or Silver Needles is one of the more expensive white teas. It is
made from the unopened buds of the first growth or “flush” of the year.

* **月下老人** Yue Xia Lao, (the Kanji is literally: "old person under the moon"), is a match maker from Chinese myth. He ties an invisible red cord to the ankle (China) or little fingers (Japan) of two people who are destined to be together. This red ribbon is an element that also often crops up in Japanese manga and anime.

* Middle Kingdom is the literal reading the Japanese kanji for China **中国** as well as one of the translations of one of China’s name for itself: Zhōngguó.

* **gofukujaku (36.4cm)** a premetric Japanese measurement for clothing and fabric

* **Zhinü, 織女**, the celestial weaver (the constellation Vega) is separated her lover, the herdsman Niulang, **牛郎**, (Altair) by the milky-way for neglecting their duties in their infatuation with one another. Once a year, on the 7th of July they are able to meet on a bridge of flying magpies, if it rains and the stars are obscured then they have to wait it out for the next year, according to some tellings of the tale.

For those curious the first card that Yue Lao drew was VI (6) from the Tarot :3 He wasn’t surprised - it’s what always gets shoved off onto his plate.
Chapter Summary

This chapter and the next few has me putting a world map on my desktop to keep my head straight as Sesshoumaru travels across continents.

If you'd like to see what I've been up to in the long span between chapters you can check out http://melanippos.tumblr.com and my portfolio site http://www.melanippos.com

Enjoy

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

At first Sesshoumaru tumbled like a prayer-kite, the pockets in the paper jacket catching every fragment of breeze that was headed in a vaguely Westerly direction and amplifying it’s force. Gritting his teeth through the initial disorientation, the taiyoukai flung his limbs out, along with his dignity, and gradually reestablishing some modicum of balance until he had finally righted himself properly and could pay attention to his surroundings. Already he had passed away over the vast mountains of the Middle Kingdom and now, below him, a vast ocean of sand and barren rocky lands spread, blurred from the speed of his transit and reflecting the sun with an eye watering brightness. There was a slap of wind between his shoulder blades and he went yet faster, the desert seeming to fold beneath him in waves of sand that broke on a flatter shore. Giant triangular structures zipped beneath his feet between one blink and the next as he passed over a thin ribbon of cultivated land and then was back over desert again, then gradually and increasingly woodland.

The wind carrying him began to stutter and slow, shedding ragged fragments of the jacket pockets as the dense woods gave away to a vast golden grass land. Sesshoumaru had a brief view of herds of strange horses with black and white stripes and tall, blotch-coated, camel-like creatures loping across the plain before the wind, with a sudden twist, ripped away the majority of the paper-coat and dropped him from the sky.

~o0o~

Sesshoumaru managed to land with his feet under him on an small game trail, startling a herd of strangely antlered deer* that had been browsing on surrounding mimosa bushes. What had seemed a smooth plain from above proved to be tall and dried tussock grasses thickly peppered with spiky shrubs and stunted trees. Sesshoumaru’s shoulder blades prickled with a sense of being watched and he turned, scrutinising the long grass around him for potential ambush.

“What are you looking for?”

Sesshoumaru spun back to find a tall, loose limbed man with skin as black as lacquer and hair tightly curled like furled bracken leaves standing on the path ahead of him. The man arched an eyebrow and grinned showing bright white teeth. Small spiders skittered across the bright pattern
of his clothing from shadow to shadow.

Sesshoumaru stiffened subtly and eyed the man who was not a man warily. The being held no weapon but his confidence was armor enough against a taiyoukai who had learned the hard way not to make assumptions about the weakness of strangers. Unconsciously his thumb ran along Tensaiga’s grip. The sword stayed silent and the dark man’s grin widened without malice as he spoke again.

“You are not at all from around here. You smell of the spices the Silk Road carries down from the lands beyond Samarkan. What are you doing here?”

Sesshoumaru narrowed his eyes, weighing his words. “I was sent here by one called Yue Lao but he did not give me a name for the one he said would help me.”

“Oh Names,” the dark man said dismissively, “Names are so variable. I have one for each season and two for celebratory days,” there was a beat as he evidently had a thought “I may know this Yue Lao, if he is who I think he is, and I will assist you if you can tell me: Who am I?” There was now a mocking lilt to his words - a challenge. Sesshoumaru looked at him assessingly. He knew nothing of this land nor of it’s people. The brightly woven fabric of the being’s garb gave no clue the taiyoukai could interpret. On his shoulders, under the paper jacket Kagome Higurashi’s pelt twitched and one of the paws pressed slightly against the front of his kosode where the deck of cards and the fruit was tucked. Again the old woman’s voice spoke in his memory *May they never lose for you.*

“Then I will tell you who you are and you will assist me,” Sesshoumaru reached into his kosode and freed one of the cards from the deck, drawing it out and turning it over to see it himself before showing it to the man. Despite Yue Lao reshuffling the deck before he had handed it back Sesshomary had drawn the same card - only the image had changed slightly. The man depicted was no longer in silhouette but was very distinctly the one who stood before him, but in this card he was also overlaid with a rabbit and a fox. In one hand he held a long pipe and in the other a fist full of spiderweb that branched out to the borders of the image. The hound at his feet remained an unfamiliar mottled dog with round ears and a small golden mane.

The man plucked the card from Sesshoumaru’s fingers and scrutinised it, his supercilious smile becoming a little more genuine and interested.

“Ah. Yes. That is me. Very well played. You may call me Anansi though, as I said, I have many names. And you have been told I will help you? Why should I do that”

There was a long silence as Sesshoumaru tried to think how to respond. Then he realised that the man was staring avidly at the mask of Kagome’s pelt. The Taiyoukai quirked an eyebrow discouragingly but this only made Anansi grin

“Will you give me that skin in return for my assistance?” he asked, reaching out in order to brush his fingers across the tips of the fur, “It is fair and ferocious. The lions here do not come in such a fine colour.”

“It is not mine to give,” Sesshoumaru replied curtly stepping back.

His imagination or the paws closed slightly possessively over his shoulders as if to further dissuade him from parting with it. At the stiffening of the other man’s face Sesshoumaru forced himself to relax his body language and be less abrupt “But I do have something I will gift you - if you can help me find what I am looking for.”
“Oh?”

Sesshoumaru reached into his kosode replacing the card and selected the small pumpkin from his gifts.

“That is a fine enough looking thing I suppose but I would rather have a story… or a game.”

Sesshoumaru reached once again into his Kosode, pushing aside the ribbon of his hair he freed the full deck of cards and proffered it to Anansi.

“A Game it is then?” The man’s eyes brightened and his teeth flashed “How does one play it?”

“How would you play it?” Sesshoumaru responded, twitching the corners of his own mouth up in as close to a semblance of a smile as he could manage, remembering Yue Lao’s words -  

“if he’s in a good mood he may be of use to you…”

“Better and better - a game and a riddle then - give me three cards then, for the past, the present and future and let us see.”

Sesshoumaru held out the deck and Anansi took three cards without glancing at them. On a whim, Sesshoumaru drew out one more card, willing it to be useful.

“This is what I seek,” he turned the card so they could both see it. It was a woman in white junihitoe sitting on a throne of ice, her long black hair flowed down her shoulders like ink and her gaze was empty. It both was and was not Higurashi Kagome. At the bottom of the card was the kanji ‘Priestess’.

“Hmm. Well the one you seek’s evidently somewhere cold… or crystal - which is much the same thing,” Anansi mused, scrutinising his own cards. “These are very interesting - Here is the past,” he turned over the first of the cards. It displayed a large silk spinner’s wheel being turned by the goddess Benten in a golden kimono embroidered with black hawks. A small depiction of Sesshoumaru himself tumbled from one side of the wheel while Kagome Higurashi, holding his father’s sheathed sword, scrambled determinedly up the other side following him.

“And the present…” Anansi revealed the next card. The image was of an figure in white gently holding closed the mouth of a large black lion with slender-fingered hands. The raggedly cut hair of the figure fell forward obscuring their face but Sesshoumaru knew it again depicted himself and Higurashi Kagome.

“And the future… This one I know. And this one I can help you with, though you may come to regret choosing to make Her acquaintance.” Anansi said, staring at the last card a beat longer before revealing to to Sesshoumaru. The final card showed a strange chariot with bird legs instead of wheels. No animal drew it but an old woman in unfamiliar clothing leant from is pointing her direction. Fingers and bones were strung on a necklace about her neck and she had a hungry look to her.

“Does she live West of here?” Sesshoumaru asked, “I have been told to travel “So far West that it turns East again”.”

“Oh she lives West of West, though not quite so far as the East lies. And she knows a thing or two powers of other countries have forgotten.”

“Then I would be grateful…” the word was odd on Sesshoumaru’s tongue but he barely faltered “to be shown how to find her realm.”
“Give me that pumpkin and I will help you on your way.”

Sesshoumaru offered the vegetable, it rolled from his palm and into the long fingered hand of Anansi readily. As it did so it became a real fruit, rapidly swelling in size until Anansi needed two hands to hold it and then he was forced to drop it to the ground where it expanded until it was as tall as his waist. The African god tipped back his head and laughed in delight. Though Sesshoumaru did not recognise them all there was the roar of lions, the howl of jackals and the barking of antelope in the sound.

“Well visitor, this is by far better a trade than I was expecting. And the seeds, if there are any, will carry feed many generations if planted well.” I was going to give you a some small token to take with you but this deserves far better! What have I? What have I?” The dark man patted down his robes and finally extricated a small whistle folded out of tin in the shape like a bird and painted like magpie. Anansi turned it in his hand for a moment before passing it to Sesshoumaru.

“Take this, for luck and if you need an answer to a problem give it a whistle - though I can’t promise anyone will answer where you end up. And that paper cloak won’t carry you any further - flimsy stuff isn’t made to travel.” Anansi shrugged the bunched red cloth from his shoulder and shook out what was a sizeable piece of fabric with a brisk snap. The pattern of small spiders knocking out of the cloth as though they had only been printed on in dust.

He helped Sesshoumaru wrap it around his waist, over and under his shoulders snugly and pinned it with a strange wooden brooch covered in hooks, so intricate it looked grown rather than carved*. His fingers lingering over the fur of the lion skin even as Sesshoumaru folded and rolled it tightly, tucking it under firmly his arm as the other being fastened the last folds at his shoulder.

“That will hold fast- an elephant could not shake it free.” Anansi said with some satisfaction before he stepped back and drew a bundle of feathers out of his robes. With deft fingers he teased it open to reveal a dessicated bird wing, the quill of each feather tightly wrapped in brightly coloured thread. “You’d best keep a good grip on that furs and anything precious if you want to keep it - you have a long way to travel.” He flicked the wing like a fan once and a strong wind sprang up, warm and rattling with leaves and seedpods.

“Don’t tell the old Witch I sent you.” Anansi called merrily. “I don’t want to end up in her stewpot again. Thank you for the pumpkin.” Then he twisted the fan in a complicated gesture that involved his whole body and Sesshoumaru was bludgeoned upwards into the sky by a second wind. This one whipping dry fingers in through the gaps in the red cloak and tried to tug the lion skin from Sesshoumaru’s grip with some force.

“It is not mine to give” Sesshoumaru growled loudly in reply, his youki flaring in warning. There was a hyena laugh and then the grip let go and he tumbled free and West again, ever West.

~o0o~

Chapter End Notes

*Sesshoumaru would know camels from China via mongolia and the middle east but
may not have encountered depictions of giraffes (or for that matter zebra) - though they were known and depicted in China from the 13th century. The Sengoku (戦国時代) or Warring States period in which Inuyasha is set ran from the 15th -17thC.

*Antelopes actually but then, same as above.

* The brooch is made from a Harpagophytum procumbens fruit, also known as “Devils Claw”
An Exchange of Favours

Chapter Summary

Authors Note:
If you are lucky and I am dedicated I might get the next chapter sorted within the week. This transitional section has been a bit boggy to work through and I’m still not entirely sure of the meat for parts upcoming but the skeleton is sound and I’ve a number of good strong tendons in place to carry the weight and motion of it all.

If you are at all inclined to comment please do - I hope it may motivate me to chew through the next few chapters and get them to you the sooner. Consider it a social experiment in motivational incentive.

Also Also: the usual disclaimer : I own no characters but my own ones. I make no money from this project in any way.
However should you need a professional illustrator for something else...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Anansi’s wind was more capricious than Yue Lao’s - it bucked and skipped, dropped Sesshoumaru and then caught him up again, constantly teasing, constantly tugging at Higurashi Kagome’s hide any time a black hair of it was exposed from beneath the red cloth. While he continued to travel West-wards he was also travelling to the South, the grass plains giving way to desert, forest and then, briefly coast and over ocean again. Counter-winds over the water snatched at him aggressively and Anansi’s breeze zigged against it, wriggling up and across, down and doubling back, snaking a path half South-wards to keep it’s journey West. The view was water, water, more water. Bored Sesshoumaru didn’t dare inspect any of his gifts, new or old, lest they be ripped from his hands, there was nothing but the saline air humid and balmy at first and then increasingly cold, drier and sharp. The scent of the brine reminded him of his time beneath the sea and the slow, sad voice of the whale. He dared no go closer to the water to look for such creatures though, despite his boredom, lest he loose the wind and drop into the ocean. He had no inclination to swim the rest of the way West. Lacking anything else to do and seeing no end to the stretch of water below Sesshoumaru nodded off to true sleep for the first time in a week.

He awoke abruptly as he was dropped, unceremoniously and with one last tired hyena giggle from the wind, into a deep snow bank. The surface had a thick crust of ice which shattered beneath his weight and he plunged into the fluffy cold crystals below head down. Finally struggling up to the surface once more he was struck by the cold and a view of an empty forest full of deep snow. Nothing stirred but the wind in the branches above, which were too dense to make out the sun and direction.

Sesshoumaru drew the red wool cloak closer around him, lifting its hem from where it dragged on the snow. As he did so his hand brushed against the lump in his kosode that was the magpie whistle. Sesshoumaru hesitated a bare moment, then drew the instrument out and blew upon it, producing a low flute like noise that seemed to be whipped away by the wind even as it sounded.
Sesshoumaru quashed a frown and blew harder. The noise was no louder and as quickly lost in the silence of the forest. Then there was a new noise, faint at first above the wind, a rhythmic pounding that Sesshoumaru could increasingly feel through the soles of his now snow-damp boots: The running stride of some large animal. He turned to orientate on its direction.

A great grey youkai elk came bounding through the drifts. Its head, held high, bore an impressive rack of antler and its eyes glowed a bright and eerie. It seemed to be searching the area for something or someone, ears flared wide. Then it saw him and slewed to a halt. The elk youkai stood frozen, staring at him for one heart beat before it turned on its heels and bolted back the way it came.

Sesshoumaru was up and after it before his brain caught up with his instincts, using youki to buoy up his strides so he didn’t need to plough through the snow as the elk did. The chase was short and almost anticlimatic. Sesshoumaru ended it by tackling the animal to the ground, securing it there by a double-handed grip on its antlers and a knee on its neck.

Lying half prone with its head and shoulder firmly on the ground, great flanks billowing the elk grunted angrily through it’s large square teeth, accent strong and foreign. “Fine, make it quick hound. You’ve bested me, it’s dead winter, I know what comes next - do the courtesy of killing me before you start on my entrails.”

Sesshoumaru snorted but did not loosen his grip on the creature’s antlers, keeping clear of it’s sharp hooves despite it having acknowledged defeat.

“I will let you go but you must answer my question.”

“Oh it was you that blew that thrice damned whistle was it.  Serves me right for getting in a position of owing a favour to that grinning wretch. Alright. Let me up and ask your thrice cursed question.

Sesshoumaru hesitated a moment, absorbing the elk’s words.

“Go on - I am trothed to your service - blast that whistle - Get off!”

The taiyoukai rose smoothly and the elk scrambled to its feet, shaking snow from it’s coat and clumps of loam from its antlers.

“Well? What do you want of me?”

“I am directed to an old woman who rides a chariot that runs on bird legs instead of wheels. How do I find her.”

The elk looked at him a long moment, its ears at an angle that somehow conveyed incredulousness. Then its ears dropped into resignation. “To find one old woman you’ll first need to go talk to another. We’re in luck that she winters near here. This way.” It walked past him and on through the forest without looking back.

As Sesshoumaru turned to follow the elk he heard a faint and small noise. A slight tremor of movement in the mottled leaf litter at the base of one of the spruce trees made him step closer and stoop. It was an unconscious sparrow, more than half frozen, crumpled on the ground. There was no reason for such a creature to be here and no likely hood of it surviving if it were left where it was. Remembering the whistle, and the fact he had blown twice upon it, Sesshoumaru scooped the animal up, smoothed its wings back in close against its body and tucked it into the breast of his kosode across from the gifts he had received. Youkai did not produce much body heat but it was
better than leaving it. And if it survived and was just a bird he lost nothing for his action. There was also some little part of him, one that was getting the rhythm of these fah-ri-tai-ru, that felt a rightness to this action - like a section of a puzzle box slipping into place, though without revealing the final design or direction.

From the forest, through a mix of spruce, alder and aspen, the elk led Sesshoumaru out into what appeared at first to be a flat plain. The wind kept the snow shallow and compressed, beneath the ground was as hard as ice. Then the elk began to step with exaggerated care and Sesshoumaru realised that was ice. They were heading out across a great, the surface frozen solid. In the distance there was a mound of some sort in the middle of the lake, a lazy plume of smoke curling from its apex, and it was straight towards this that the elk went.

As they drew closer Sesshoumaru could see that the mound was some dwelling place made from large skins, many of them elk, from the size and shape. He glanced at his youkai guide but it showed no discomfort at approaching the remains of so many of its mundane kin. The elk youkai circled around to the leeward size of the dwelling, bowed its head three times and then belled a resonating call that contained both power and supplication. There was a moments silence, filled with the shush of wind on snow and then a croaking reply accompanied by a flap of the dwelling entrance being tugged open, releasing a warm gust of air redolent with the scent of fish, smoke and cooking fat. The elk bowed its head low to avoid catching its antlers on the doorway and entered with a curt “Follow.”

Sesshoumaru found himself far more amused than outraged by the resentful servitude of this youkai. These were not his lands nor his subjects and he recognised that his sense of entitlement to respect had greatly shifted even since he had met Yue Lao. He ducked his head and followed the animal into the interior of the dwelling place, his eyes adjusting to the darkness.

There was a hearth in the middle of the structure, heaped with glowing coals and the place was fiercely warm. Painted animal hides covered the rounded walls of the space, many depicting stories involving the ocean. Seated on the far side of the space was a huge old woman who watched them with beetle-black eyes. She reminded Sesshoumaru of the Ainu but her face shape was somehow also that of another people, bronzed, seamed and weatherbeaten. She sat slightly hunched in a great skin of a bear as white as Kagome’s lion pelt was black. She looked up and blinked solemnly at him. Beneath the white fur her clothing of sealskin was brightly embroidered with patterns and tiny white seashells that seemed to almost dance across the skin’s surface. Her hair was also white, as were her eyelashes, and frosted with rime despite the heat of the room. She appeared but was not human. She drew in a deep breath, scenting the air and him and looked at him expectantly. He too scented the air - he was beginning to recognise the tang of divine power sparking in the air but unlike the gods of Japan there was no flavour of incense, instead there was rich herbs, feathers and wood smoke.

She flicked a glance at the elk and muttered something in a language that was a combination of a liquid noise like an Erhu* and sharp barking noise.

The elk nudged him with a shoulder. “Will you not introduce yourself, foreigner, to Sedna, sea mother, provider of food for her people.”

Sesshoumaru gracefully knelt and bowed formally in the custom of his own country, though he had not bowed in such a fashion willingly since his father has been in his prime.

“I am Sesshoumaru, Lord of the West… though I have learned there is far more West than I ever intended to or will govern… I am seeking a young human woman whom I promised to return to her friends and family. One who is called Anansi directed me to find a woman who rides a chariot that
runs on bird legs in order to find the girl.”

The elk translated this, or so Sesshoumaru assumed, the elk holding its head near Sedna’s ear and champing its jaws as it did its best to produce the strange sounds she spoke so fluently.

The goddess, for Sesshoumaru did not believe her to be anything less, contemplated him a moment, scrutinising his face, his garb and, for some reason, his fingers, before replying at length to the elk.

The Youkai elk rolled its eyes at Sesshoumaru and then replied in kind for a moment. Sedna straightened somewhat and swelled in size. The dwelling seemed to shrink around her and the coals died down as though the very warmth was being sucked from them. Sedna drew in a deep breath and flared her nostrils, pale eyebrows drifting down she glowering at the elk. Its ears sank and it turned back to Sesshoumaru, defeated. He heard it mutter to itself “So much for avoiding giving or taking favours…” before it raised its voice to address him.

“If you will give Sedna that red cloth that you carry around yourself I will carry you to the old woman you seek.”

Sesshoumaru looked at Sedna. Her eyes were sliding back and forth between the rich red of the wool blanket and his long pale fingers where they rested on his thighs.

“Honestly give her the cloth. The alternative trades she suggested will not end prettily for either of us!” the elk advised. Sesshoumaru had no attachment at all to Anansi’s gift and was happy to relinquish it. After brief but unsuccessful attempt at undoing the wooden brooch, pulled it of over his head, folding it as best he could around the pinned section.

“You’d best place it before her - she won’t take it directly,” the elk stated, “and we’d best get running before she changes her mind.”

Sesshoumaru began to part his lips to speak but the elk youkai cut him off, shouldering past him rudely towards the exit. “Outside before you speak.”

Sesshoumaru snapped his mouth shut and followed. Glancing over his shoulder as he left the dwelling place Sesshoumaru saw Sedna reach a large, blunt and fingerless hand from where it had been hidden beneath the bear skin to stroke the red fabric lovingly. The leather flap that covered the doorway fell abruptly behind him hiding the sight.

Outside, without the barrier of Anansi’s cloak, the wind bit sharply through his clothing. He turned to demand answers from the elk youkai but the creature was already rapidly striding across the ice, ears back, coat staring and shoulders rigid. Sesshoumaru strode after in, catching up quickly. Before he could speak the elk filled the silence with abrupt words.

“The one you seek is called Baba Yaga, greatest witch of the Russ. She’s old as winter itself and her bones are torn from the bedrock of the land. Sedna has given leave for you to cross her realm unhindered and given directions for how to find Baba Yaga in return for that cloth.” Having reached solid ground again the elk youkai stopped, braced all four feet on the ground and shook itself vigorously like a dog, shedding much hair from its coat as it did so and then relaxed its posture somewhat, evidently glad to have put distance between itself and the goddess.

“Sedna now owes me a minor favour for agreeing to carry you there… I do not thank you for either circumstance… but Sedna should not be gainsaid.”

Sesshoumaru, never one for many words in the first place, found he had nothing to say to this. The
elk flicked it’s ears dismissively at him.

“The sooner I am done with this service the better. You’d best climb on my back for there is a lick or two of water in between us and where the old Baba dwells. I will have to jump hard to get us from here to there and will likely lose you if we were go separately.

The elk youkai flexed its shoulders as Sesshoumaru smoothly swung up onto its withers. The last time he had been astride had been the water horse Higurashi Kagome had summoned, so many many moons past. At least this time he was not encumbered by skirts. Even as this thought fluttered through his head the animal was away, kicking up clods of frozen tundra and snow as it dropped its head and bounding forward. Beneath Sesshoumaru’s calves the elk’s sides swelled as it sucked in a deep breath of the frigid air and it bellowed a note of challenge and demand that reverberated through his bones. Around him the view of the landscape gathered into folds around them like a paper fan and then the animal leapt. There was a sensation akin to being smacked hard on the back by a big broad, fingerless palm and then the elk was landing hard, digging in with its hind legs on a surface that teetered like a child’s see-saw, there was a momentary slither forward and the elk youkai leapt again. Three times they bounced off large chunks of ice floating amidst a grey and roiling sea. On one of these occassions Sesshoumaru saw a great black and white whale rise and eye them hungrily in the half second they were still, then they were gone again, unmolested. Then the Elk was back over land, slowing in abrupt jolting hops that almost threw Sesshoumaru over its shoulder until it was once again trotting smoothly forward. The vegetation had changed, becoming Pines interspersed with leafless Chinese Elm and Juniper bushes. The air was bitterly cold, even more so than it had been out in the open over the lake by Sedna’s dwelling.

The elk’s coat was standing on end again and it was shivering as it came back to a walk and then halted.

“Ahead, through this forest, lies the hearth space and home of Baba Yaga. She may aid you or she may eat you. No one knows which is most likely before they meet her and few come back to advise on her moods. My service to you, and Anansi, is done. I will go no further not for any favour I could ask of beast or god.”

Even as Sesshoumaru slid from its back the elk youkai turned abruptly and, with that same accelerated movement that had carried it across the ocean, was gone in a grey blur back East and to the comparably sultry warmth of Sedna’s realm.

Chapter End Notes

*An Erhu is a two stringed Chinese musical instrument.
The moment Sesshoumaru slid from the elk’s back he was surprised to miss the warmth of its back. Some power about the animal had provided a barrier against the cold. Even as the animal disappeared back the way it had come the frigid temperature began to nibble at his ears and fingers. He drew out and rolled Higurashi Kagome’s fur and tucked his hands into it, carrying it before him as a muff, but beyond that he ignored the cold. Instead he turned his attention to the deer path that lead deeper into the forest. Along its borders brambles and thorny plants snarled in sizeable thickets. Here and there roots and branches jutted from the trampled snow like bleached bones. There were fresh horse hoof marks on the trail. They were in three different sizes: that of a small pony, of a good sized horse and of a horse larger than Sesshoumaru had ever encountered*. All of them headed in the same direction, deeper into the forest. Buffered from behind by the wind Sesshoumaru drew Higurashi Kagome’s fur, and his hands, closer to his brisket and set out along the path.

As he progressed the trees grew closer and the atmosphere darker. There was a wildness to this place that surpassed any realm Sesshoumaru had yet trod, and a lithe native energy in the soil that rivalled that which he had tasted in the ocean. While the later buffeted gently all around him, soaking into his skin, the ki of this forest place almost rattled his teeth with its presence beneath his feet - as sharp and savage as a hunting ferret. He savoured its abundance as a peasant would a heaped bowl of rice after a long day working in the fields.

Before long Sesshomaru was all but glowing with energy, nourished and satiated. Occasional sparks of reiki crackled from Higurashi Kagome’s fur in response to his burgeoning youki. It was this intermittent flicker of light that revealed the remnant fence that paralleled the path. Here and there the remains of a ragged palings, half consumed by the roots and undergrowth, jutted from the ground like rotten teeth. As Sesshoumaru walked on this sign of past habitation gradually became less decrepit, the flaking paint and rotted planks giving way to stout timber and then the addition of garlands of small animal bones. These in turn were replaced with the bones of larger animals and then, finally every few palings was strung an humanoid skull that held glowing coals in their eye sockets and a gate. Here, behind the flimsy barrier was a large thatched house that hunched beneath a heavy dusting of snow. The path bent to end at the gate. There was no division of the road or other path going elsewhere. The hoofmarks also stopped at the gate as though the animals had disappeared entirely as they entered and the snow on the path beyond was unmarked. Sesshoumaru stopped and considered his actions. Given the elk’s opinion of this being, and the barely restrained roil of old power in this place Sesshoumaru found himself uncharacteristically cautious. He sent out a brief pulse of youki ahead of him to announce his presence and waited where he was. Almost immediately he felt an answering ripple of energy across the landscape- not reiki or youki - an old earthy power, not celestially divine as others he had encountered were, but one, he felt, that was just as prone to having it’s own way and its own whims gratified. He felt a strange frission of both fear and kinship raised the fine hair from the nape of his neck to the space below his shoulder blades.

The door creaked open and a quavering voice called out “Who are you and what do you want?” A wispy old human woman leaned out from of the building, her thin hair pulled back beneath a black kerchief and her dark fustian clothing was covered in bright and elaborately detailed embroidery. There was an intent glitter in her eyes that contrasted to her apparent fragility. She ran an eye over Sesshoumaru and when he made no move nor cloaked his youki she quirked a jagged toothed smile and the air around her roiled with unsuppressed power. This then was Baba Yaga. “Eh. A hound from the orient? It’s been some time since a youkai from the far realms stumbled on
my doorstep. You’d best come in then.”

Sesshoumaru quashed the odd little frightened-fish swirl in his stomach, one that he had not felt since he was very very young, inclined his head, opened the gate and followed the most powerful witch in all of the Russ into her abode.

Unexpectedly, given the oddities he had encountered elsewhere in these realms, the inside Baba Yaga’s house wasn’t any larger than one might expect given its outside appearance. It had evidently been dug down into the deep soil and was panelled in plaster and wood. Thirteen* stairs lead down from the door into a large hexagonal room stuffed with rugs and cushions. A great bronze samovar* bubbled in a corner beside an open hearth that was stoked high with both wood and sea coal. The room all but rippled with heat and the strong smell of stewing black tea, dried herbs and old velvet pervaded everything. All of the exposed wooden beams cupboards and doors leading out of the room were thickly painted with unfamiliar and exaggerated botanical motifs.

Baba Yaga waved him into the middle of the room and then circled him, scrutinising his garb, his ragged hair and the lion skin now tucked back under his arm.

As the pervasive and roiling warmth of the house seeped into his clothing Sesshoumaru felt a flutter of movement against his breastbone. The sparrow was stirring. There was second little jostling motion and then a brief scrabble of tiny claw against the skin of his chest through his juban as it turned. A small face peered out of the V where his robes overlapped. It glanced around and then up at him with bright little eyes, assessing the situation before disappearing back into its hiding place. Sesshoumaru hoped it would not defecate whilst it remained in there. If Baba Yaga noticed the creature she said nothing.

“Well you’re a tall one aren’t you… and not much flesh on your bones is there?” She poked at his arm through sleeve and hummed as her finger encountered the firm surface of his bicept “Ah. Some after all. Not just fabric then, a little meat at least. Worth bringing in from the cold.”

Perversely there was something about her that reminded Sesshoumaru of one of his relatives on his mother’s side. He couldn’t help but find his lip quirking up despite himself.

“Who are you and why are you here then pup?” The final word was said with no distain or malice, just the recognition of his kind and his comparative youth.

“I am Sesshoumaru, Son of Toga.”

“Never heard of neither.” She interrupted picking her teeth in a way he was sure was intended to irritate him. One of his cousins had, when he was a child, baited him in a similar way. He had lost his temper then. He wouldn’t now.

“Nor I of you. I learn the world is a big place, even without Benten’s layers of realms.”

“Ah so you know of that then. Do you know where you are now?”

“No, only that I was directed to find you” Sesshoumaru drew a breath at that. She did know something of who he was then. He replied with caution, “I am searching for an individual to ensure she returns to her friends.”

“How about a game of cards?” Sesshoumaru asked.
Chapter End Notes

* The number of the stairs would mean nothing to Sesshoumaru, who comes from a culture where 4 and 9 and 49 are unlucky numbers.

*A Samovar is a form of kettle used to brew tea. I personally love the word in itself, as well as tea in general (which you may have noticed from how often overall I mention the characters partaking).

*I’ve yet to see any documentation in image or text of anything approaching a draft-horse in size in asian equestrian history. Here are traces of Baba Yaga’s servants: Dawn, Day and Deepest Night on their mounts. I resisted giving them actual parts in the tale because seriously I have enough trouble controlling my NPC’s and this story HAS to end some day.

Again *Thank You* all for sticking around: I had a hard time motivating with this chapter because Baba Yaga did NOT want to be a terrifying, horrible old woman. She’s still hungry, shes always hungry, but she also decided to mother our Lad and would NOT let me write her as otherwise. I don’t have a hugely clear direction after the next chapter but I hope by breaking through this blockage (by capitulating to Baba Yaga’s demand to be who she is in this chapter and the next) that my direction will become clearer. I know how it ends, just not entirely how we get there yet.
Thank you all for your patience - This tale isn't abandoned, it has just been pretty low on my priorities recently. This chapter has been sitting waiting for me to do a last comb over before posting for some time. The next section is not written, which is another reason I hadn't posted this. I will try to get a skeleton at least laid out for the next part before I leave my keyboard today.

Sesshoumaru reached into his kosode, feeling the soft feathers of the sparrow as it wriggled aside before his fingertips made contact with the bundle of cards.

Drawing out the deck, and with burgeoning confidence about using these strange paper pieces, he pulled out the card showing Baba Yaga in her chariot, then himself with Higurashi Kagome as a lion youkai, and then the one of Higurashi Kagome on the throne.

Baba Yaga eyed the cards with distain.

“Piff! Card tricks! What use have I for card tricks? Any tinker or trader in the Baltic seas can play card tricks, and cup tricks, and rope tricks besides…” Her eyes turned crafty as she eyed the deck in his hands “…unless you care to make a wager or two on the game. Nothing is worth playing without some reward or risk to add spice.”

“As you said before - what could I have you that would care to wager for?” Sesshoumaru kept his voice neutral but he could see she had something in mind.

“Your thigh bone, meat freely given is sweeter than taken by force - I could crack it and have the marrow on toast.” Baba Yaga licked her lips, eyes gleaming.

Sesshoumaru found the corners of his mouth turning up at her enthusiastic appetite despite the situation. “With all the wild ki in this forest how can you still hunger for flesh of any kind?”

Baba yaga shrugged. “The forest feeds me well enough but marrow on toast - that is a treat!”

“I will wager but for a shin bone but not a thigh.” Sesshoumaru haggled.

She eyed the span from his obi to his boots speculatively. “You’re long legged enough. I’d rather a femur but a calf on the bone will do. And what do you want from me in the unlikely event you should win?”

Sesshoumaru thought a moment on how to word his prize. “If you know of the one I seek give me a way to get to her, to free her. If you do not know of her then send me on to one who may.”

“And what form will this game take?” Baba Yaga’s eyes glittered hungrily. “I warn you I know many card games and variations and I am ruthless at all of them.
Sesshoumaru shrugged “Choose whichever game suits you - I do not know any.”

Baba Yaga’s face split into an honest grin, a delighted grin, a hungry grin. “Then I shall make a new game for your deck of cards and as to the rules…” Baba Yaga strung off a long list of procedures and exceptions about the cards that Sesshoumaru could barely follow as she heaved herself to her feet and drew out a small wooden table, only now serving small glasses of strong black tea to the both of them. Sesshoumaru awkwardly shuffled the cards, his hands unused to the task. Baba Yaga gloated as he dealt the first hand under her instruction.

And he won it.

Baba Yaga scowled. “Best of three.”

Sesshoumaru inclined his head at her terse command, shuffled the deck and won again.

“Best of Seven!” Baba Yaga demanded, holding out her hand, “And I shuffle them.” she rifflled the cards into each other expertly, cutting and flicking them back into a single stack five times before handing it back to him to deal out the next bout. And she lost.

“Another! And this time I deal the cards” She snapped irritably when Sesshoumaru laid down his winning hand for the sixteenth time.

The night continued thus - Baba Yaga never winning a game, even when she was very obviously cheating and changing the rules as they went. The tea was abandoned for a sharp clear liquor that she poured with an overly generous hand. As the morning light began to shine in through the windows and the samovar began to spit and hiss for want of more water Baba Yaga threw down her hand of cards in disgust.

“Fine! Fine! I know the girl of whom you seek and will give you the means to fetch her out of the ice which contains her. But you must first work for me for three days. If you cannot complete my tasks then I get that shin bone after all, and all the meat it carries. AND I want one of those gifts you mentioned earlier up front. Something I can eat,” she demanded.

Sesshoumaru inclined his head in acceptance and reached into his kosode to bring out the last item of fruit from the three sisters: the small emerald yuzu, still as green as spring leaves. A clean citrus aroma filled the hot air the instant he had it free of his clothing. Without hesitation he placed it in Baba Yaga’s outstretched palm. She took the yuzu in her wizened fingers and turned it this way and that in her hand examining it closely.

“Well! Not what I had expected. And what do you want to be? Little gem? Little fruit? Little beans?” The fruit gave a shudder and crumbled into shards in her hand, spilling from between her fingers as hundreds of rich green bean pods that fell to the ground, swelling up as they yellowed and spilling pearly dried beans to carpet the flagstones in an abundance of legumes.

“Generous generous sister. You reward richly don’t you. Even those as might not deserve it,” Baba Yaga muttered before she turned to Sesshoumaru, “Sweep these up, ensure they are clean, every single one of them mind, put them in the largest crock I have and then make me a good vat of stone soup and I will consider how to answer your petition. Now I have work to do - I will want a hearty meal to return to - either the soup or your marrow.”

With that she heaved herself to her feet, kicking cushions aside as she made for the front door, leaving Sesshoumaru still kneeling by the table with its scattered piles of cards. “I will be back at dusk.” With that she shut the door and was gone.
“Well!” said a bright voice from the V-overlap of his kosode, “that went far better than it could have.”

The sparrow wriggled out of its hiding place and hopped across the card table. Landing on Baba Yaga’s half drunk glass of spirits it drank enthusiastically before looking up at the taiyoukai with lacquer-bright eyes. “I am at twice at your service, once for that owed to Anansi’s whistle, and once for the rescue from the snow. You are fortunate that I know a fine recipe for stone soup. But first gather all these beans up. Wash them in snow melt and let them dry by the fire. She won’t want them in her soup - we can find better than that.”

Directed by the small bird Sesshoumaru set the largest cauldron full of snow knocked from the eaves. Once it began melting he dippered out water to clean the beans in a small wooden vessel, leaving the rest of the water to heat. As he did this the sparrow hopped across the cobbled hearth, inspecting each stone carefully from multiple angles before perching on one of them and stating “This will be the best one for purpose. Pluck it out and break it in half and drop it in the cauldron when the water begins to simmer. Stoke up the fire too - get it good and hot. This room needs more warmth.”

This Sesshoumaru did, with some bemusement, while the small bird continued to hop around the floor of Baba Yaga’s hut, inspecting cracks in the woodwork and occasionally pecking at a plank and listening intently or flitting up to investigate the shelves of unlabelled ingredients.

When the water began a roiling boil the sparrow returned to the table top and strutted importantly from one end to the other, fidgeting its wings open and closed.

“Now blow on that whistle and this task may be completed swift enough - but add nothing else to the pot from now on, not even salt.”

Fishing the whistle from his kosode Sesshoumaru noted that it looked distinctly more tarnished and less robust than before. The metal seemed flimsier and the weight less substantial. Setting it carefully to his lips he blew and a sharp, pipping noise rang from it. There was a sudden rustling and then a flutter as a large colony of tiny bats, long-eared and long-winged shook free of the underside of the thatch. At first Sesshoumaru thought the whistle had frightened the bats from their roost, then he saw how the sparrow had flung itself from the table top into the air to amidst the little mammals, circling around the vaulted roof of the cavern with them and swittering enthusiastically. Then they were all circling and wheeling in a purposeful manner. The sparrow flitted by one of the shelves, landing to manoeuvre the lid off a stone jar from which an impossible cloud of flies, moths, beetles and midges whirled, swirling out into the room in a mad ballet of buzzing wings and glossy, fuzzy and fat abdomens.

Back and forth the bats swept, zipping in over the pot of water, dropping in the insects that seemed to be multiplying rapidly in the warm fug of the room. The sparrow flitted over Sesshoumaru’s shoulder, tossing half a cricket into the pot, the other half, he assumed, had gone down its gullet. In short order the cauldron was thick with roiling ingredients. Several mice had been added by one particularly large bat and several bats, under the sparrows direction, had snatched up pinches of salt and dried herbs from the small crocks on the shelves in their tiny hind-paws. Any time Sesshoumaru tried to step closer to look into the pot he was dive bombed by the sparrow who insisted that not so much of a hair of his should accidentally fall into the pot. Bemused by this insistence Sesshoumaru gathered the now dry beans and retired to the far corner of the kitchen, polishing each with the soft cloth and dropping into the jar Baba Yaga had indicated. They glowed
like pearls even in the low light. He remembered the words “Every single one of them” and searched out the few that had tumbled under furniture when they had spilled from the Russ witch’s hands.

“Relid the insect jar!” the sparrow panted as it paused on his shoulder for a moment, “They will keep coming, we need no more and I can barely eat another bite.” Rising Sesshoumaru deftly re-lidded the jar. The bats continued to sweep, no longer approaching the soup pot but eating the remaining insects with gusto before, one by fat-bellied one, they retired back to their place in the rafters. The few remaining insects wriggled into the cracks and chinks of the walls, disappearing from sight.

“What is this vessel?” Sesshoumaru asked, holding the lid firmly on as he turned it, looking for some makers mark or label before replacing it on the shelf.

“It is where Baba keeps her amulets of insect plague. We sparrows have benefitted from them in the past. Though rare is the farmer who earns such wroth these days. Now if you don’t mind I intend to sleep now.” The sparrow flitted to land on the overlap of his collars, gripping the fabric with it’s tiny claws before, with a quick flick of it’s feathers to resettle them, it burrowed back down the front of his kosode.

With nothing else to do Sesshoumaru refilled the Samovar and settled down on one of the cushions to wait.

An odd but somehow savoury aroma was billowing from the soup pot by the time Baba Yaga returned, kicking her snow encrusted boots and socks into the corner behind her front door before stepping into wooden clogs. She snuffled at the air with hungry eagerness and then frowned. “I told you to make stone soup didn’t I?”

Sesshoumaru looked from her to the pot and back again. He found his lips curling up into a smile that had conveyed equal parts innocence and mischief. He felt oddly young despite his situation.

“On my honour, I put nothing but water and a stone in the pot - I only broke the stone open to allow the flavour out.”

Baba Yaga squinted at him for a moment and then waved a hand at the cooking pot.

“Does he tell the truth Cauldron mine? Or do I crack his bones and sauté his flesh?” The surface of the iron pot rippled and a face formed, lugubrious and droop eyed.

“He put in a dipper to draw water away, mistress mine, while the snow was melting but nothing more did he add but the stone, split in twain.”

“Be done then!” Snapped Baba Yaga pettishly and kicked the cauldron with her wooden clog. The face sighed and then melted back into the smooth surface. She held out an imperious hand and, intuiting her intention, Sesshoumaru handed her the dipper. She scooped out a generous serve and tipped it into a small dish to cool then tasting the concoction. It was odd watching her roll the flavour over her tongue. With the cauldron’s support of his statement, and her tasting of the soup, the sharp edge in her voice melted away and she became almost jovial.

“Well calf meat is superior, but if this is the latest in cookery from the Orient then I do not half mind it.” She slurped the dish empty and refilled it before turning to him, “And my beans?”

“Here, as directed.” Sesshoumaru lifted the lid of the large crock to reveal the glossy beans.
“Hmph…. And there is tea to hand already? Well then go cut me some more wood for the evening fire and I will admit you’ve done well enough for today. I must think on tomorrow’s tasks.”

Remembering Anansi’s avarice, Sesshoumaru took up Higurashi Kagome’s fur unwilling to leave it unattended and went out to see to the woodpile.

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