The Great Trial

by wintersnight

Summary

Like any royal family, the sons of the Inu no Taishou have no choice but to follow a traditional exile in order to sustain the honor of their bloodline. What if Sess finally tells Inu the truth? Rated M for later chapters
He remembers being perched in Goshinboku when his wounds had been in the process of healing, just looking out over the forest that bore his name. Since no one is around, he doesn't have to be brash, confident, or arrogant to deny the claim that half-breeds were inferior, weak. Nor does he have to put on a brave face, to lend others his unbreakable spirit. But in the quiet vale of the forest, the swaying of trees in the wind, the sounds of wildlife foraging, the real InuYasha is silent and thoughtful. Not until then, three days following the final battle, a familiar pain struck him in the center of the chest—no sacred arrow could match that particular pain, one that went beyond physical, beyond blood, muscle, sinew and viscera. This pain made his very spirit ache.

Of course, there had never been a question of winning against his insanely powerful half-demon enemy, not in InuYasha's mind anyway. There was too much at stake that depended on Naraku's defeat: Miroku's and Kohaku's lives, Kikyo's and Sango's vengeance, Kagome's safety, and the safety of everyone within Naraku's reach. In the stark reality, there were always too many reasons for the InuHanyou to allow failure as an option; rather, he maintained a cocky attitude to cover up his realistic fear of dying before Naraku could be destroyed. He needed to be over-confident to supplement the fears and pessimistic view when they met with defeat. It was up to him to keep them fighting by a completely false attitude and putting himself at bodily risk to keep them all alive until the end. They would win; there could be no other option. No one in his pack would be allowed to die, not while he still drew a sword and a breath.

Thus, his mind's neat little conclusion to how life would progress after the Jewel and the bastard were gone: Sango and Miroku: married. Shippo: staying in the village where he could train the kit to be a real demon. Sesshomaru: leaving Rin with Kaede and visiting once and while. But Kagome, of course the Jewel would allow Kagome to remain in the Feudal Era with him, like she'd always wanted to be. (Spoiler alert) Maybe even pissing his older brother off by calling him, "Sesshomaru nii-chan!" while they gathered herbs around the village.

He had believed he would keep them together even after their mutual mission was completed. No other option was acceptable. They were his, his pack, his to protect, his to feed, his to laugh with, his to weep for. He would strive to keep them close and safe…Maybe even get that damn Monk to finally put his hentai hand away.

However, it had all spiraled out of his control, so quick in the last few moments of Naraku's life on this plane. The aftermath was horrific in emotional backwash than the holes and bloody rips that riddle his physical body. Rather, his neat fantasy (the one he'd fully allowed himself to fall into, to depend on, to base his arrogance on) crumbled irreparably upon waking. It was all he could do was try to keep some semblance of sanity while healing and mourning the pieces.

But it wasn't really until then, in Goshinboku's branches without their auras in range, that he realized the effect of his loss of control.

No voices came after him, asking or trying to cajole him out of his favorite perch to announce food or wound checks. His ears swiveled, twitched, spasmed, strained in the attempt to catch the soft thud of a footstep coming in his direction or the crinkle of the Ninja Food in a bright yellow pack. Maybe even the soft whistle of breath or the faint jingling of a holy staff, the purr of a fire cat on the shoulder of her fighting mate. His eyes scanned the foliage, separating the lines of leaves, cherry blossoms, and branches for an impression of a cheek or the pink tint of skin. Something, even the similar green of a short kimono or the little bow on the front of her "shirt." A dark purple or black of the robes, a moving shape that could be the Hiraikotsu. Anything other than the usual
spans of ground that housed him for fifty years. And yet, the forest was quiet with the swaying of wind through the trees, and the animal life struggling for daily survival. He could vaguely hear some voices in the village calling out as they too eked out their own living. But, so many things were missing:

No: "I'm going home to get first-aid supplies and some Ramen to help you feel better! I'll be back in a few hours, okay? Not long at all!" with the scent of her mother's cookies and the sweet hint of unquestionable acceptance fading as she went to the well. "Wait for me, mina-san!" Her, so different and yet similar to the woman he'd once loved enough to give up every ounce of demonic power to change completely human. Just like her past self, he found that she gave him some form of absolution for him being born a sin to the world. Her presence soothed him in a way nothing, not even his mother's touch, could—made the ragged ends of his soul seal themselves back together again. Between the human and demon in him, only she understood the struggle he went through. Only she had seen the darkest parts of his soul.

No, "InuYasha?" softly from half-way down whatever tree he happened to be perched in. But hearing that soft tone of voice, one he could remember uttering as a child alone in the wild, made some part of him that had never existed rise to the call. It was a priority to protect the youngest, to soothe them when they were afraid, even though no one had been there to comfort him as a child left to survive or die. "I-I had a… I mean, about the Thunder Brothers. Can I- c-can I please-?" was all he could stand before he'd reach down to pluck the little red-headed fox demon up on his lap to warm him from the horrors of his past. That warm little kit finally resting with some feeling of safety that he used to feel when his parents were still alive.

No. "My friend, you need not feel bad for Naraku's escape. His defeat is not something the Gods wished to happen right then, no matter how formidable your strength. There are still events at work that must unfold in the universe before he can be brought to justice, or else you would have killed him with that blast. But also, my friend, Naraku is a wily bastard that has had more than fifty years to prepare his plans. Of course he has escape plan after escape plan, of course he has studied your techniques and adapted to counter them. But do not be disheartened, for you have increased in strength each time he has come close to fulfilling his plots. You will have the strength to end him. Only when the time is right, InuYasha. Then, we will find him, we will kill him, and the Gods forgive us, help us, when we do." That damn chipper optimism, always hard-to-believe coming from a man that saw his own father die a horrific death because of the cursed hand, had leant to the inu's own sense of optimism and confidence. As council, he'd been invaluable to helping the half-demon control his temper and learn to interact with other people rather than try deter them with intimidation and false gusto.

No. "Allright. Let's look at it again, InuYasha." Squatting in the dirt with a short stick to draw out the movements of war, to try predicting the next moves, to plot ways to keep everyone safe while using their talents in battle, he and Sango combined strategy. The facts, only he and Kirara could dodge high enough and fast enough to get close enough for hand-to-hand with powerful demons… He always ordered the others to stay back as far as possible, cajoling Kagome to shoot further distances just to keep her away. The slayer, however, always understood the subtle strategy behind his fights. What seemed like wild and unpracticed swing and disregard for the finesse of swordsmanship was actually initial distraction. Good warriors can size up an opponent's style in the first ten minutes of a fight, and the half-demon came in half-cocked to keep 'em guessing, pulling back at just the right moments until he had his opponent's weakness pegged (usually long before the others meaninglessly shouted absurd crap from the side lines). He knew to anticipate the humans' interference and plan around them, making certain to keep an eye out for poisonous insects, murderous little brothers, and incarnations after the jewel. More than once she'd let him know his strategic thinking wasn't lost on the pack: "That's a good plan, InuYasha, but we need to keep the right covered! These kinds of demons shove themselves underground and sense by
vibrations in the earth. What do you want us to do in case that happens? Kirara can hold the three of us, but not for long. Can you get ready with the Adamant Barrage while we distract them?” The other soldier, a real fighter in the unbelievable package of a beautiful young woman, made him include the others in his fighting strategies and to plan around the group strengths and weaknesses. Her eyes, always so much older than the gentle smile on her face, ready for the next attack, the next move, the next on-coming enemy. Like all of them, he'd gained a grudging admiration for her strength of spirit.

But. None of that anymore.

The village, his forest, was empty of their scent, voices, and auras.

The quest had finally ended, and, instead, his nomadic existence would begin once again—with this moment of pensive solitude. While the pangs of still-healing wounds struck at odd moments, the pain in his soul was much more acute. Even though the main threat was dead and he'd regained his honor from a fifty year old betrayal, even though those Naraku had wronged, slaughtered like so much meat, were now avenged, and those that were trapped now freed, the half-demon was in emotional agony.

All was supposedly right with the world, and some part of him felt ashamed for hating the outcome. Kagome would have to return her time and restore the balance that had been askewed when she passed through the time portal. Miroku would no longer have the constant fear of being swallowed by his cursed hand; he could really live. And Sango, Sango could finally stop being the last of her clan out to avenge their betrayal; she, as well, could finally really live. Even Shippo would have more stability in a home of two parents and Kohaku. They would all finally have the peace they'd all worked so hard for; maybe not at first, but human lives were so short that with the majority, they would live happy lives free of the burden of Naraku.

But he, the glue that kept them together as a pack, he would be the one to return to the life of an exile. He would again walk as the outcast he'd been before word of the Shikon Jewel ever reached his puppy-like ears… It made him want them back while hating himself for that desire. To wish for Naraku's evil to still exist in the world, just to keep the only true pack he'd ever had together, shamed him beyond even his knowledge.

No matter what pathetic shit other demons and humans spewed at him, about him, the hanyou had a fierce sense of right and wrong. Sure, he covered it up with bravado and a little "that fuckin'ugly-ass demon just happened to be in my way" mentality; but he had taken lives (of demons or humans) only to save the innocent, or ones that were after his own. He derived no pleasure from the kill, not as his normal self anyway. In his long childhood, adolescence, and maturity, he'd seen the weak beaten by the strong, victims made to suffer over and over without hope of rescue; he'd seen the natural order of the world. The strong win, but that does not necessarily make it right. If sometimes, just sometimes, the strong could protect, then more would be better off; the world would be balanced.

His original reason for wanting the Jewel of Four Souls had been to become a full demon, of course, to protect himself better. But, he was the son of the Inu no Taishou. He also wanted to protect the people of the Western Lands as a full and powerful demon, not that he would ever expect to do so as a Prince of the West, but it was the duty of his blood to protect the innocent people of his family's land. Even his mother's people, the royal humans that had thrown him out of their household after her death, were rulers with humans they protected. His morals became ingrained as from his royal blood as from his harsh experiences. And so, wanting his pack returned would mean putting others at risk of Naraku's evil; the thoughts churned his gut. A pathetic, dirty, half-breed would damn others to try holding on with selfish intent. Maybe, just maybe, Sesshomaru
had been right all these years…

The wind whipped through the branches, swirling close to the hanyou's face, and spinning his white mane in its spiral for only a moment. The breeze reveal the worn, golden eyes of the once-fiery warrior, the set line of his jaw, and the grooves of despair around his mouth and corner of his eyes. The whole mess cumulated in the hanyou's thoughts, churned with torment at the familiar surroundings of his forest, his village…sans his pack.

_A few more days is about all I'll be able to take of this_, he thinks inanely while his ears twitch in the breeze. It would be too painful to stay for long and cater to these depressing thoughts and realizations. He sighed gently to himself, proving his strength by not shedding tears or allowing himself the luxury of sitting in Goshinboku until his vile flesh rotted, alone as was apparently meant. Rather, when he healed, the wandering would begin all over again. The old InuYasha that saved a girl from the future, that took in a little fox, a demon slayer, and a monk, began to die away.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I: Wandering

Five years….and he finds himself here of all places. The Lord of the Western Lands looks up at the sea with nostalgia.

One hundred and fifty-five years in the past:

In between the nations, set on one of the smaller islands off the mainland, lies the imperial palace of the Elders. Cut from shining white stone, inlaid with unique carvings from the ancients, the massive structure is seemingly untouched by time and the elements. It remains a shrine, a haven, to demon kind, literally stranded where no human dare tread. Specifically, the history of civilization as they knew it was recorded in tomes deep within the catacombs under the palace. Moreover, the amount of scrolls in the underground sanctuary tripled that of any royal library; ancient secrets, demon and human spell weaving, weapon-making, spirit stealing, and so much more knowledge rested within these walls—multiple traps and ten of the most powerful being on the planet charged with guarding it all. From ruling bodies in human and demon societies to the greatest heroes among both races, the Elders have stayed outside of time in order to record the events and information for future generations (and still manage to meddle in affairs of state). That in itself deems seclusion from the mainlands; the island itself nestles the structure among bamboo and wildlife, deep forests and bordered by sand. The structure has stood longer than memory serves.

However, the Demon Lord of the Western Lands is irritated at being summoned to the Elder's island like some peasant cur. This is not the first time he has appeared on this island, and those past memories hold fear, anger, and mistrust in many aspects. These emotions, which the Demon Lord purged from his being, resurface whenever he draws near; he controls himself with ruthless intent, cutting off those churning feelings in his abdomen. He is a ruler in his own right now and only abides by this farce of a ruling body because of tradition and respect—not out of any real fear for non-existent power or threat of warfare to his lands. His late father respected and abided the council, and that is reason enough for Sesshomaru.

The council is comprised of ten ancient, all massively powerful and wise in their own rights. They hold no standing army nor land but for the island; however, they consistently keep their noses in the affairs of demon lands that stretch to the four corners—from Nippon to the Middle East. They justify their interferences in present affairs with mentions of past mistakes from other societies of long ago, using their infinite knowledge as an excuse to have their own way in affairs they deem as their business. For the betterment of demonkind and demon/human relations...he would bet Moko Moko on the political ranglings as just pretense. Immortality and immense power lead to only few options: eternal boredom (and, thus, the meddling as ways to alleviate it), the need to seek even more power and knowledge, or the eventually breakdown of sanity. Maintaining some sort of purpose would give all the Elders and excuse to fight against madness. Consequently, no one, no one, alive had met all ten. The ten are not all from Nippon or even all Inu. As speculation always insinuated, the ten were each a separate sect of demon society...

In summoning one of the main rulers of the four lands, at least half the council had to be in agreement of its own opinion (or "advisement" as they called it) should be known (and expected to be heeded more often than not) to the ruler. In the past, the council had intervened in all manner of events: all-out war, territory disputes, invasions, choosing of the heir and disbursements of land,
mating plans for the upper echelons and administrators, traditional feasts and events, even single-

person duels for honor. No matter seemed to be trivial for their interference. One story he had learned 

from Bokusenou told of a council member appearing at the birth of the Inu no Taishou and 

assessing, scrutinizing the future ruler carefully before carrying word back to the rest. From his 

infant father's feet and the length as well as color of his demon markings, something important had 

passed onto the council, which may have somehow determined their lack of action in most his 

battles and political dealings with the Western Lands. Sesshomaru, to that day, still wondered why 

the council did not intervene in matters of the Hime Izayoi or the fatal fight with Ryukotsusei. No, 

their interests were only with the half-demon born of a royal human and powerful ruler.

The last time Sesshomaru had been summoned by the ancients was less than two full moons after 

the birth of his half-brother. The main message had been delivered and his presence required to 

finalize the formalities. After receiving the letter with the council's ultimatum, he 

had immediately killed the council member (acting as messenger) as quickly and efficiently as his 

name indicated, using his own hands rather than sword, poison, or whip—perhaps in some sort of 

twisted idea of retribution. In fact, the young, newly-appointed Lord should have been able to kill 

the Elder as easily or as quickly as he was able. A Tiger demon (more than a thousand years his 

senior) should have literally painted the walls of the Western Palace with the young dog's blood 

without even becoming winded. The young lord, while incredibly arrogant, was no fool. There was 

much more behind this summons than he originally imagined, and his intense curiosity drove him 

to discover why he should simply bow to these unreasonable demands (as well as why the Tiger 

Elder had been ordered not to harm him). Sesshomaru arrived at the auspicious sanctuary with the 

scent of ancient death still surrounding him. It was the play Sesshomaru needed to assure himself a 

place in the ruling world; killing easily a demon thrice his age and ability would spread throughout 

the realm and instill fear in his enemies.

However, before three of the remaining council, the newly appointed Lord of the West had cooled 

his impetuous behavior as the full edict was explained. The Elders had effectively trapped him into 

consenting to their demands by using his own sense of honor against him. To prove their bloodline 

and the legacy of his great father, Sesshomaru had no choice but to accept the deal they proposed 

in person, the former message thrown at their feet stained with blood. As the new lord listened to 

the proposition, his youkai rose in anger, but he could not simply refuse and stain his honor. 

Rather, after their demands, he assured them he would not wage war on their tiny island refuge, he 

would not lay siege with the great army under his command, and he would not slay them one by 

one as long as they kept their end of the bargain—but would also never meddle in the affairs of the 

Western Kingdom as long as they existed.

The eldest of them, who was actually a female Shiro-Inu, drew herself up to her full height when he 

made these promises and gave his own stipulation. Long moment of still silence from her followed 

his decree and gave him time to study his possible opponent should she decide his stipulations 

were unacceptable. The Elder's seemingly calm manner was more cold and more removed than 

even his own; her golden eyes merely reflected the ornate receiving room around her— 

expressionless, emotionless to his plight. She sat traditional-style with perfect posture on pillows 

littering the raised daises before him, breeding and bearings obvious in each gesture of her 

dehceptively small hands to the complex and multiple-layers of embroidered kimono to the delicate 

was she sipped tea from a dainty cup at her side. The complex arrangement of her silver hair held 

tiny black pearls (that Sesshomaru suspiciously noticed) masked her true youkai with auspicious 

style and function. Her true power would be impossible to estimate in battle... The other two 

remained behind her by the open windows with the sound of the sea filling the silence.

"Young ruler," for one so terribly old, her voice rang out as clear as an unsullied spring flowing 

down the mountain-side, "you may feel this is a terrible injustice now, for you are still new to the 

ways of the elite... One day, however... one day, you will see the decision is made for the best
interest of all included." Her golden eyes narrowed at him, "and on that day, son of the Dog General, you will realize how difficult it was, not for you whom must carry out the sentence, but for we, who will have to abide the consequences of this decision." She blinked delicately, "we accept your terms, Lord of the West. The Great Trial for the younger son of the late Dog General will begin in his fifth year. You will be his huntsman, the bane to his existence, his tormentor. If he survives, the honor of your bloodline will be established," to this, her hand gestured to the great wall spanning her right, and his eyes slid to the white stone. Covering the walls on three sides, small diagrams caught his attention. He noticed the concise handwriting was actually hundreds and hundreds of names. Her dainty hand gestured specifically to one family tree that took up more length than many of the others. **Touga, the Inu no Taishou. Under it, Sesshomaru, the Killing Perfection.**

The new Demon Lord sucked in a breath. **Our family line. Our honor lies here on this wall.** Yet, beside his name, under his honored father, was a blank space.

Sesshomaru wanted to snarl at her, wanted to transform in a bone-crushing dog, wanted to break them all between his acidic jaws, wanted to inflict the agony upon them such as that they had wrought upon him just by this compendium of honorable rulers. He had more than proved the nobility of his generation, his worthiness. His many battles won, his first two-hundred years of survival against the wilds, his quest against the cat demons were all proof of his prowess, and any indication of the contrary raised his hackles. He could feel the inner demon well up like flood waters. Yet, a sovereign had to school his face, and the politician had to keep a calm air—as his father during negotiations.

"You presume much about this Sesshomaru," his tone contained no inflection, no remorse, no pain. His eyes returned to the Elder Inu; he would give no one the satisfaction of wringing rage or joy, sorrow or guilt, a smile nor a tear from him again. "This Lord will abide by the decision made this day. One hundred and fifty-five years hence is the agreed time." Without another word, certainly no respectful one of these immensely powerful beings, Sesshomaru returned home to face the Lady Izayoi and his newborn half-brother and carried the edict that would be InuYasha's fate...

Yet, here the Lord Sesshomaru stands. The time is up, and the summons from these damn ancients has finally called him from his fruitless meanderings. Fruitless? Not necessarily, he reminds himself, his meanderings, his monumentus and hated task kept him from settling permanently in the Western Lands. Of course, he returned every few moons to keep up appearances in the surrounding fiefdoms that he maintained a permanent residence at the palace of his father. More often than not, larger matters of state were sent via carrying birds maintained by Jaken (as well as that damned staff) and indicated when the Lord's physical presence was needed. His advisors and ministers kept track of the daily workings of the kingdom, designated tax collection and militaristic positioning, calculated efforts to keep the people from starvation and the elements, coordinated disaster relief and pre-planning during the monsoon seasons. He had long ago planned good and trustworthy men in places of power.

The corners of the Diayoukai's mouth slightly turn down, breaking his expressionless mask with distaste. Hunting those who prey upon his people, those who lay siege in his land, those who subjugate others under his rule were all honorable reasons for wanderlust. The other reason, hunting down his only brother, his only connection to his honored father, however, left a sour twist in the Lord Sesshomaru's gut—in truth, it always had. Spewing hate and degradations about the half-breed's blood and birth mother went against Sesshomaru's personal code of honor, for strength is proven through deeds more than lineage, but the hanyou was sensitive to those personal attacks and would remain his ultimate weakness to be exploited. But more detrimental to Sesshomaru's state of mind, it brought back images of his own hated childhood, his own detested Trial. Those memories aided him in the appearances of hatred and disgust; those memories gave him the
motivation to fight his brother, to drive a poison hand through his unprotected abdomen, to find every weakness with the goal to eliminate it from InuYasha's psyche.

The Demon Lord shuddered, decades of exile, of being hunted by his own kin (by the Inu no Taishou, specifically) haunted this Western Lord each time he came upon his half-brother surviving in the wilds, an exile at the order of these ancient fools. Their discrimination burned at Sesshomaru's sense of honor, for only one son in a royal family had to survive the demeaning Great Trial in order to have the necessarily fighting, warring skills of battle to take over the mantle of ruler. Sesshomaru, the first son, had spent two hundred and fifty years in ignorant exile, as unaware of the formal tradition as InuYasha was at present. No one would whisper a word of the trial to an exiled one, no one would dare lend aid to an exiled one, and no one would show one shred of kindness to the exiled one. The scent marker left upon infancy made sure all demons would know...

"My Lord?" A small voice brings Sesshomaru out of his bloody, tortured past. He turns from the breath-taking view to the small girl bowing low at the waist. She is young, weak, and plain. The only interesting thing about the girl is that her eyes are the same color as Rin's rather than an exotic coloring of a lizard demon. "The council apologizes for your wait. They are ready to receive you at any time."

Had he not been schooled in the art of political maneuvering after his Trial, Sesshomaru would have snorted or bared his teeth in a snarl. Apologize, indeed. I waited three full moons before I answered their damnable summons, and this is a petty excuse for revenge. Rather, he nods regally and follows behind the servant to the massive set of iron doors, carved intricately with demons of all nations from top to bottom. In the center, a shiro-inu in full form howled, a demon that looked suspiciously like his late-father in full dog form. He restrains himself from reaching out to touch that carving. The demon lord closes his eyes, and what would you believe of this Sesshomaru now, father? The door steadily creeks open and the demon lord sweeps inside.

**The Hanyou, InuYasha**

Five years after Naraku's defeat and Kagome's disappearance back to her world beyond the well. Five years of wandering the Western Lands alone, taking on no followers or new pack members; this time, the hanyou forced himself away from contact, away from others and the possible friendship they may have offered. Five years since his soul started bleeding, the scent like rotting sweets to trail after him and attract others, mistaking the scent of a dying soul for infirmity. Some weaker demons that came after him, those that had heard of the final battle, actually stopped short of fighting to talk about that life-changing battle. More than a handful of times, he had somehow ended up on the other side of a campfire using his rusty voice in a re-telling of the fight as he remembered it to an enraptured, young warrior's face. Young, hell. The majority of them were years older than him, some by a few hundred years. He told the story, he left before the fire went out, and he never accepted their offers of joining their own bands of warriors. Countless times over the years did he hanyou reinforce his own banishment from anyone.

However, those that were warriors of worth would pause when they saw his rusty sword transform into a huge fang. Them, he shared the fire and a meal; others, he shared its power in the form of their eminent demise. He had only used the Kaze no Kizu a few times and the bakuryuuha against three specific demons that were out for human blood—as in a whole village of tasty, mortal treats. Since the final use of his Kongosoha against Naraku, InuYasha did not have the heart to use it again, not with the memory of trying to make adamant for Kagome back in her time at the Higurashi Shrine. Her brother Souta had shown him the beautiful stone, and the memory of it (or wanting to give her something like it) caused the pain in his chest to start gnawing all over again. Besides, in his wandering, he had actually slowed down his memory and tried mimicking
some of the techniques Sesshomaru had used against him in previous battles. The smooth and seamless style his brother and remaining hated enemy could wield that wicked blade Tokijin and later Bakusaiga was the way of a true swordsman, and InuYasha had slowly begin incorporating the motions he could remember into his own style of fighting. Without Sesshomaru's incredible speed, the hanyou modified the movements with balanced dodges around his opponent. Someday he wouldn't have to rely on the larger attacks but his own basic movements. In only five years, then, he had grown somewhat more flexible and balanced wielding Tetsuaiga more gracefully to exploit opponents' weaknesses instead of planning his strategy around club-like movements.

Some of the interested ones, though, weren't interested in his style or his lineage as the bastard half-son of a famous demon. Hell, most weren't really interested in the first half of his life (of course, who wanted to hear about a hundred years of starvation, fear, and fighting?). Most didn't even care about the first part of his interactions with Kikyo or the Shikon no Tama or about the priestess’ incarnation with the strange clothing. The majority wanted to hear about that last stand, the final battle. He really couldn't count how many times he'd gone through the tale in only five years:

InuYasha, baring the now-six formed fang, had once again modified his technique in order to finally beat the bastard half-demon Naraku near the end of the battle; his pack and allies looked on, ready, but unable to strike with him in the tentacle clutches of the enemy.

The battlefield had been conveniently at the top level of Naraku's castle, stone inlaid kept his tentacles from driving into the earth and with open spaces the bastard couldn't simply hide in. But, three spaced turrets still allowed for the humans to have a place for cover. Numerous strikes from the humans, mostly in cleaning up the many demons that made up the evil half-demon, began what would be a three-day long war. The amount of demons Naraku had absorbed gave him an army along with his surviving incarnations. The group of them originally consisted of him, Kagome, the monk Miroku, the demon-slayer Sango and her brother Kohaku, Shippo the Kitsune demon, and Kirara, the fire demon; joining them in the first few hours: Koga the wolf demon. The eight of them seemed to fall into an unspoken agreement, when one fell or ran out of supplies (like anyone keeps endless arrows or sutras! But, they had planned ahead and brought quite a stock!) and needed to restock, others would jump in to keep Naraku fighting and the demons dying. Luckily, the specially rigged saddle full of arrows on Kirara and Kagome's bag (empty of anything but stacks of sutras) kept the humans with power to protect themselves from the onslaught.

Long into the first night, his brother Sesshomaru had appeared. Not one strike was raised against the half-demon. Not one "die, little brother" or "stand aside, vile half-breed." Rather, the Daiyokai appeared just to shove the hanyou out of the way of a very devious attack from behind. The fight progressed as such, for some reason the half-brothers found some sort of truce in the single purpose of killing Naraku. They fought together, shoulder-by-shoulder for two days and a night.

The final stance had come long after the extra arrows were gone, and Wind Tunnel remained the monk's last option. The hanyou, bloody and exhausted but still on his feet, was clutched in the tentacles of the monster while the humans corralled behind the turrets. Koga was either dying or dead, and Sesshomaru was on bent knee with a sneer and blood staining the white of his haori. They were all wearing thin and tiring and even the appearance of an arrow from Kikyo did nothing to deter the rabid beast Naraku had become.

Finally, it came to the hanyou while the life was being squeezed from his body. Only a concentrated blow would destroy him completely; a blow in the spot right below Naraku's sternum where an aura of power had kept the half-breed's attention. Inuyasha shoved the blade through Naraku and somehow managed to concentrate the Wind Scar's massive blast into that single point, making the power rip Naraku apart from the inside out. With the evil half-demon's power to regenerate, InuYasha had enough time to glance over his shoulder at his friends and Sesshomaru
with a silent message: *if this is the last battle I fight in this world, we will meet up in the next. But here and now, we will finish the job. It ends today.*

He hadn't known at the time, but he'd scored a direct hit by piercing the child in Naraku's body rather than shattering the sacred jewel as he intended. At the moment, it didn't matter if the damn thing shattered again or if he never got to be a full demon. All he'd wanted was to save Miroku and possibly Kohaku, to avenge Kikyo and Sango, to free Kagome from the dangerous life of a jewel-hunter, to take this evil out of the world before it could fuck-up anymore innocent lives. Getting the jewel simply to become a full demon was no longer his primary motivation; it didn't lend to his strength.

However, the inu hanyo remembered the victims of Naraku, the faces of suffering and pain. When his blade shoved into the wriggling mass of evil, the faces he'd met along the way of this crazy journey took up his mind's eyes. For them, to keep Naraku's touch from others, InuYasha, bastard outcast, was willing to give up the last of his youkai and his life. Even if he couldn't finish it, he knew the others were strong enough together to end it once and for all after the most important hit was scored. In some insane part of his brain, he figured that in itself would comfort them when they mourned him.

But apparently, the jewel in Naraku's body responded to him and his intentions. Still whole, that might be why it ripped itself out of Naraku's flesh just before his golden energy wave took over with ten times the intensity of the Backlash Wave. The new and improved Wind Scar ripped their enemy apart at the literal cellular level; this new intensity fed by InuYasha's own strength, willpower, concentration and pure, demonic energy. The wave was no longer a golden ripple of claws, but rather a mixture of golden and red energy sharper than even his claws for rending and tearing at high velocity. Naraku was caught in the epicenter of a similar device to Kagome's mother's "blander."

In truth, the blast almost killed him in exchange but left nothing left of Naraku to regenerate. The half-demon remembers the wave hitting him, remembers seeing his enemy's face agonized as it was rendered to shreds by this new attack. He remembers the wave hitting, ripping into the tentacles around him before cutting into his own flesh like a thousand of Sango's sword thrusts. Even the robes of the fire rat raised in front of his face could not save him. He dimly remembers being thrown back, hitting the stone wall with the Tetsuaiga still clutched in his burned hand just before he teetered over the edge. This is where he ends him monologue to the others, but while the battle was over in that memory, the aftermath lead to the reasons InuYasha left inviting campfires and company soon after.

Shockingly enough, Sesshomaru had been the one that reached him first and had pulled him away from the edge of the castle, away from a deathly fall. But, the hanyou recalls the blurry movement as his elder brother fell to his knees beside InuYasha, dropping his sword to place oddly careful fingers to the pulse at the side of InuYasha's throat. That touch made him open his eyes, blood dribbling from his mouth, eyes dazed as he looked up at the demon that would someday be the end of him.

The half-demon remembers wondering if this battle would be his last, if his brother would just rip his throat out while he was weakened and take the damn sword once and for all. But, the sight that met him was shocking. It was the first time he'd seen anything other than cold calculation, anger, or distaste on his older brother's face—Sesshomaru had actually looked *concerned.*

"Girl," InuYasha choked out around a mouthful of blood, "*the girl!"*

The little human whelp that followed his brother everywhere had been close to the battle. His party
had enough brains to duck for cover when he used the Wind Scar, but the human girl and toad might not have been so lucky. InuYasha's sluggish, blurring gaze moved around his brother's imposing figure, looking for a short girl in the character kimono. His brother, seemingly checking the damage, paused long enough to look over at InuYasha's humans (standing just over his shoulder) in question.

"No," the half-demon vaguely remembered, "little girl. Your girl, toad..." then all the lights went out completely.

With the blood loss and backlash from the Wind Scar, the half-demon was sure he'd only imagined talking to Sesshomaru or of the bastard checking him over (especially the part where he hazily came to and found Sesshomaru carrying him through the forest with incredible speed and without strain in his newly-grown arm). He also claimed to be slightly insane from the blood loss when vaguely recalling what seemed like Sesshomaru speaking in his few moments of consciousness through the run, "you have done well, little brother. This Sesshomaru is proud."

Of course he was imagining things; years of wanting nothing more than Sesshomaru's approval had made him hallucinate the strangest things, just like when he saw images of his mother when his body was ready to give out on him. Obviously, his bastard brother would never say such a thing to the stain on his great father's name.

From there, darkness takes over once again until the ceiling of Kaede's hut blurs to focus upon waking. At his side were Miroku, Sango, Shippo, Kirara, and Kohaku. No Kagome. Something was horribly wrong, just from the expression on their solemn faces. Why weren't they celebrating...? Not long later, the others filled him on the missing parts from the aftermath, of the Jewel seemingly granting Kohaku his life while stealing his friend from the future back to her own time. The dark, swirling vortex—one similar to the Wind Tunnel in Miroku's hand—had appeared behind the future-miko and swallowed her theoretically back to her future world. They could only hope she had returned to the world beyond the Bone Eater's Well, five-hundred years in the future. Simple, she had just vanished in front of their eyes, calling out tearful farewells...

His world tunneled and not because of the wounds. That was the end of the great quest for the Sacred Jewel of Four Souls—a journey that had taken him the better part of fifty-six years to finally end. Over the next few days, while healing from his wounds in Kaeda's care, he thought calmly and carefully about the whole of it; everything in the fates seemed to bring him to the path of the Jewel, to dispose of it with the only people in his life to accept him regardless of his half blood. To meet and protect this hodgepodge pack had changed the demon InuYasha; his once selfish intents were made more honorable, more noble by including these humans with their own agendas and painful pasts. They made him unashamed of his half-blood and broke him at the same time. With them, he was more powerful than before, and without them, he was a wandering freakshow. It has to be some sick joke from the Gods, to reward him with loneliness and discrimination after he fricken saved the world.

Such must be his lot in life... In the arms of Goshinboku, the same tree that cradled him safely for fifty years, he talked with Morku, Sango, and Shippo about the future. Their talk had included the monk and slayer's plan for marriage and Shippo's future. Who would the kit be best off with? InuYasha, painful as it was, declined responsibility on the grounds of the constant discrimination the kid would face with a half-demon travelling companion. He, however, agreed to contact kitsune elders that administered the Kitsune Exam about the Shippo's training. All this while sadness and despair gnawed on his insides, but he managed to keep his outer demeanor as calm and untouchable as his brother. A moon later, he sat again in the God Tree while the remainder of his little pack finished gathering their supplies to be off the next day to the abandoned Slayers' Village. From there, the young demon lost an integral part of himself in loosing his pack and returning to
the wilds.

Five years, he roamed listlessly throughout the island.

Time became filled with killing off demons, saving humans, stopping for a few weeks to help Miroku and Sango in their effort to rebuild the slayer's villages, making sure Shippo was safe and happy with others of his kind, and then stopping in Kaede's village to cut wood for winter or fill the storehouses with meat. His scent in the forest kept out scavengers and foragers out for human blood. His occasional presence reinforced the markers; if he was lucky, he might come upon a nice and powerful bi-ped form of a demon and have a halfway decent battle to improve his own technique. Slowly, his life became all about killing the evil ones and saving the innocent like Kagome would have done; his wounds were inconsequential as always, and the battles themselves were not worth a hot meal some villagers offered when overcoming their fear of him. He did not do it for acceptance of human kind or to find another pack, for InuYasha finally realized that true strength meant protecting the weak—even if the weak hated and feared you. The blood he shed for the people of the Western Lands convinced some humans of his sincerity. Of course, the tales of his deeds has spread throughout the land: a half-demon with puppy ears and a fang for a sword. None, though, could reach him. He would save them and go, regardless of being cursed or coerced.

Only a few times did he stop at the well or perch in the painfully familiar branches of Goshinboku. Other than those instances, he kept moving and shied away from personal contact other than the warriors that came for him. The forests became home again with higher branches and enveloping leaves that hid him like when he was young and figured out sleeping in trees was safer than the ground. He could lounge in one place for a while during the summer but had to keep moving constantly in the winter. Not that he minded fighting, but food was more scarce and predators more desperate. The biting winds and heavy snow made his very bones ache and his bare feet turn blue with frostbite; moving kept him as warm as fighting. The young hanyou took out his fare share (more for the sake of humans in neighboring villages than for survival) even when his fingers were so frozen he could barely extend them for the Iron Reaver Soul Stealer. Just like his life before the Shikon No Tama, the hanyou was again exiled; his voice faded, became quiet and rusty with disuse.

More to the point, he hadn't seen or smelt Kikyo since Naraku's demise. Her desire to take him to Hell with her apparently not important enough to seek him out. She, too, had left him.

Chapter End Notes

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II: Humanity Sucks

Adrenaline caused by fear is one of the greatest motivators for human kind, this decided by a hanyou-turned human as he hot footed through the night.

Normally, he would make his way closer to the Slayers' Village, the forest that bore his name, or, hell, a nice cave buried in a rock wall. One month, he even dug out a den three or four feet deep to hide in before the new moon and surrounded it with hidden pits filled with spiky, thorn bushes and sharp rocks; nothing funnier than watching a confused, hungry, and rabid demon trying to find a scent without seeing the prey. Poor bastard probably walked over his den five or six times in confusion and hunger, then set off the traps he'd dug out that made the toothy lizard wander off for an easier meal. It was one of his better strategic moves.

This night of the new moon, however, finds InuYasha doing the normal routine— making a good attempt at not being eaten. He found it interesting that when he was in hanyou form, the large majority of animalistic demons only attacked humans out of near-starvation, but when he actually turned human for One. Ficking. Night., every demon in a fifty mile radius was suddenly hungry enough to give chase.

Of course, he had crappier luck than most people (because, hey, how many people actually got stuck to a tree for fifty years and lost the love of their lives all in one foul swoop?), but sometimes he had to wonder if the fates were in cahoots to work against him. It was the only logical conclusion. The events in his life fell in a crazy-enough pattern to be someone's idea of a cosmic joke: hey, since we're gods and all and eternity is waaaay boring, why don't we pick one individual, just one, and make his life a living hell for as long as we possibly can? That should be pretty entertaining for a few hundred years, right?

The inu hanyou did not believe in the religious beliefs of most humans since he personally witnessed (and helped or killed) some of the so-called "Gods" people worshipped, but he definitely believed in some higher power that manipulated his life in the path of most resistance. Which is probably why he is now in his weak form and scrambling through a dark, snow-covered forest planning a contingency in case some random demon would happen to show up when he should be sitting in a nice, warm hut having conversation and eating tasty stew. Fate, something he couldn't fight with claws or fang.

Fate... It had been a good idea (at the time) to follow his nose this morning; the scent of rotting flesh had been too overpowering for the half demon to just ignore. He was supposed to have had enough time to check out the scent and be back on his way toward Sango and Miroku. The best plans never worked; he should have known better. Alone or with Kagome, his fights couldn't just be easy the one day he needed it to be (Fate). Of course, the small hamlet a mile back north-east just happened to have a wicked infestation of geji demons. The normal things are actually pretty harmless insects, ones his mother used to say were a sign of good favor. Demonic geji—different story; the mindless bastards were as long as his forearm with killer teeth and the instinct to procreate—rather to kill another living being and lay their eggs in the corpse.

Fifteen humans had vanished from the village by the time he got arrived (FATE), literally ten hours ago. The genji had multiplied and attacked. The screams had reached his ears long before he got close. The ensuing clusterfuck of screaming humans, running children, flying arrows, chopping axes, piles bloody gore and viscera hadn't been his idea of a fight per say. But, he ripped the little bastards off the ones still alive and fighting, decimated groups of genji gathering to attack in a
wave. Luckily (…fate), the majority of villagers lived after he brought out the blades of blood and the iron reaver in a more rapid succession than even he thought possible. Not able to stay long enough to do more than help them bury the dead, he told the villagers to keep their eyes opened and started out as the horizon started darkening into night... (F.A.T.E.)

Full night fell like clockwork; he was in mid-freaking-leap.

Since then, running. The forest floor is unforgiving with sharp rocks and roots that cut into the tough bottoms of his feet combined with the freezing grip of snow and ice; of course, the utter lack of moonlight just makes his flight a little more of a pain in the ass. He brings up a mental image of this particular section of woods, less than thirty miles from the site of his battle with Jakotsu from the Band of Seven. There were a few safe places not destroyed in that fight that he could only hope are still standing for tonight. Rather than just scramble up a tree to get off the ground, the human is making a beeline straight for the rocky cliffside with hollowed out caverns; slowing or finding a tree to climb is out of the fricking question, not when the last new moon saw him up a tree with a rabid, four-foot long lizard climbing effortlessly after him.

The human had escaped by a narrow margin, swinging off the branches and landing far enough away to not get gnawed on and hard enough to break an ankle (rock is harder to penetrate and gives him fewer directions to guard, helpful when the instinctual need to survive kept his human sense painfully alert), but adrenaline, adrenaline made him try the swing, throw the majority of his human strength into the momentum. Adrenaline (or so Kagome's "skewl" books called that infusion of energy to survive following intense fear or stress) kept him moving in this inferior form, and adrenaline kept him up until morning. If the human was honest with himself, he could just stop moving and wait for it. Might be better that way.

_Dammit_, a branch fwacks him in the face, a rough sting to the cheek. _Yeah, the scent of blood is also a good motivation. Keeps my ass moving so the hungry ones have to haul ass for dinner on the run._

Meanwhile...

In the Palace of the Western Lands, Lord Sesshomaru—the Inu no Taishou, he reminds himself after seeing the title still attached to his father's name—has returned from his meeting with the Elder demons. He spent his first night back greeting his advisors and generals and catching up on the state of affairs during his absence.

There is always a great deal happening in a kingdom the size of the Western Lands. In one area (the north-north east) of his land alone were six smaller kingdoms with four to eight villages in each, all with an overlord to supervise local matters. Double that number in the southern and western areas. Mostly, his overseers did well enough keeping the masses of peasants appeased and safe; few of the lesser issues even crossed the Lord's desk (except for monthly reports and accounts).

His head advisor, an elemental demon resembling Sesshomaru's own two-legged form, was the first to meet him with hot sake and dinner. Yao Xin, master of Earth, Rock, and Metal, had served the ruling family of the Western lands for two generations or more as far as Sesshomaru knew. The elemental was several hundred years older than the lord himself and was once a private soldier in the far northern lands before coming to the West and never gave up the habit of wearing ornate iron armor and underclothes from the late Zhao Dynasty.

Even though Yao Xin is several feet taller than Sesshomaru, he does not give the impression of looming and maintains a comical air when he must bend at the waist to go through any doorway. Nor does he get angry when children tug on his long pig-tail or fu Manchu.
The two spent several hours in the Lord's private chamber reviewing the general condition of his
kingdoms and lesser holdings under the management of other Shoguns; everything from trade to
taxes to the state of the standing army to border patrols to demon attacks to spy reports on the
every-present Northern raiders kept both demons up until late. The full reports had been neatly
stacked on the Lord's desk to await his attention.

However, after the business was concluded and the fifth or sixth gallon of sake finished,
Sesshomaru finally started talking about his frequent visits upon InuYasha.

"And so, my Lord, it has been how long since you last laid eyes upon your brother?" Yao Xin's
eyes, steely gray with flecks of lighter blue, stay calmly on his liege while one clawed hand held up
their final cup of warm sake.

Sesshomaru holds up his own dainty cup before regally swallowing the contents. He regards the
elemental with emotionless eyes, "with the recent uprising, it has been more than three full cycles
of the seasons since this Sesshomaru has seen his half-breed brother."

Xin raises one golden brow at the abrupt change in hid lord's attitude. At one time, Yao Xin
himself had been a young elemental serving under Sesshomaru's grandfather, a terrifying despot
that had been over-thrown by Touga, and he understands the need for the aristocracy to keep up
appearances. However, he is also not a fool; he sits back with the raised brow and waits for the
young lord to elucidate.

A frown mars Sesshomaru's features, "do not look at me with your smug insight, Yao Xin. That cur
is a despicable, dishonorable stain—"

"—oh, this again my lord?" The elemental grinned, " —a stain on my dignified father's name'? Is
that what you were to say?" The elemental braces an elbow on the table to cup his face in one hand
as if in exasperation, "this old excuse is getting so tiresome."

Anyone else would have dove for cover should the lord's eyes narrow on them as such, but Yao
Xin merely looks up to grin, "come now, Sesshomaru. I am your closest advisor, and dare I say the
only friend you have. In all these years, do you honestly think I am or have ever been fooled? Was
I not here when your father returned you from the wilds? Fear not, I am well aware of
your... distaste shall we call it."

As anyone that knew anything about Inu Yokai, it was obvious dog demons were fiercely
protective of kin, instinctually as well as traditionally. While not himself an inu, Yao Xin had been
with the family long enough to know of the ritual exile. In all manner, the banished one was to be
utterly despised by family whom shared a deep connection from birth (which is one reason why
The Great Trial began generations ago, Yao Xin had been told by the previous Inu no Taisho, to
assure that a strong member of the ruling class was not coddled or placed on the throne by some
prejudiced family members).

Sesshomaru glances at the roaring fire, silent for quite some time as he considers whether or not to
finally unburden himself. The end was drawing near at any rate; the demon lord closes his eyes and
sighs.

"The Elders called for me. That is where I have been for the last fortnight." The younger finds
himself admitting. "The preliminary agreement was that InuYasha would only need to spend one
hundred and fifty years exiled from the Western Lands considering he is a hanyou, and there is not
way to be certain of his lifespan."

At this, Xin straightens, "a hundred and fifty...? But, my lord, your brother is a little over two-
hundred now! Should he not have already been returned?"

A bitter bile rises up in Sesshomaru's throat, but his expression does not change, "My brother spent fifty years pinned to a tree by a sacred arrow. The Elders decided to extend his trial to equate the original sentence... also, the situation involving half-demon Naraku, it seems, was an enemy of great interest to the council. They wished to see whether or not my younger brother would come out the victor but also what he would do in the aftermath of such a tedious battle."

The elemental's aura flares momentarily, but he merely gestures his lord to continue.

Sesshomaru relaxes an iota in his chair, still looking at the roaring flames. "Things may finally progress from here. The Elders will now recognize InuYasha as an heir to the West and worthy of our bloodline as well as a bonus to the Western Lands. Apparently his name has risen in their estimation since I last petitioned nearly a decade ago. Although I can not fathom why his destruction of Ryukotsusei and the demon Naraku as well as the seven—or is it eight now?—forms he has added to the Tetsuiaga were not enough to earn his rightful place long before now." The low growling in his chest makes the young lord start; he hadn't even realized he was growling in suppressed anger.

"How will you tell him, my lord?" Yao Xin asks carefully, suddenly sympathetic for both brothers—for their horrific pasts and the uncertain future. "Do you think he will come willingly home?"

"Did I?" Sesshomaru counters as the dawn slowly creeps up the horizon.

Yao Xin pauses a minute then lets out a deep belly laugh, ignoring the younger's eyes narrowing in murder yet again. The image of a pup, less than three hundred years old, snarling like a rabid beast while wrapped in his father's tails sends the advisor into another gale of mirth. The younger demon's useless kicking and squirming, barking, fighting, and howling ended when the late Lord dumped Sesshomaru unceremoniously on the floor—then took him up by the scruff of the neck to give the boy a few good shakes. Alarmed at the time, Yao Xin had no way of knowing the series of barks, ruffs, and howls of the Alpha male were more instinctual to calming the pack or backing down a challenging pup. The dog demons from his land are solitary hunters and watching the two, he had no way of knowing they were actually communicating.

"Aside from the night Father brought me home, Yao Xin," the lord sighs again, and his advisor makes quite an effort to calm himself (discreetly wiping a tear from the corner of his eye). "This will be a difficult undertaking."

The advisor merely props his cheek up in one hand, "my lord, you have an aptitude for understatement."

Finally, Xin leaves his lord to the desk stacked high with reports and waves a cheery farewell. Sleep alludes him as memories of his days in the wild rear like spirits of the dead. To distract himself, Sesshomaru itemizes duties among catching up on work before planning on how to deal with InuYasha.

There are stacks upon stacks of rice paper reports in front of him, ranging from furthest to closest, that had been waiting for him upon his return from roaming the borders of the Western Lands. Reading the first one, over two-years old, the report describes a rogue half-demon defending villages in his jurisdiction, not only from demon attacks but raiders and natural disasters as well. Everything in the description very obviously points toward his younger brother:

*"Clad in red, golden-eyed, half-Inu with dog ears and a wicked fang for a sword. He is a merciless hunter, fast and furious. His attacks are mighty but have not yet hurt an innocent. He has returned
to the lesser kingdom of Shinshou for three straight nights. At first, we believed him to be an attacking monster; we attacked him with the tools at our disposal. However, he was not swayed and slayed the monster that has already killed three of the village children and four grown men. We assume he is a soldier of our Lord and extend our gratitude for his majesty's aid."

"Last eve a vicious demon or unrelenting hunger attacked milord's village in the eastern end of the Kingdom, a village named Arisu. The demon has lurked in the outskirts for more than three full moons and did not enter the village until thus. The men tried to fend off the bakemono with shovels and spears but were not match. Only then, another demon twenty hands high with teeth longer than a man's forearm attacked the women; the demon we had tried to kill saved our women. He was a white-haired half-blood with red robes and demon-fang. We thank our Lord for sending his warrior to save the lives of his people and vassals..."

"Night of the half-moon, the moth demon that has continually attacked several villages in the South-West was felled by a half-Shiro Inu demon. The warrior demon sustained grievous injuries from the battle, yet he would not allow the village healers to tend his wounds. Nor would the Lord's soldier take sustenance or reward from the village coffers..."

"Official Report: Kazue Nao, First Administrator, Second Rank: My gracious and kind sovereign, many thanks for milord's insight in sending a defender of the realm to his highness' northern kingdom. The red-robed savior, a half-demon Shiro Inu, appeared for the last two moons to defend this small fiefdom from the many demons haunting the surrounding woods. The village has been under constant attack for six full moons; not until the lord's servant arrived have the villagers had any sense of peace. Hired warriors have fled the onslaught, male villagers have been carried off, and the supply of milord's men have been exhausted. Yet, the massive fang of this single warrior has taken out over one hundred demons with one blow. He is a stately warrior if not younger than expected. Your people send their gratitude for your mercy and protection..."

Obviously, it can be no other. But, as the Lord reads each and discards it in another pile, he is intensely disturbed that each report states the half-demon had been silent and mostly driven away or simply left after saving countless human and demon lives in the Western Lands. It seems InuYasha either defends the lands of their father out of boredom or duty. Nevertheless, his brother could have stayed in the human village rather than travel to defend the realm. InuYasha chose, he chose, the way of the honorable ruler.

Excellent my brother; perhaps this Sesshomaru has trained him for the good after all. Perhaps he has learned. Yet, this kind of treatment is unbefitting, unacceptable. Eventually, this Lord will sink in order to personally visit these inconsequential little villages that have scorned him. They will pay for his pain... For now, I will wait no longer. The time to acknowledge his strength and prowess is long overdue. The Great Trial ends tonight. (Yeah, I thought about stopping here, but that would be really mean of me... :)

The Lord pushes away from his ornate desk with flutters of scrolls falling in the swish of his robes. From the set of his jaw, apparently the Lord makes a decision he should have made years ago. I will bring him here before his next birthday, for it is time my little brother came home. The council has had their way all these years, and this Sesshomaru will no longer abide their cruelty. Wait another two full moons? Absurd.

The Lord of the West curls his upper lip up to reveal the gleam of razor-sharp fangs, his memory of the last time he had seen the half-breed sends unanticipated shocks of pain through him—ones he had been forced to lock away in the darkest recesses of his mind. Long ago, the feelings of anger, fear, and pain on his half-brother's account had been ruthlessly stomped out when the council had reminded him of his duty as the eldest son of the late Inu no Taishou. However, now that the young
one was finally taking up the mantle of their family, to protect those in the Western Lands, this
Sesshomaru can finally breathe, untainted with false malice…

"Jaken." The demon lord gives himself a mental pat on the back; his tone does not betray the
awakening pain in his chest. It will not do for the toad to se

e him with any unfamiliar expressions or emotions.

"Ai, milord!" The short, squat amphibian bows low as he came to the doorway. "What might I do
to please my lord Sesshomaru this night?" The toad, when away from the nomadic existence
of constant fear, is actually (and almost unbelievably) far more composed in the castle of the great
lord; his many responsibilities to Rin and lesser workings of the household take much of the excess
energy and leave him with a somewhat dignified air. Of course, had this former-ruler of his own
toady people prove as excessively annoying all the time, Sesshomaru would have dispatched with
him long ago (and probably gained a certain amount of satisfaction from the act). The squaking
tone and the screeching yells along would have made the Inu Lord's ears bleed if that horrific noise
was constant. Luckily for the Lord and the toad, the squalk is only an instinctual reaction to fear
and predators.

"I have need of you…My half-brother will be returning home and preparations must be completed
quickly. The time has come."

**Back with humanity sucking... and sucking quite a bit:**

Dirty, disheveled, and freezing his manly buns off, the said Hanyou has finally ended up in a cave,
ironically not far from his brother's palace. Not that he had ever stopped in for tea or a chat or to
talk about the emerging art forms or something equally as snooty. Instead, here he is in a makeshift
shelter shivering and soaking wet from a refreshing sprint through snow, and now the cold air is
starting to freeze the fire rat robes still on his body.

The meager fire in front of him does little to ease his trembling or the stiff cold that settles into
every joint. He can barely move with the penetrating cold, and paranoia about being found hovers
on the edges of his consciousness that keeps him from building up the fire to a tolerable level. He
doesn't dare venture outside to hunt small game to eat. Hell, he isn't really sure of the last time he
did eat (was it a week or so ago when he stopped by Sango and Miroku's? No, damn, the nights
were still warm then; it must have been summer…? Last summer? Eh, what is time to him
anyway?). But, InuYasha is no stranger to starvation—even during his human night. Most of his
younger years are filled with days and weeks of hunger, of gnawing at tree limbs to try and assuage
the pains in his little, cramping belly. He would survive it, wait out the night, and find something
edible in the morning when various things wouldn't try to eat him instead.

A violent tremor suddenly rocks him, makes him hold tighter to himself and rub his numbing arms
in an attempt for warmth. *Humans can freeze...to death. Tetsuaiga won't help me if I die like this; I
should get up to generate heat...* But, the hanyou-turned-human literally and figuratively cannot
make himself stand. His force of will, his desire to live, had been dangerously waning in the last
five years. If someone that needs him was out in that snow, if someone that wanted him begs him
to live, then that would be enough to give him the necessary strength. The only one that could have
forced him to stand right then was Kagome: Kagome in trouble, Kagome needing him, Kagome
making him defend humans, Kagome making him want to keep moving forward...

But there is no Kagome anymore. No one to protect. No one to call out for him. No one to make
him stand and put one foot in front of the other... No one to make him speak.

Without Kagome, the human InuYasha finds no reason to get up—even as his meager fire goes out.
Sesshomaru watches, snuck in too fast for the preoccupied, very human little brother of his to notice. He sits back on his heels, face in shadow above the human's dark head... But there is no malice, no disdain in his visage or stance, no desire to attack, not even a twinge to go for the cursed sword at his hip. Rather, Sesshomaru's expression is oddly sad and tender while his chest aches once again in that familiar sensation akin to pain. The cold disdain that has always been his political cover falls in the shadows. Amber eyes soften ever so much as he looks upon the beautiful creature before him, one that had suffered far too long in the dark.

Long years of watching InuYasha's growth, for the major part of his adolescence, has caused the agony behind his mask of cold silence and solitude. His brother's plight has slowly torn away at the Lord for the better part of two hundred years. Tonight, however, something about InuYasha's pain is so very different. So very familiar to Sesshomaru's own past. Some part of his psyche, his instincts, flare, as if knowing the precipice on which InuYasha stands on this night: a point every exiled one must come to is deciding whether or not the lonely life's journey is worth continuing.

As members of the royal family, Sesshomaru had no choice but to allow his brother to suffer the Great Trial, a ritual to breed the strongest, most adept warriors of the Western Land InuYokai. As was done to Sesshomaru and their great lord father before them, Sesshomaru sent Lady Izayoi and his infant brother leave the palace of their father. Later, after his step-mother's death, he was forced to abandon InuYasha to survive in the wilds, to become a warrior of strength, skill, and strategic stealth...or die. As an added incentive to the trial, a scent marker was stamped upon the child, combining with its natural scent, before his exile; the scent would cause other demons and humans to subtly cause adverse reactions: humans would fear and hate (and thus desire to destroy) and demons would become overly-aggressive. only a member of the child's family could have direct contact with the exiled one and only to train and test the child's growing skills in battle.

Of course, Sesshomaru has spent years fighting the council's decision to force his brother through the trial. His arguments were logical: as the first-born and Alpha male, Sesshomaru's own trial should fulfill the required sacrifice for their family. As the only two remaining of their father's bloodline, a second sacrifice would not be necessary. He was Lord of the Western Lands, InuYasha would be his advisor, his second-in-command, and would need actual training that could not be found in the wilds! Sesshomaru even used the argument that his half-demon brother would suffer twice the ostracization and discrimination of most exiled Inus, no one outside his immediate domain would treat InuYasha with any sort of kindness or respect for his status...

All his arguments, all his appeals, were for naught. InuYasha remained banished...and Sesshomaru had silently despaired as they fought time and time again. He was able to sneak in a few moments here and there, in the sordid past, to care for the little half-breed; he slaughtered numerous hordes of demons chasing the child InuYasha (out of the boy's sight, of course) through his younger years, sometimes leaving meat close to the boy's range. With Sou'ung, their father's third sword, he had merely reacted out of instinct by shoving InuYasha safely out of blast range. The Alpha male response and his own suppressed need to see his brother survive The Great Trial, were the greatest of the demon Lord's own trial. Even when the hanyou was sealed to the God Tree, Sesshomaru found himself seeking his brother out to smell the comforting musk of family—not even recoiling at the tainted scent marker. But, Sesshomaru found himself suppressing his own scent or staying downwind when Inuyasha was cognizant and free.

It had been a long two hundred years alone.
InuYasha's once fiery eyes. After the defeat of Naraku and disappearance of the miko, Sesshomaru should have taken his brother in immediately and explained The Great Trial, Elder be damned. The last five years should have been spent earning his brother's trust and integrating him into the role he was born for… The Trial had officially ended just before InuYasha had been sealed, and with the complications of the Miko, Naraku, and the Jewel of Four Souls, the council had merely taken advantage of the situation, but to his own fault, there not been time or the right opportunity to seize his little brother up.

However, why in the four hells had it been a good idea to leave the boy with the humans after the fight when he needed to recuperate from nearly-fatal wounds…? The demon lord sighs just as the fire goes out.
Humanity Sucks: Part II

Warm. The wind is icy cold whipping at his hair, but he is so warm. Maybe death is warmer than living; that is almost a comforting thought. He breathes and the air is cold, but the rest of him just wants to fall back into unconsciousness for a while.

However, reality (or common sense) kicks in after a second, and the shock is jarring. The hidey-cave was freezing cold the last he could remember, snow falling thick and soft from the narrow opening. He couldn't stand then, couldn't make himself make an effort at life. It wasn't that long ago; his palms still stung from a helluva scraping he had gotten from squeezing his skinny human butt through it. He is still human, has to be, and he is obviously missing some very important events that took him from ice-covered death and the feeling of weightlessness, of furry fuzz, and solid warmth. Warmth is out of place. Reclining is out of place. Being held in an embrace is out of place. Movement is out of place. What the fuck has he gotten into now? It crosses his mind, fleetingly, that he hasn't been held in an embrace since Kagome hugged him...Even Sango only awkwardly patted his back when they left for the slayer's village.

The one that never sleeps on the night of the new moon—exceptions of poison, wounds, and panicky, scantily clad girls notwithstanding—wakes with a sick jerk; consciousness is sharp as claws in his back and heart stutters then pounds hard in his check with immediate panic and fear. It is still dark outside...out-outside? FUCK! A million thoughts zoom through his mind—each demon he has ever faced flash as he wonders which one survived and found him on his human night.

But, oh it just gets better from there. Not any of Naraku's surviving incarnations, not any of his old foes, not even that smart-ass wolf holds onto the half-demon. As if his life couldn't possibly suck enough at this point, hand it to FATE to stick him with yet another incredible obstacle on his human night—another pathway ending in death. When he realizes why the fluffy white blob is familiar, it's already too late to do shit about it and his expression falls. The face above him is none other than the bane to his existence. Sesshomaru—Lord of the Mother-fucking West. Struggle is an instinctual response to looming death; he can't help himself. His newly-adopted attitude ('remain cool under pressure and threat of death') apparently notwithstanding when faced with the most dangerous enemy.

The demon Lord holding him with both arms and the help of his white, furred tail (honestly, who could ever mistake his tail for a simple pelt!), never loosens his grip. He does not allow the hanyou-turned-human to wrench free and fall to his eminent death.

"Stay calm," Sesshomaru strains to make his tone emotionless but he inwardly flinches when it comes out somewhat gentle for those cute human ears. At this moment, in the sky where InuYasha can not escape him, he could start the sordid story. He could tell the younger about the Elder council, about The Great Trial, about their father hunting this Sesshomaru with a vicious tenacity and vengeance, about his own despised task of testing the hanyou, even about his repeated attempts at freeing InuYasha from a burden that only he, the eldest son, should have had to bear...but, he cannot. The full story might help alleviate the eventual fear his brother would suffer due to the night of weakness, but this—in the middle of the night with darkened lands and predators waiting for a feast—is not the time
nor place. He needs to wait until InuYasha is, at least, a half demon again with the strength and skill to make his choice of actions. It is painful for the demon lord to watch, to scent, to feel his younger brothers immense fear of him—to be left guessing what agonizing thoughts permeated the other's thoughts. Is InuYasha preparing himself for death? Is he wondering why Sesshomaru hasn't dropped him to his ultimate demise? Where is the fire and passion always present in their previous battles? Is this fear due to his human night? First, assure the younger of his safety. Second, warmth and food. Third, the story will come out.

Decision made, the demon lord simultaneously concentrates on his scent and hikes the malnourished boy higher against his chest to put his face right into the niche of Sesshomaru's shoulder and neck. Specifically, he holds his brother's face closer to his neck in order for the younger to pick up the subtle change. The human would unwittingly become calmer, drowsy again without picking out the distinctness or that Sesshomaru is manufacturing the underlying aroma. More so, InuYasha might also react less anxious and with less struggle just knowing he had access to one of Sesshomaru's vulnerable point; well, he might not struggle, but the rough and somewhat crude attitude would begin aaaaany minute. Holding his breath in anticipation, the demon lord waits.

"Sess…ho…maru?" The voice is rusty, husky, and cracking. Sesshomaru nearly winces in sympathy. The consistent reminder, however, dictates not a hint of his empathy outwardly shows. An abrupt change of character will make the younger more suspicious, not particularly forgiving or understanding. This will have to be a delicate process, a slow process. The demon lord sighs gently, a bare exhale. Breathing in, not surprising, he immediately scents panic and the rise of adrenaline pumping through human veins exuding from every pore of the half-asleep hanyou in his hold. Against his re-grown left arm, he feels the dull thuds of InuYasha's heart beat pick up rhythm through his back. Slow, indeed.

"Yes, otoutu. Be calm." The Lord's mind races on what to say in order to keep his brother from making a stupid and lethal leap. Ah, take the route of the honorable ruler: "I have recently returned home to find that someone has been protecting villages in my kingdom. All reports seem vaguely familiar in description of the vigilante and of his style. It seems you have been busy after the demise of Naraku." With effort to appear non-chalant, Sesshomaru mentally pats himself on the back.

The voice is his half-brother but not dripping with malice and hate? Is he dreaming? Or having a nightmare? Has the world ended? Have the seven hells risen up and taken over the world? Are pigs flying...? The dazed hanyou actually glances around the sky to make certain no swine are perched on clouds or frogs falling from the heaven rather than snow...

Nope. Everything seems normal.

Within the folds of the fluffy thing (that makes Sesshomaru look like a fricking sissy-boy no matter what excuse he used), InuYasha pinches himself.

Ouch. Ouch means: shit, shit, holy ever-mother-lovin' shit. Palms still hurt, cheek still stings, and (now that he's awake enough to notice) joints still ache from the recent cold. He is still human, and he is really being carried by the guy that shoved a poison hand through InuYasha's gut without a pause. His heart starts racing with the implications. They must be on the cloud made of Sesshomaru's Ki or youkai energy, which mean they are probably fairly high up and the fall will probably kill him. So, he's figuratively fucked. He is human, weak, and defenseless. Sesshomaru is going to have a field day.

A low rumbling begins from the chest he is pressed against, vibrating gently against the frightened
human's upper body. Nevertheless, survival instinct kicks in first and foremost. Usually, he would take stock of everything, everything and anything, in arm's reach to use as a weapon, a diversion, or hiding place—especially during the new moon. However, only sky and space is around him. He can reach Tetsuaiga, oh wait. His fingers find a sword hilt, but it is not the sword hilt he is accustomed to. Even as a human, he can normally feel the hum of his father's legacy. The hum currently against his palm is altogether a different—well, animal. Tensaiga... won't help me out, it can't cut, and there's no way I can handle Bakusaiga as a human. Well, damn. He's got me. Guess this might be my last stand. Try stabbing him with Tetsuaiga and hope the shield saves me from the fall...?

Then again, his face is lying in the niche of shoulder and throat... right against Sesshomaru's neck and within snapping distance to the jugular vein. Even human, his teeth were sharp enough to do serious damage; however, he didn't know if he could wound Sesshomaru badly enough to give him time to get the hell away (preferably far enough away to live until daybreak). Moreover...the fall would really be the perfectly shitty ending to the night.

The scared but calculating human is beginning to flush with proximity as he comes awake enough to realize what is happening. And that his half-brother, the one that had cursed him from birth, is holding him in a strangely tight and close embrace. He isn't being crushed against the spiky armor or held as far away from the Lord's snooty person as possible. He isn't sprawled on the cloud at Sesshomaru's feet or tossed over his shoulder like a sack of rice.

Something is going on; there is some reason his half-brother saved him from freezing, and the human is certain it is not going to be the rationale of any sane person. What could Sesshomaru want him for besides hoping to gain Tetsuaiga, killing him, or...well, killing him painfully? It had been years since his brother had crossed his path, and the last time they had met was not the best of circumstances. Sure, they managed to kill Naraku, but Sesshomaru left immediately after, and InuYasha still doesn't believe in the blood-loss induced hallucinations of his speaking to his older brother, so the blood-feud between them is still in effect...right?

He sighs, hope for the best and prepare for the worst. He palms the hilt of his sword, and he is already planning strategies and contingencies for an escape, tactics for survival until day break and also ways he could lose his brother once they hit the ground (or his half-brother dropped him). Either scenario is inevitable; Sesshomaru wouldn't be holding the taint of the family unless he has a damn good reason—maybe taking InuYasha to a primo hunting spot (in which the temporary human would be prey). He isn't as fast as his brother as a hanyou and sure as hell not as a human, but the bag of stink pellets, a small bladder full of demon poison, small but sharp porcupine demon quills, and other such things Sango gave him last time would provide a useful deterrent. He needs long enough to get away and find a flowing body of water to hide his scent, give the bastard a good chase. Even as a human, InuYasha refuses to be helpless, to just lie down and die without a fight.

Wait. The sudden voice in the back of his mind perks up, Escape? Run? Hide?...for what? To live another couple of decades alone? For your own kin to just turn around and slaughter you later? There's nothing left to fight for, to survive for, remember? Sesshomaru will eventually be the death of you, so why continue to fight it anyway? As a human, his emotions are more acute, and the seeds of doubt sewn long ago are taking root now that his older brother had reappeared. The death clock is ticking again.

InuYasha remains silent and unmoving, every muscle tense as they fly through the night while his own mind works against him. The stars pass too fast for him to get a good sense of where they are or where they may be heading. Then, he is glancing over Sesshomaru's shoulder and trying to get a handle on where they are and how far up. Would the fall really kill him on his human night?...Did it even matter, really? There was no Kagome to go back to. There was only the empty well,
Goshinboku, and his friends that had already started their lives without room for him—the outcast half-breed. He had nothing left but his sword, his fire rat robe, and his honor. The only things that belong to him, that he would die with...however, the matter of dying with his honor intact was unlikely anyway; as his own brother had pointed out on more than one occasion, abominations didn't get the luxury of having honor.

The human remains tense but slowly resigns himself mentally to his fate; if he is supposed to die on the night his tainted blood had control, give the Tetsuiga to Sesshomaru—well, fate dictates that all the fighting would be a moot point in the end. But, the young demon InuYasha had become since his impetuous decision to steal the Shikon no Tama (when he assumed Kikyo had betrayed him) only demanded he not give in easily. If Sesshomaru wants his life or his Tetsuiga, then the half-demon would make the asshole work for it. He would prove Sesshomaru wrong—he has already decided not to beg for his life. No matter the pain, the torture, the burn of acid. His personal code would not allow for less; he would die with his honor intact. He would die as the son of his father. With a deep breath, the human slowly conquers his fear.

Sesshomaru breathes deeply, and even in the hard winds around them, he keenly scents and is disturbed at the pheromones suddenly coming from his brother to over-lay his initial panic and fear. Agony and despair. The scents are a bitter tang, like rotting fish and acid to the demon lord's sensitive nose. Hn, obviously he needs to speak, to say something of importance rather than remain silent. This human InuYasha is more susceptible to emotions and impulsive decisions than the half-demon, and that reckless nature (while saving him during some battles) might be the end of his brother, especially if he does something incredibly stupid in an attempt to free himself.

Judging by the layers of scents, an impulsive decision lies not far ahead. The feel of a racing heart beat, the scent of adrenaline flowing from every pore, the obvious tightening of muscles to leap, all a similar combination coming from the older brother's memory when he escaped after InuYasha cut off his arm. From his form of light, Sesshomaru saw the younger boy watching him fly away with hurt eyes and an agonizingly sad smell mixing with InuYasha's natural scent...It turns his stomach to this day.

"It seems I am in your debt. You are the much revered hanyou savior of the Western Lands as well as the Great Warrior that destroyed Naraku." He tries to keep his tone soft, without inflection, but for the first time in his life—the demon Lord is having problems keeping his calm and empty façade in place. Especially with that scent coming off his only remaining kin.

"And, it seems I have come at quite an opportune time to express my appreciation for your selfless actions, InuYasha."

Sesshomaru pulls back a little to look down at the face no longer lying but hovering over his shoulder as if ready to dodge at any second. The violet eyes, so like and unlike his brother's normal golden gaze, are wide with some new and unknown emotion hovering in them—slowly, the scents begin to regulate and disburse in the wind whipping by them.

InuYasha, however, reels. He actually said my name... without saying 'die' immediately afterwards. I think it's the first time in my life he's ever... just said it. And like that? There's something in his tone, I can't place it at all.... Is this some kind of trick? It has to be, why else would he thank me? I'm the bane to his existence, the taint in the bloodline—what the fuck is this? Savior? Great Warrior? What the hell happened to him?

The human swallows at the scrutiny and realizes he's been looking too long; prodding an Alpha dog with a challenge on his human night is a stupid move even he doesn't want to attempt. The younger of the two averts his gaze, still disturbed at the very different way his brother is acting—
something obviously isn't right, but without his superior senses and strength, he's at a disadvantage.

"Why," he clears the scratchy baritone from his throat, "haven't you dropped me yet? I know my ass ain't that heavy and all but... you hate me an' stuff, at least last time I checked." Even saying that much hurt his ill-used vocal chords, but he still prepares for the eventual pull of gravity when Sesshomaru would surely do now that he had asked. This is just a test to make sure InuYasha is dealing with his real half brother. Compliments and appreciation are certainly not his brother.

Instead, Lord Sesshomaru increases his calming scent (attributing InuYasha's apparent transformation to human for not allowing the effect to be immediate) and lowers his head slightly to talk directly in the human ear. He feels his brother tense slightly at fangs within close proximity to his jugular and the pain of that mistrust feels like an arrow spear in his chest.

There is a reason Lord Sesshomaru had always used such fast techniques on his younger brother; not in order to beat the hanyou or prove some idiotic sense of supremacy, it was but to save them both the pain of drawing the fights out. Moreover, to save himself the agony he is feeling at this very moment. In essence, Sesshomaru struck before what he was doing could fully register; his clawed hand through the abdomen was just such an instance. Striking an insane InuYasha down before he could slaughter more innocents as a rabid full-demon is yet another. No, seeing the rage and disappointment in InuYasha's eyes while he had to go on sprouting all those ridiculous lies about half-breeds and weakness (especially when he'd personally seen how strong his younger brother could be), and still lashing out with the scent of his family's blood in his nose...all of it, all these years of fighting, had made Lord Sesshomaru suffer nearly as much as the hanyou. How InuYasha could never scent the putrefying aroma of his lies always made the demon lord wonder if InuYasha was just deluding himself as much as Sesshomaru was.

Suddenly, there is a weak struggle of arms against the white tail that is wrapped around the younger. It makes the demon Lord blink, realizing he's been staring with some expression on his face that might not have been completely neutral. InuYasha's panic has heightened, the scent worse than rotted, spoiled meat in his nose. Bile rises in the back of Sesshomaru's throat. He breathes gently to focus only on the natural, underlying scent of family and leans in, almost allowing their foreheads to touch.

"I vow, my word of honor, that I will not harm you, my brother. I swear it. You are safe within my care."

The words are vehement, and a pull from Sesshomaru's memory of his father speaking the same words so many years ago... Out in the wilds of the Western Lands, the young demon faced his father for what he believed was the final time and felt himself looking into the face of his own death. His meager rags of clothing would be no match against the sword Sou'ung, his claws and poison not nearly powerful enough to take the staunch Inu no Taisho down. However, he would not have just laid down his life to die. He was prepared to make this final fight a fight to the finish... But, his father had not moved against him, had not drawn a sword, but had reach out one hand and made the same vow, "I swear, upon my word of honor, Sesshomaru. I will not harm you. Never again, my son. I vow it." Sesshomaru had not believed him them—not for a second.

The hanyou's eyes shoot open, he pulls back to look at his brother's face. The normally cold or angry expression isn't there, and the younger brother is thrown completely off-kilter in mid-strugggl. Sesshomaru is watching him with something intense in his eyes, emotions churning inside the normally cold demon Lord. InuYasha is looking at him unabashed, speechless. He doesn't even register that this is the closest he had ever been to his own brother without bleeding first. Instead: Holy shit. This isn't Sesshomaru. Can't be sure without my senses, but there's no possible way this could really be the guy that's tried to kill me my whole life.
"Safe?" He repeats dully, voice still husky with ill-use "safe? This from the guy that ripped a pearl out from my eye? A very painful ripping, mind you." His human eyes must be deceiving him (probably from lack of food and warmth) but he swears he saw his cold brother flinch. Impossible—he's got to be hallucinating. Maybe he ate some bad mushrooms...? But Sesshomaru is still giving him an expectant look. "Now look, I'm not the smartest guy on the island, granted, but I'm not a complete moron, contrary to popular opinion. Come clean, you bastard. What's this about?"

The pause is staggering—the younger braces himself for the abrupt lack of support in mid-air. Test 2: calling him a bastard is surely going to get InuYasha a free flight through the air.

But instead, Sesshomaru's hold does not even falter. "There...is much to discuss, little brother. Not now, but soon, though. This Sesshomaru is taking you to the palace where you will be warm and well-fed until you turn back into your natural form, then we will speak. Nothing shall harm you until then, I give you my word InuYasha." There it is again, in the back of Sesshomaru's mind. The face of his father, without disgust and disdain, promising, swearing on his oath, that the blood-feud between father and son was over.

The bitter twinge of panic, again, started emanating, the adrenaline cancelling out the demon lord's calming scent that removes his dead father's face from his mind's eye. But, Sesshomaru knows the reaction his half-brother will inevitably have when InuYasha replies with, "Not there. I don't like the idea of being demon food. Leave me in the woods until dawn, then you can fuckin' talk until your armor rusts for all I care." Making his sore throat work, Inuyasha tries in earnest to get his arms free from the tail wrapped around him. He knows what's coming, or at least he has a pretty damn good idea. Something like: "Ungrateful half-breed!" or "I offer you warmth and you reject it, little brother? How very unworthy you are to carry father's blood." Or even something more cunning: "I would gladly trade you a night of warmth for Tetsuaiga if you are undecided."

His hands and feet are tingling as he prepares for the drop. Instead:

"This Sesshomaru will not leave you in the woods. It is winter, and you will freeze to death if I leave you in the wilds again. Hn." He glances down at the human with that mask of calm aloof," and my armor is made of demon bone and steel, handed down by our father. It will not rust, no matter how much you need to spew profanities and nonsense, or even how long I speak."


Hesitantly, his pulse thudding in his ears,"I won't die in the woods. I've survived worse... Sesshomaru, I can't go there like this. It would be signing my own death warrant." Idiotically, InuYasha sees the irony in all this—asking his brother to abandon him in the present day time when the first time he was discarded like trash nearly destroyed him. The first time he'd come across Sesshomaru, the demon lord had sneered at him, deserted him, belittled him as a curse upon the name of Inu no Taisho... The child in him that had wanted, needed family, never recovered from that first encounter; it had set the stage for the rest of his life.

"I will make it safe for you, InuYasha."

Something in the younger boy's chest gave a massive lurch while his thought reaffirmed suspicion: Warning. Warning. Warning. This is not the guy that shoved his poison claw through your back.

And yet, he presses his face into his brother's neck again to keep Sesshomaru from witnessing his further degradation. InuYasha's pride will not allow him to let Sesshomaru see him choked up even if it was only some shape shifting demon trying to lure him into some trap or another. Like with the
Un-Mother, the tiny speck of hope, of his only remaining family accepting him or showing him some kind of compassion, within InuYasha could never make him a true skeptic. A realist, however, is another matter.

"I don't know what the trick is," he begins quietly, shakily, but knows his brother's superior hearing will pick his words out of the wind, "but you could just take the damn sword. We've almost killed each other over it for years, and that is not what our father wanted. I won't fight about it anymore, especially not tonight."

"This has nothing to do with Tetsusaiga, little brother." The demon lord replies close to the human's ear. His chest is hurting from the very true point about their father; he would be ashamed Sesshomaru used the Tetsuaiga as an excuse to fight—particularly after he learned the sword kept his brother from going insane and slaughtering everyone and everything in sight. However, in order to find the sword for his younger brother to defeat Naraku, he had no choice but to pull the pearl from his eyes and make InuYasha use the sword to its full abilities. Protecting those he cared about helped in shaping the hanyou for greatness, regardless of the tactics Sesshomaru used to drive him.

The younger sighs against Sesshomaru's neck, and the demon Lord shudders delicately.

"Then you obviously aren't my brother." Sesshomaru's chest tightens when he catches those words. "Or, this is about torturing me...you're too late though," finally, the scent starts to overcome him. Gingerly, InuYasha's body starts relaxing into his tail again. "Not much more anyone can do to me."

The minute he says it, the human wishes the words back because he realizes it isn't true. A sickening, gore-filled slideshow flashes through his mind for long agonizing seconds. Stewing in poison for a few days, slowly dying, disintegrating by inches; constant burning rods overlay scars and welts from the burn before it; long strokes of a poison whip cutting into the flesh of his back that attempts to draw out cries and pleas for mercy. He had even heard tale of male demons raping another male captive in the attempt to break a powerful spirit. Surely Sesshomaru must have some little sadistic torture chamber in his dungeon just waiting for the blood and pain of a fucking half-breed stain on the glorious name of the Inu no Taishou. The half-breed swallows thickly, waiting for his brother to make some sick innuendo alluding to a world of pain awaiting him in the Western Palace. In his human condition, there would be no way to escape or fight. As a hanyou, he stood little chance as it is.

The demon Lord's expression changes, unbeknownst to the boy nuzzled into his body. He does not reply but tightens his hold a little and presses his cheek into the top of the human's head, unknowingly conveying comfort. This is what the last five years of loneliness has wrought upon the younger; the fire and spirit gone. A shell of his former brother remains for Sesshomaru to attempt to salvage.

"I wish to do nothing to you, other than repay you for the service you have provided to the lands of our father," the Lord found himself saying without thought and emotion. His earlier slips, simple changes in his attitude, already had InuYasha's suspicions and mistrust. Rather, the demon lord's logical mind worked to find an acceptable reason that would fit the boy's image of him thus far. Revealing the truth about the council and The Great Trial would definitely have to wait. "There are no hidden plots to kill you or take our father's legacy, simply put, you are deserving of a reward for your sacrifice. I would do no less for any in my lands that put themselves at risk to fight for my empire." There, let that soothe the boy's pride and understandable reservations.

Not believing any of this for a minute, the human simply remains silent in the demon lord's half embrace. The fall would kill him and fighting is useless as he was; the only logical choice is to
wait for the Truth.

Never once (in his memory) has the hanyou been to the home of his father; the great palace of the Western Lands, Sesshomaru's home when he took over the title on the day of the hanyou's birth. Of course, InuYasha had heard multiple stories and descriptions from Myoga as well about some of his father's more famous battles near the borders. What he'd heard from the old flea did not prepare him for the fortress that appeared through the clouds.

Build into the mountain, the Western Palace was splendor and security in one foul swoop. Cut into the mountain-face, spanning the rock, the palace is protected with a combination of demon and human magic along with soldiers housed in the barracks carved at the base. Even in the dead of night, his human eyes could pick out the torches lit at the base and the top walkways and turrets with tall shadows moving along in a march. The haze, more than simple mist but magic that made even his human hackles rise, misted the rock face in an ethereal glow off the fire light.

Regardless, the banners of the Inu no Taishou splashed white and red against the dark rock and wood, interrupting the gleam off the balconies and turrets. It is a massive structure, and the human's dull eyes could still make out the intricacies and carvings of the palace in torch-light. He let out a small gasp in appreciation as some strange emotion welled up within him, replacing the dark premonition he had about the situation. Even if Sesshomaru had brought him into a trap, at least he can say he has finally seen the home of his father. The hanyou turned human realizes he can cope with what he believed would be his impending death now that he has finally laid eyes on a vital piece of his father, something just as substantial as the fang or the graveyard housed in his eye.

Sesshomaru's Ki cloud hovers before moving along the carved buttresses and few yet ornate balconies that line the outside, seemingly delicate with vines carved from stone by an expert hand. The curving wing of the royal family is his destination; his own room will suffice for the night. He has plenty of incense along with his natural Alpha scent to mask his brother's human aroma. Rin's natural smell in the room just down the hall would also help keep others from becoming suspicious. A mere glance down makes the demon lord catch a breath at the intense scrutiny on InuYasha's face. His brother, to Sesshomaru's knowledge, had not been back to the home of his ancestors since he was a mere babe in his mother's arms. Of course he would want to see his ancestral home in all its many splendors.

"When you return to your other form, this Sesshomaru will show you the home of our father,"

The human doesn't reply; he does not need to. The thumping of his heart, the distinct scent of curiosity and myriad of emotions tell Sesshomaru all he needs to know about his overwhelmed younger brother. The demon lord merely lets his feet touch down on the top of the balcony outside his personal quarters and allows the cloud to dissipate with the rest of the mist. He gingerly lowers the human to stand (watching carefully in case weakness from malnutrition would make maintaining gravity difficult) while his tail limply uncurls. He faces his younger brother, an arm's width apart, without striking for the first time in over one hundred and fifty years... On general reaction, the lord very nearly strikes out in habit. His muscles even tense for a blow before he reins himself and his control back. Arms deceptively loose at his sides, he merely waits for the eventual blow-up.

InuYasha feels the warmth fall away, and the cold stone beneath his bare feet reminds him how cold he was only a short while ago. While the carved balcony is big enough for both them to stand on with room to move around (and to maneuver should he need to), he is also reminded how much taller Sesshomaru is than him in his human form. He is literally chest height, the top of his head meeting the lowest spikes on his brother's armor. Yet, the human feels better on his feet and facing
"A hundred years before I was sealed to a tree, I defended the people of the Western Lands," InuYasha starts now that he is not hundreds of feet in midair. "You didn't come for me then or during the times I almost got killed by Naraku or even after he was dead." The human's rusty voice is warming up with a spark of his old self, "so I cannot help but wonder why the hell you would bother now. Not that I'm incredibly ungrateful for the bonds of fraternal support thus far." This time, he gives Sesshomaru the full weight of a violet-eyed stare—eyes so very familiar.

The ghost of Izayoi snakes up in the demon lord's memory for only a few seconds and then dissipates.

"Haven't you learned anything about fate in your time, little brother?" The demon lord answers instead, "At times, some events must unfold as the universe deems it time to be so. Now is the time this Sesshomaru returns from the brink of war to our lands and find you have taken up my duty as lord. Never before have you bothered with the peasantry of this land other than for your own engagement or means." The demon lord sweeps closer to his brother and even bends at the waist to put them eye level. "Little brother, the time is right."

InuYasha pauses, looking directly in his brother's golden gaze as Miroku-esque sentiments surprise the hanyou. "It is the will of the universe, InuYasha, to dictate when the time is right..."

Nostalgia rises up in his chest as a sense of déjà vu overtakes the emotionally-susceptible human. He actually has to glance away, folding his arms in his haori sleeves, and looking out of the balcony into the night.

"Only because you say, right Sesshomaru? You say you are going to do the honorable thing after all this time? Does it really matter why I went and helped people out? Never did before, when we were on the road to killing Naraku. Why now?"

"I have already told you why, little brother. You are welcome to enter my home with warmth and safety." InuYasha glances over his shoulder to see the balcony door is open by the flat of Sesshomaru's hand.

"You swear—"

"This Sesshomaru swore you would come to no harm while in his care. I will swear it even now. On my honor as the ruler of the Western Lands, you will not be harmed by this Sesshomaru or any under his rule."

Fists clench as the human makes a split second decision. Even if is brother is telling an elaborate lie or if torture waits for him, it wouldn't matter in the long run. No one would mourn him anyway, not anymore.

~~~ (poor Inu...)~~~

Sesshomaru's suite of rooms is incredibly not what InuYasha would have expected. No torture tables or enemies roasting over the big, open fire, hell, not even a head on a pike or a case full of trophies from winning fights. This could have been a normal office and meeting room. The rough stone floor has several animal pelts spread around for warmth, a small table and three chairs set off to one side for private meetings and a large, solid oak desk (carved from a demon tree, the hanyou could feel the demonic aura even as a human; must have been a helluva tree) lines against one wall closest to the door. The fireplace, nearly as tall as he was, is burning intently with a pile wood that does not seem to ash away. Above the great fireplace is the clearest look InuYasha has ever seen of the demon of nightmares, the aristocratic assassin.
his father's face. The half-frozen young man simply stares up at it, not moving.

The Inu no Taisho stands with regal grace in his full armor and two tails; the three swords all have a place in his obi. InuYasha absorbs all the details, from the length of his father's hair (worn in a traditional top knot) to the demon markings on his cheeks to each piece of armor to the sword hilts at his waist. His father's eyes, golden like his and Sesshomaru's, are painted with cold intent and the merest hint of a snarl making his upper lip curl and the fangs bared on one side of his mouth. It was his father preparing for war. Even without knowing for certain, InuYasha feels it through the paint—his father's demonic battle aura is so powerful it permeates, transcends time. His heart stutters again but for a completely different reason.

"He was the most revered ruler of our bloodline," Sesshomaru says from InuYasha's right; the human didn't even hear him move. With the shadows thrown from the fire, Sesshomaru looks so very different; only half his face is visible—one golden eye glints. "When I took over the responsibilities, war broke out all over the lands." InuYasha glances at his brother's face, but the demon lord is looking at the painting. "I did not take the title, 'Inu no Taisho,' for that was his title and no other could fulfill his place. I am simply Lord of the Western Lands."

Test three: "So, this is him? The father that died so I could live?" The human blinks up at the portrait, already aware of the shape of his father's face, and waits patiently for Sesshomaru to strike out in a ridiculously fast motion that he wouldn't even see coming. Only talk of their mutual father could get Sesshomaru riled up. Just point out the obvious primary reason why his brother hates him will soon incite a riot of epic proportion.

A pause, InuYasha shifts his weight.

"Yes, little brother. This is the man that gave his life for you and your mother to live. The stories of his power and prowess are somewhat under-rated. Some time perhaps, we shall discuss the best ones should you desire to hear them. I highly doubt Myoga has given you anything of substance and fact."

Nothing. Not even the twinge of a hand. InuYasha is almost disappointed at the lack of response, but he watches closely as Sesshomaru moves to the small table and gestures to several covered dishes. "This Sesshomaru did have a meal prepared for you as well as tea. Will you join me InuYasha?" The demon lord seems to flow like wind as he settles on the side closest to the door and begins to set up a for real tea ceremony. InuYasha had never been one to prepare a tea ceremony and had only been invited to one (that his mother performed for the Elder men of her clan). He had witnessed the tea ceremony performed numerous times in human and demon society alike—both in the ro and furo seasons—and Sesshomaru, as a host and political leader without a female mate, would certainly know how to perform the tea ceremony...but, for him...? The tea ceremony symbolizes warm reception and respect for honored guests (or so the half-demon had interpreted it). This evening seems to be going beyond strange.

Gingerly, the human lowers himself to sit across the table from his brother, who is diligently pouring powdered tea into the two dainty cups and using the whip brush to stir the tea. Sesshomaru's expression does not change while he finishes and pours the tea into each cup. Just from watching the upper class, InuYasha knows how to pick up the tea cup and hold it using both hands. However, he is not fooled. As his brother raises the cup and drinks, InuYasha watches his throat to make sure he swallows before allowing the tiniest sip to pass through his cold lips and make a trace through his body. The demonic lord would not suffer from most poisons, so InuYasha is screwed if the tea or food is indeed fatal anyway. He drinks deeply, enjoying the warmth spreading through him.
The two share an uncomfortable silence while a second serving of tea is poured and enjoyed. Without a word, Sesshomaru slides a covered platter to the center of the table and lifts the lid. Underneath is, piping-hot, bowl of noodles, sides of beef, chicken, pork, vegetables, and rice. On smaller plates are delicate, speckled eggs and various fruits he had never before seen (which is absurd, the half-demon had traveled in the wilds all over the island and had—or so he thought—seen every kind of fruit the Western Lands had to offer). He sees the yellowish fruit and the scent, seemingly acidic, is still appetizing.

The large platter and all those appetizing little plates are pushed toward the younger, "Eat your fill, little brother."

That is all he needs. His human fingers can work chopsticks just fine.

InuYasha eats slower than he would have in the wilds or with his old pack. Partially, he is still recovering from almost freezing to death, and his hands still hurt from the cold. The other reason is that some part of him recoils at being called a 'filthy mongrel' or an 'uncouth beast' by his perfectly mannered older brother. As the old days before the Jewel, he had returned to the scavenger mentality: *eat it before something else does*. But why irritate Sesshomaru unnecessarily by eating like he's starving (even though he is)? Besides, if the food is poisoned, eating slower will just give it time to work—or so the exhausted human thinks to himself. He munches on some meat while his brother stands from the table and moves to light some incense by the altar on the mantle that rests under their father's portrait. It gives the hanyou time to integrate the events that have happened thus far as well as time to study the adjoining rooms.

Very different than the human homes and mansions he has seen (especially when Miroku suddenly 'felt' the presence of dangerous spirits at the most luxurious house in the village they happened to be passing through), his brother's room are not made with shoji (sliding doors) and tatami (padded flooring) of traditional and wealthy homes. Rather, the stone ceilings are taller than most human dwellings, the stone floors covered with carefully and beautifully woven mats of demon spider silk, and large, thick wooden doors (held to the stone by iron hinges) cover the entrances to the other rooms. Several chairs in a semi-circle around the fireplace are not floor seating but are heavily padded seats. This room itself, seemingly the demon lord's private audience room, is larger than most peasant homes.

And Sesshomaru...The demon lord stands by the altar and stares up at the portrait, apparently lost in his own thoughts. With impeccable poise, his brother hasn't physically changed, ramrod straight spine, flowing white and red robes under the armor. However, something other than physical is different. The air of constant danger, anger, and revulsion isn't so obvious in the lord's demeanor. Usually, the younger's hackles are always up when his brother makes an appearance; usually, he suspects claws in his back at every turn; usually, he suspects deception since the Un-Mother episode. That incident still makes his anger rise, but the human simply eats the free food.

From out of nowhere, the demon lord finally has a strike of brilliance; one that will give him ample time to plan and prepare for the Truth to come out. It will even give him plenty of time before his brother's next birthday when the Elders dictated InuYasha be brought before them.

"Pray tell, little brother, what it will take to make you take up the Tetsuaiga again?" The tone is vaguely bored, but the message anything but.

Looking at his brother's empty expression turned to their father's image, InuYasha is at a loss. "Take up the Tetsuaiga again'? I'm not dead here, Sesshomaru. I *am* alive, and I have been taking up the fang." Is this yet another indication of a shape-shifter?

Finally, the demon lord turns his gaze, and the eyes are calling him a liar. "This is no joking
matter, InuYasha. Answer the question I have set before you. What will it take to make you fight once again?"

After a second of silence, the human sets his chopsticks down, "I thought that's why you brought me here, because I'm fighting in the Western Lands—kicking ass and not taking names."

"Your human morals and the effect the strangely-dressed miko has had upon you are what drive you to fight, InuYasha." The demon lord picks up one of the furs over his chair and strides forward to lay it across his brother's shoulders, not caring at all for the slightly blue tint still on the human's lips. He takes up his seat across the table from his brother once more, "what will it take for you and the sake of your own honor to take up the Tetsuaiga for a cause?"

The human blinks, unconsciously adjusting the fur around the still-numb parts of his body, "I suppose a cause I can believe in would make me fight," he states hesitantly. He does not mention a pack would make him fight again; as far as he is concerned, he would no longer take any (weak or strong) along his life's path. Not when it is fraught with violence, prejudice, and hatred for his dirty blood.

"Hn, and what if this Sesshomaru asks you to take up your sword and fight at my side against the enemies that threaten our lands, even threaten the little human village you constantly return to? Would that be reason enough for you to truly fight as you did against the villain Naraku?"

Speechless? Him? Is his older brother, the one that named InuYasha the dirt to their bloodline, actually asking for help? Wait, maybe pigs are flying and hell has frozen over. Maybe he just missed out on his own death or the end of the world.

Instead, the human counters with a question of his own, "and why would you ask for my help of all people? You're the most powerful demon in Japan, and you wouldn't lower yourself to ask me, the tainted, bastard half-brother, to help you if the damn invaders were knocking down your door. So, I suppose it's a useless point, eh big brother?"

At this, the demon lord stares him down with something feral in his golden eyes; a feral look InuYasha has seen before and knows to fear. It's the look Sesshomaru gets when he is about to attack because his honor has been besmirched. It's the poison claw to the face look. However, the human doesn't look away; he is still bound and determined to face death at his brother's hand head-on if that is what fate truly has in store.

"This Sesshomaru would ask for your aid on two conditions," the demon lord finally replies rather than attack, "one is if I have witnessed, with my own eyes, that you have brought honor to our bloodline through battle or sacrifice. The second is if I truly believe you to be mature enough to stand at my side, brothers united, in the times of war. You have fought battles, InuYasha, do not mistake one-on-one combat or confrontations with the demons hidden within Naraku as warfare." The grave air sobers the human. Sesshomaru is serious... His brother is asking for his sword.

"And...one of two of these condition has been met, I take it?" The human hedges, "Are you asking me to fight with you, Sesshomaru?"

The demon lord affirms with a short nod. "This Sesshomaru asks if you, the hanyou son of our great father, will take up his sword and fight to defend his lands."

"And after? Do I get a swift and painless death?" Bitterness twinges the tone of his voice.

"Stupid hanyou. Do you honestly believe it would take this Sesshomaru, the Killing Perfection, more than one hundred and fifty years to kill an enemy?" Even saying his much is the demon lord
going against the Elder council. He keeps himself from saying more.

But, the hanyou's eyes widen at the revelation. Sesshomaru does not have to spell it out for him anymore than he already has. Good point. He's had me more than once. I've always wondered why he didn't bother to kill me when I was a kid or when I was at my weakest before I got the Tetsuaiga. Hell, even after I got the damn sword, he didn't make the final strike... I-I couldn't dare to believe he felt anything but hatred... There's more to the story than I'm getting...

"Now answer the question little brother. Will you stay the night and leave once your time of weakness is over? Or, will you stay and fight at this Sesshomaru's side for all that our father fought to gain?"

InuYasha stares his brother down for long moments, years of abandonment and shame his brother wrought upon him wars with the tiny part that wants almost craves the acceptance of his only living family. For long moments, the human side and the demon side of the hanyou argue loudly in his subconscious—both making adequate points as to why he should or should not accept his brother's proposal. But, in the end, it is the hanyou that must have the final say. With a deep breath and narrowed eyes, InuYasha voices his decision.

Chapter End Notes

Somewhere along the line, I great to love this pairing ;) I hope you review
The demon lord's aura pulsates with displeasure. His lower regions churn with the bile of anger, anger that he is not so quick to dismiss. Long years of ingrained reactions is the deciding factor in his next move—ironically, he relocates faster than the human eye can track and takes his human little brother by the throat. A credit to his control is that the half-breed's toes are barely, yet still, scraping the ground. Moreover, his claws are not emitting deadly clouds of P.O.I.S.O.N [by Hella], and blood is not staining his hands nor InuYasha's neck.

If he hadn't been so angry, he might have given himself some credit.

Even though the demon lord has unwillingly hunted the half-breed, he is still the first son—pureblood and high monarch of the West. He is somewhat accustomed to InuYasha's brash bragging and profanity—but THIS is another matter outright. Few dared disrespect him or his noble bloodline, and those that dared met their untimely end. InuYasha's answer, however, touched a nerve the demon lord didn't realize existed. The reverberations echo through his bi-ped form, right up his spine. He had expected, prepared for a flat-out refusal. Not this:

*Our father died so my mother could escape certain death. I'll fight for his lands and his people to repay that debt, but I won't fight beside you. The bastard that's hunted me my whole life? Not fucking likely, Sesshomaru. Give me the time and place the attack starts, I'll be there.*

This infuriated the demon lord.

Angered him as only InuYasha can do.

The bonds and boundaries he has worked so long to place on his inner yokai are perilously close to bending. His skin feels too tight, hot, and itchy; the prickling in his lower gums is elongating fangs that are too long and sharp for his bi-ped jaw size. Even his claws are longer, sharper, than normal but still do not break frail human skin. The vibrations in his abdomen are not comforting, soothing noises—but warning growls of his heightening anger. The growls drown out the human's attempt at filling his lungs and the choking noises as he tries to make his throat work against the hand holding his weight.

Test four: Sesshomaru, pissy-ass, icy bastard... identity confirmed. Few had this kind of choke hold, just the right amount of pressure to keep from crushing his windpipe.

This thought inanely passes through InuYasha's mind as his vision starts to blur from suffocation.

Deciding factor: even red-eyed, growling, and radiating 'seriously pissed-off' vibes, the bastard's cold expression hasn't changed in the slightest. He has just as much disdain and distaste in that
stony face as always. Sentiments and family bonding be fucking damned. His bastard brother didn't mean a word of it. Protect him? Make it safe? Feed him? Warm him? Lies, all lies. Stupid untruths to lure him into a false sense of security—to let his guard down so the fucking son of a mangy, flea-bitten, poxy *bitch* could one-up him. The whole thing was about his death AND the sword after all.

Spots and gray edges.

Out of some instinctual move to survive, the human's hand goes from uselessly clawing at the demon's with blunt nails to the small bag in his haori.

"Let me test my understanding," the voice borders on animalistic—more garbled and baritone than human. "You would fight for the land, our father's legacy, yet not at my side? Your own blood?"

The hand tightens juuust an inth more, and the windpipe under his hand creaks painfully.

"While *I* fought beside you against Sou'ung, against an undead army, against Naraku, against your own tainted blood, and this! This is how you repay me..."

*Tainted.* He catches Sesshomaru's voice fading in and out.

The fangs pulse as the human's world tunnels, spirals to the face of the demon that will eventually be his conveyance to the underworld. Heart pound erratically in his ears, lungs burning with the need to breath, fingertips and nose numbing. Well, fuck. He'd already decided not to make it easy—he would not die dangling like helpless meat.

*Tainted.* That's all he needs to know.

*Fuck you too asshole,* with one hand—he flicks the stink pellet at Sesshomaru's feet.

The inaudible snap fills the hairsbreadth of space with the *putrid* scents. The glands of several skunks, the arousal scent of stinking cat demons in heat, the rank leavings of a rotted bear demon, snow monkey piss, rotting fish, even hints of multiple excrements invade the demon lord's highly sensitive nose. He does not flinch even though the immediate change in scent gives him an instantaneous headache, right above his right ear. However, the abrupt change does calm him anger somewhat; he snaps back into himself to realize what he has done and how conditioned responses might have ruined everything before it really even began. He drops his brother, noting the blue tint to his lips that is not an effect of the cold.

*Drop, duck, roll to the balls of his feet, out of the smoke.* Still dizzy and partially conscious, the human tries to make the motion as manly and smooth as possible—less scramble, more finesse. Covering nose and mouth with his sleeve, he manages to get out from the cloud with watering eyes as he stumbles forward. *Damn things are worse than I remember.*

The lack of air is effecting his human form; his balance is off, yet a split-second decision—door or balcony—gives him intense pause for crucial moments while the future possibilities of both options range from an realistic climb thousands of feet to waiting soldiers below or to try sneaking his way through the monstrosity of a castle just crawling with full demons that would scent him in less than two seconds. *Well, damn.* The climb, he would at least have a chance of staying to the shadows without the moon's light and his scent might be carried off in a down wind. The heat of a pissed off demon aura is enough to make him choose the lesser evil: balcony door is closest.

Decision made, the hanyou stumbles out on the balcony. He looks down, breath already puffing in the frigid air—a clean breathe after that damn pellet. He looks down for a few seconds to see the long, long, looooong fall in shadows and rocks. However, the temporary human is confident he can make it to the ground (or so he hopes). InuYasha swings a leg over the railing, gets his
precarious balance on a mini-ledge and swings the other. Carefully, he bends down to grab one of
the stone spindles and lets his feet find purchase on the base below. His eyes at foot level, he sees
Sesshomaru's boots still in the stench cloud but he just steels himself for the climb and begins his
descent.

Yao Xin pauses at the rank odor floating down the hall from the family wing of the castle. He is
sitting at the servants' game room just beyond the grand staircase (an old maneuver by the royalty
—to hide their scent and personal rooms from invaders or unwanted visitors). He has removed his
armor and formal garments in preparation for bedtime. Yet, knowing him, a game of Go and a stiff
flask of sake would be just what the healer ordered to send off to a nice, dreamless sleep. Of
course, unless something unforeseen would just suddenly strike out of nowhere while he has no
weapons and feels like a woman in a yukata. Of course the damn Northern bastards would dare to
invade the castle of the West.

Xin's hand pulls back from the tile he was about to move. The game, as far as he is concerned, is
on pause. The advisor looks up at the resident healer across the board, "what in the Seven hells...?"

The fox healer also looks up from the game as he finally gets a whiff of the horrific stench, "Damn
Xin, what the hell have you been eating lately?" It took the fox's weak senses a little longer to
detect the foulness.

Yao Xin's eyes narrow, fingering his fu Manchu, "That's not me, fool," he curses lightly and stands
from the board. "I fear our mighty sovereign might be having some issues."

Armor clangs from the main staircase, and both men watch as armed soldiers nearly fly past the
door. Iron and steel glint in the torch light. Both men can guess where the handful of demons are
heading.

"Fool? I was killing dogs before you were spawned, foreigner," the old fox replies in mock
severity, tail whipping back and forth as he tries to scent something associated with the stench
other than vomit. "Are we being invaded by rotting meat and skunks' asses?"

Yao Xin sighs, little brother Plan A seems not to be going well. "Keep the sake warm Shin, it
seems—"

"The hell I will," the fox replies; he already has his little woven bag over his shoulders. "Our Lord
might be killing someone by now. Can't miss that, can I? It's always so entertaining to watch a
bastard squirm in that acid whip." This last spoken as the fox heads out the door first.

Xin, mouth agape, glances back at the board, moves his piece, takes one of the fox's tiles, and
hurries after him.

The Lord of the West allows himself a moment to calm while holding his breath in the stink cloud.
However, the damage has already been done; his sense of smell drives his brain into an overdrive
of pain. Too many different, disgusting aromas for his brain to differentiate—even the mild scent
of the humans that gathered such abominations in one small pellet are linger in his brain. Too
many to interpret; he must give his younger brother a point. The attack is somewhat effective and
explains how the whelp survived his human night all these years (especially the nights Sesshomaru
was not able to watch over him).

His tail rises and swipes to and fro quickly to dissipate the worst of the cloud (so he can at least see
if not scent). His vision clears of smog, and the incense slightly permeates the rancid odor. The
demon lord takes a single, shallow breath and holds it again—scanning for his human sibling with
eyes rather than nose. As he expects, the younger is not visible but probably hiding in the shadows
since the demon lord's most powerful sense is hindered. The lord's stony face moves slightly in displeasure. Repay a debt; fight for father's legacy to repay his life—something their father did unselfishly, out of love for both mother and son.

InuYasha would continue to protect tamed demons, prejudice humans, the weaklings that hated hanyous, but would not fight at the side of his brother? After all this Sesshomaru has gone through for that cur—given up two hundred years, put his honor and the honor of their family on the line, fought for his freedom, given up an arm, given up pride, given consideration and—of all things—worry. All for the half breed. And this—his repayment in kind.

He already realizes how close he is to losing control; his hands and feet are now tingling in anticipation of paws. He focuses on calming down again—I am like ripples in the water, I am like the wind flowing through the sakura blossoms...

Images of his own trial interject into calming mental scenes; he recalls his own suspicion and denial of his father's seemingly honorable intentions at the close of his own Great Trial (a half smirk lifts the corners of his mouth as, in this same room, four hundred years in the past, he had been on the verge of murder). Trust is never easy to gain—impossible once it has been broken. Of course his brother would be no different, or even more suspicious after two centuries of his own trials and tribulations. Betrayal, deceit, and loss had haunted the boy around every corner and in the gleam of every eye.

Damn. He has reverted to his old ways automatically. Perhaps this Sesshomaru, as much as InuYasha, would have to adjust to the change. Briefly, as he strides around the room to check hiding places, Sesshomaru wonders if Touga, the Inu no Taisho had found himself also attempting to rein in long-honed reactions—had his father come close to striking out at Sesshomaru out of habit? Did he fight with himself and his ingrained instinctual responses to draw the blood of his son? Had he simply been able to put all the past pain and bloodshed go?

Huffing breath.

Pounding feet.

Clinking armor.

The demon lord moves to the main door before his men even reach it—opens it himself with extreme pleasure radiating. The soldiers—an assortment of bi-ped, half-animal, and full animal forms—take position in the hallway, weapons at the ready. The form two lines, the first dropping to their knees in lunging position to have the first attack.

"My Lord!" The lizard on the end calls in question, waiting for him to move for the target to show itself and the attack to begin.

Sesshomaru's aura calms down an iota. "This is not an attack, an intruder is not in my chambers. Return to your posts." His deadly calm tone bodes ill for anyone not listening; the poison dripping from his claws is a deterrent for any that wish to keep body parts in tact.

In their wake, Yao Xin and Kenshin, resident fox healer, wait for the hallway to clear out and their Lord to acknowledge them. He does not even raise an eyebrow in their direction but turns to let his poison work at taking care of the still-lingering scent before the whole standing army makes its way to his private door. The lord may not have nodded to them, but he leaves the door open and both take it as an invitation to enter.

Kenshin, shorter and just as broad as the elemental demon, is no young kit. His hair and tail are
streaked with gray and white, blood and bone, to show his age. He is a squarely built fox, very
different than normal willowy, thin-boned fox structures. His face is broad with squared jaw, red
and white fox markings...and three claw-mark scars splitting from above his eyebrow to mid-cheek.
The yellowish eye is left unscathed.

"Milord? Do you require medical attention?" The fox asks, unimpressed with the scorching aura
surrounding the dog lord—irritation and...fear? concern? In matters of health and safety, Kenshin
throws the rules of decorum to the figurative wolves. He matches Sesshomaru's path around the
sitting room, wondering what the hell is lord is looking for.

"Do not be ridiculous," the lord snaps, "this Sesshomaru can not be harmed by such a pitiful
attack." The golden eyes are still seeking nooks and shadowy corners around the scroll shelf, under
his desk.

"And Lord—ahem—Master InuYasha?" Xin counters, earning a look from the fox. The foreigner
has a moment of supremacy—*he* knew about the younger brother's return.

"Shin, how are your skills with humans?" The lord answers with another question.

"I am well-versed in demon and human anatomy sire! Same basic parts in both, human are just a
bit more squishy on the outside is all."

"Excellent," the demon lord replies absent while Xin coughs to cover up a snicker.

A noise draws Sesshomaru's attention—the creak of the balcony doors. *Surely he would not have attempted*...not from thousands of feet...on the moonless night...damn.

Leaving his two most trusted advisors in his study, he is outside on the balcony in a heartbeat,
leaning over the railing to scan for a flash of red. The air outside is cleaner, clearer, and the wind is
in his favor. The crisp night breeze and softly falling snow clears his aching head; the demon lord
snorts to rid himself of the previous residue. He takes in a cleansing breath.

*There you are little brother*

Sixty hands below, the light scent of human blood, sweat, and adrenaline. His brother has climbed
at a wicked pace for a human trying to hold onto stone without claws. Even better—the soldiers at
ground level patrolling the main bridge to the castle have apparently also spotted the climbing
hanyou—not clearly—but with assumption of an intruder attempting to penetrate the family wing.

Less than a few seconds after he has leaned over the balcony, flaming arrows sail through the dark
night and light up the shadows around InuYasha. Stony-faced, Sesshomaru's chest tightens as two
come mortally close to the human's right hand. Sesshomaru's youkai burst, a wave of painful
vibration leaves him in a tidal wave, rippling out in all directions. The men behind him back away
as his power makes their teeth chatter and knees weak in the *need* to submit to this powerful Alpha.
The Ki cloud forms under his feet as the backlash becomes absolute: military, servants, and guests
all over the castle kneel and bare their throats. The arrows stop as the soldiers on the ground
submit, throwing down swords, axes, wicked curved blades, bo staffs, and other weapons.

On his cloud, Sesshomaru throws his head back, draws in a *deep* breath, and lets loose a howl that
would make every man, woman, and child for twenty miles stand on end. The throaty call is an
order for all those under his rule to stand the *fuck* down. His battle aura will not be denied.

Order restored, his cloud descends. InuYasha is the only one still moving—the only one that has
not submitted. The human is still far from the ground, blood on his fingers and feet from the rough,
rocky exterior. One mis-step, one slip, would be the end of him. How the boy has managed to cling to the carved stone is beyond the lord, who has always had claws for ripping, tearing, and climbing. His brother has no means of defense, only his wits and cunning. This truth makes the demon lord feel pangs of something akin to guilt for the initial attack.

Hovering in mid-air, he prepares to swallow his pride...for the second time in his entire life.

"Now why the hell didn't you just let 'em kill me," the huffing human doesn't bother to pause even though he can feel Sesshomaru's aura at his back. "It woulda saved your lordly ass from getting tainted blood all over that pristine get-up."

He isn't going to let his fear of falling, his fear of dying, or his fear of being alone be sniffed out by the bastard. It is bad enough Sesshomaru can probably tell his human body is starting to wear down; arms are aching, teeth chattering, hands bleeding, legs trembling—all in the strain to keep himself from falling, to keep clinging to the intricately carved seam running the length of the castle. Actually, focusing on the climb has cleared his head a bit—given the human a little bit of perspective. Should he keep his pride and fight for his life, who would be there to wait for him, to welcome him home? What's the purpose behind it all anyway?

"You offended me," the demon lord replies mildly, "I am unused to anyone refusing me. I reacted out of anger and dishonorably attacked you."

The human doesn't even pause or look at the demon lord in his descent, but Sesshomaru keeps pace with him. "Angry, huh? Did you strain something admitting to that you frigid asshole?"

The other lets out an imperceptible sigh, one the human's ears do not catch. "No, I did not, little brother. Few care about the feelings of their monarch as long as they are fed when they starve, saved when attacked, and not taxed when they are already impoverished." The bloody fingers leave a mark on the stone.

"The fate of the honorable ruler," the hanyou sneers, "power comes with responsibility, bastard, haven't you figured that out yet?"

*More than you shall ever know, little brother*

"I have known this since the day you were born, and I had to become Lord of the West at four hundred and fifty years old." The tone is bland, but something about what Sesshomaru said makes the younger brother pause in his climb. "Which is why I ask for your aid, InuYasha."

"I said I would damn well fight!" The human snarls between breaths, "Give me a fucking time and place and I'll be there. I won't fight beside you. Remember Sou'ung? Remember fighting back-to-back? Remember fighting Naraku? It always happens that way. You screw me, you get me hurt, or you get in my way."

"Or you get in mine," the demon lord comes back mildly, "it is a mutual problem with two combatants that do not often fight together against a common enemy." The night air snarls his hair in the same way as it had the night when he put The Great Trial aside to help his brother overcome their father's deadliest weapon.

*You're in my way!*

The night stands between the two brothers, Sesshomaru hovering on his cloud and InuYasha standing on the little ledge with mere centimeters between him and death. "Look," the human's soft voice is carried to his brother by the wind, "this is a crazy, complex plot. Why don't you just wait
until my strength gives out, I fall, and you can just take the damn sword if killing me like this offends your honor somehow. You have demon magic—you can find a way around the fricking barrier. But this—this bullshit is beneath us both."

The lord sighs, "this is not about the Tetsuaiga, little brother—"

InuYasha actually laughs, a twisted mockery of humor, that holds no mirth but years of pent up bitterness and betrayal; the sound sets off warning bells in the lord's head. The hysterical pitch to the sound has an edge of insanity that worries the demon lord in an instant. Unconsciously, his little cloud inches closer.

"You save me to try to kill me. You want to use me for the power of the sword when I've got nothing, have had nothing for most of my life." Another of these dangerously contorted laughs. "What else is there for me? Not you, not family, no Kagome, no Kikyo, no jewel, not even fucking Naraku...what the fuck is left for me but lies?"

The human turns on his tiny ledge, and Sesshomaru can finally scent well enough to discern despair.

The bloody fingertips release the carvings—his balance precarious as they stare at one another from less than six feet apart and only the wind between them.

"A war? A fight? You want the stain in your bloodline, the miserable, filthy cur to help you? I'm weak and pathetic and tainted—remember?" For the first time since the battle of his life ended and Kagome left him, the inuhanyou feels like he is thinking clearly. The dark abyss he has been staring into these last five years has been countless centuries of loneliness and anguish looming before him. Hanyous could live as long as demons if they survived that long—but who would want to live so long alone without the warmth of others to share one's life? What's the point?

"Do you honestly believe this, InuYasha?" The demon lord finally asks with the same gentled tone from their journey to this massive castle. "Do you believe you would have ever been able to wield the Tetsuaiga had you not been worthy of it?"

Violet eyes, raw with old hurts, just watch.

"For some time, this Sesshomaru has watched you grow into power, learn control, master yourself and adapt to your surroundings. You have selflessly given your blood and Strength (for ajjsunhawk ^_^ ) to protect those that are weaker...You have proven much in the last few years." Not yet, the demon lord realizes after seeing the layers of buried emotions under the sheen of violet eyes; this human night finally allows the older sibling to see the debts of pain the younger covers with brash boldness. Some of these old wounds must be dealt with before the Truth can come out. His sense of smell has returned in force, and he understands now that his little brother is a hairsbreadth away from madness—the recognition of all the signs comes just in time. Where has the former fire gone? Why has his brother not fought back with a vengeance? Where is the extended oration of profanity and insults? This adversely different version of InuYasha (combined with his body language, his eyes, and his scent) indicate that his younger brother has reached some limit of tolerance for the world that shows him little else but tragedy.

The human is obviously read to step off the ledge at the slightest provocation.

"This Sesshomaru has many regrets in his life InuYasha, I have many regrets," he does not hesitate to admit this personal flaw, nor does he choke on these bitter words. The chip in his exterior widens to a small gap. The demon lord cannot let his mask keep him from his brother any longer; his honor is not worth InuYasha's life. "Many, many regrets when it comes to you—" that I could not
"I should not have let Jaken convince me to use the UnMother. I should not have ripped the black pearl from your eye. I should not have tried to take Tetsuiga. I should not have degraded you, my only kin in this world, when I have seen with my own eyes how you have proven your worth regardless of your human blood." Too far, the demon lord pauses to breathe, stops himself before he goes any farther. His cloud, however, inches a little closer to the trembling human. "I have not tried to kill you, honestly tried, in six years, little brother. Yet—indifference is sometimes worse than conflict."

The human's eyes slide from his brother's stony face and back to the ground—gauging everything.

"This Sesshomaru should have come for you long before now. However, my enemies have been closing in for some time. They lie in wait near the borders of this land in the sea. I can no longer ignore them and have been watching them. Thus, I have not come for you until now."

The cold is settling in the human's very bones yet again; the demon lord can see this without looking too closely. The lips are no longer slightly pink but tinted blue yet again. He wants to get the boy out of this wind and reaches out a striped hand. "You will freeze if we stay out longer. Come and I will tell you the situation as I know it."

The human's violet eyes harden, "How do I know all this is true?" The scratchy voice is accompanied by the coppery scent of blood, left over from the strain the demon lord had put on the windpipe. "You're talking around something, you bastard. There's no way you would changed two hundred years worth of hate this fast, so why don't you tell me what is really going on here?"

The demon lords sighs, "there is much happening—"

"What aren't you telling me? This is about more than impending war, Sesshomaru."

"Indeed, it is, little brother. However, as I said, now is not the time. Soon though, I will be able to tell you the whole story."

The swaying human remains silent, distrusting. His balance is precarious on the ledge.

"You have no reason to believe or to trust in me. That is understandable." He pauses, the politician section of his brain works frantically to come up with some sort of acceptable answer, an agreeable compromise.

His quick thinking, however, is interrupted by the hanyou's mad laughter breaking the night as he purposely sways off the edge, throwing his weight forward to pitch into empty space. He would die.

Thought does not give him pause. Sesshomaru dives from his cloud to follow the plummeting human form through the frigid night. Dawn is still hours away, the human would not survive the fall, and the demon lord could not, would not allow his brother to die just when he could finally have him back again. Loosing InuYasha...this was is simply not acceptable.

Freezing wind rushes by the human, and he cannot help but embrace the feeling of utter freedom as the ground rushes closer. The frigid air screams past him, taking his fear of dying with it. Not once in the last five years has he felt this—not fighting to save humans, demons, or children, nor while wandering the open lands. He won't feel this in a war with Sesshomaru's enemies; he won't feel it in the next one hundred years of useless protection of humans that hate and despise him (ones that cannot even talk to him like a living being). He can finally stop all the pointless, meaningless living. Sure, he wanted to give Sesshomaru the final fight; he wanted to go out in a blaze of glory—to prove he was at least part of the great Inu no Taisho's bloodline with some
achievements. Yet, if Sesshomaru is just telling him what he wants to hear, rambling off some bullshit, then even that goal is pointless. His human blood would always color everything he tried to do. *Proved your worth regardless of your human blood, my ass.*

His humanity, the weakness in his blood, is going to be splattered all over the ground. The loneliness, the aimlessness of his existence is the same searing pain in his soul that started after his mother died will not be his future. If there is nothing of his own to protect, nothing of his own to fight for, then right here and right now he will make the choice to end it. Sesshomaru or those other bastard demons won't choose for him. Final epic battle be damned. Let Sesshomaru use the fucking Wind Scar to win his war.

On the ground, the thirty or so soldiers scramble, yell to one another. The falling red blur of the intruder is obviously the culprit trying to escape the Lord's wrath! Either that or the falling intruder is gearing up for some sort of aerial attack: a huge blast of demonic Ki, an explosive wave of power, a menagerie of weapons flying from the falling figure. The soldiers have seen multiple types of attacks and knew to prepare for anything.

The master of the third shift gate guards yells orders the second that blur jumps over the edge. In full armor, twenty demons scramble to separate corners of the front. The weapons hut is raided for extra quivers of arrows and shields. Metal clanging fills the air as ten arches hit one knee with bows drawn back, tense, ready to let fly. Another soldier darts from archer to archer with a torch to light the flaming projectiles. They wait the signal in order to avoid hitting Lord Sesshomaru.

The demon lord notices his men readying for an attack and puts on a burst of speed to catch up to his falling brother, the ground less than fifty feet from them. At this speed, his brother will hit in seconds and die. Fear, bitter on his tongue, alarms the demon lord for less than a second while his mind works on how to get to the human in time to avoid catastrophe. His tail unconsciously shoots out to cup the human while his arms curl around InuYasha's chest and abdomen. The human's face drowns in fluff, his back presses against muscle and metal: he is surrounded in demon lord. Yet, the cold air no longer seems to take his spirit with it.

The demon lord pulls up sharply as the ground comes into deadly distance. His heart actually hammers a little faster when the underside of his tail protecting the hanyou scrapes the ground. His tail smartens but he is not certain whether or not the human felt the near disaster. The fragile form could break so much easier than the hanyou... regardless, the healer is in his quarters anyway. He does not waste time landing or calling to the master of arms, but merely uses the momentum to drive them back skyward to climb the palace front back to his suite of rooms. The human's heart is pounding so hard against Sesshomaru's forearms, he fears it will burst out of his brother's chest. The body quivers, spasms in natural reaction to the excitement and possibility of a high-speed death, and the lungs creak with shuddering breaths.

Neither speak—InuYasha couldn't and Sesshomaru slightly fears he will make the situation even worse...and that his brother will jump from his hold to attempt ending his life a second time.

Yao Xin and Kenshin watch from the balcony as the two Lords of the West make one hell of an entrance. The head General of the Ground Troops, Matsu Shikazu, and three infantry men wait with weapons at the ready behind the two head advisors. Well, excellent. Why haven't the gossiping chambermaids shown up as well?

"Out!" The demon lord snarls, not unwrapping his human little brother. He keeps the scent trapped in his tail, Moko Moko. "Everyone except Yao Xin and Kenshin. Nothing is amiss. Order the men to stand down!"

Matsu and his men bow low as they back out of the lord's chamber and close the door behind them
without question. Absentee lord or not, they rightly fear his wrath.

_Sometime, it is good to be the King._

Slowly, Sesshomaru removes his tail and arms from his little brother, sniffing carefully for any wounds or blood other than his superficial feet and fingers. He turns InuYasha in his embrace and looks down at the face covered by long bangs, ignoring the two demons waiting for his acknowledgement. The lord's long fingers cup InuYasha's chin in hand, and more gently than the human can image happening, his face is turned upward to meet his brother's golden gaze. The stark emotion he sees in his cold brother is enough to jar the human out of his near-death daze.

"Sesshomaru?" The voice still cracks a bit, whispering out between blue lips.

"Nothing," his brother's tone is soft, trembling slightly for some strange reason the human can not fathom, "nothing like that will ever happen again. This Sesshomaru will not allow his baby brother to die. Not because of the sword, not because of war, but because you are all I have in this world." The lord's arm shoots out to wrap around the shocked human once again. The human is pulled tightly to his brother's chest.

"What in the seven hells has gotten into you?" The human demands roughly.

The Lord pulls his head back to put he and his brother inches apart, noses almost touching. "You! I have made mistakes, little brother, I have said as much. I am only a demon, not a god. I am a Lord and an assassin for my people. I will change this unacceptable behavior toward you, but you must also put a little faith in what I say. I desire _you_ to stand at my side. Not for the power of Tetsuaiga, not for the glory of our kingdom, or even the safety of those under my rule. But for you, my only blood, to stand with _me_." 

Shock. InuYasha is so numb to everything yet again, "and I repeat: How do I know I can trust you?" He pulls back a little just to give himself room to take a breath.

"You may believe in this Sesshomaru because I will give you the most sacred of our vows," the stone-faced lord proclaims. He pulls his brother back, lowers his head, and kisses his brother directly on the mouth.

Chapter End Notes

_Inu gives me feels. I don't know why, he just does._
Acceptance

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes


The slayer of Naraku, the mighty hanyou warrior, the wielder of Tetsuaiga, has only been kissed on the mouth twice in his life. Both times, a female did the kissing, not his psychopathic older brother. The pain in his fingertips and feet, the cold in his bones, and even the aches in his human muscles all fade (some of the pain gone when Sesshomaru's face twisted into something unrecognizable...vulnerable? Scared? Worried?) when the demon lord's head dipped and warmth graced the human's mouth.

InuYasha wants to move the second he feels himself trapped against the stronger male, yet the hold allows him no room to dart away, and he can't really move back. His older brother's head tilts at an angle, fitting their mouths more completely together.

Initial reaction: get the hell away before his lips melt away or the bastard comes to his senses. But, as a human, he can't even move from the weird-ass embrace. So, he remains frozen in several kinds of shock: preparing for the jagged bite of teeth; tensing for the hands to crush the bones in his wrists; waiting for the hilt of Tetsuaiga to vanish...any number of actions that would indicate Sesshomaru is planning to make him suffer instead of being a somewhat tolerable asshole and just killing him outright. The hanyou had never experienced such intimacy or closeness to icy sibling and is floundering in what might happen next. The anticipation beats against his skin.

*For the love of the Gods, is he trying to poison me?* Acidic doggie drool of death?

Long moments, readying himself for pain and death.

No burn. Just a press and the slight wetness of a tongue passing over his lips. The human's eyes widen for an instant and then fall half-closed with relief at the lack of violence. *Sesshomaru...?* The gesture touches something inside the temporarily demon-bereft, some instinct begins to warm his chest at the motion; there is something oddly familiar and not familiar about this moment. The tiniest shred of hope breaks through the younger one's harsh exterior, and he cannot (for the life of him) explain why this closeness is enough to change the previous 200 years of hate.

Yet, regardless of his instinctual distrust, the hanyou has vague optimism that Sesshomaru might not be fucking around with him. Lord Royal Asswipe is actually carrying out the Declaration Ritual of the ancient Inu demons. A ritual used only between loved ones, close kin, friends, or mates to admit fault or guilt. It was one of the few things InuYasha actually knew about his own people on the demon side.

Myoga-jiji had once described some practices and customs of the inu to explain why he possessed certain instincts and desires. With his mother deceased all these years, Myoga was the only one that could give the young hanyou answers about his nature that he desperately sought—especially wants he had felt before he met Kikyo and was pinned to Goshinboku... There were these *cravings* he had once had that (for some weird reason) centered on Sesshomaru, the demon that despised him, hunted him, and hated him. Craving that he spent years cursing himself for having. What kind of weak fuck did he have to be to still want some kind of...well, *acceptance* or at least acknowledgement from that pox-ridden son of a mangy bitch. It was something he couldn't fathom; a separation of brain and inner feeling. It made him so angry at times when they faced
each other for a fight, fueling his attacks with his own inner turmoil. The hanyou kept his exterior emotions as full of hatred and disdain for Sesshomaru as his fucked-up brother had for him. But, the inner demonic instincts had made a small part of him long for a kind word—that's all, one fucking *nice* thing.

No dice. Not from that frigid pure blood.

Some of his physical instincts could simply be explained by his inu heritage (the scratching, shaking off water, even chasing rabbits in his sleep—all dog-like habits). However, some of his yearnings were confusing and frightening, especially when he forced himself to suppress his urges when around human or close to other demons. Growing up human had taught him what things were at the limits of 'acceptable' and what things were 'strange' and thus reasons for fear and ridicule.

Either that, or some of his "strange" behaviors would draw unwanted attention to himself. His intense desire to throw back his head and simply *howl* was one such unexplainable impulse he had been able to quell—since his childhood consisted of mastering stealth and silence for survival. Besides, howling only brought other demons at him by showing weakness since he had no family or clan to answer his calls. Moreover, unlike other demons, his inner youkai had never spoken to him or been a voice in the back of his head explaining the instincts. The loner had no one to question and desperately wanted an explanation.

For the majority of his long life, he had wanted to understand the powerful needs hovering in his psyche, seemingly a part of his blood. However, even though the hanyou had traveled extensively through the Western Lands in his youth, he had never even seen another Inu besides Sesshomaru, there was no one else for him to question. Myoga-jiiji was the only consistency in his life (even with all the running and hiding), and the only one other than Sesshomaru that could tell him the truths about his legendary father.

*My Lord, the Inu (especially the Shiro Inu demon) have many complex formalities and other more intimate traditions that are practiced only with close family.*

*Your desire to howl is a normal response to loneliness, fear, or danger. It is the instinct to call others of your clan to your aid; it is not something your intellect must do or consciously understand, it is simply something your demon side—your animal side if you will—expects you to do.*

*These instincts are not necessary logical, milord, but are products of centuries of natural responses in your blood. These impulses are not wrong just because humans do not have them or fear them, it is a natural part of your character, sire. Just like when you respond to a blow with one of your own. They are reactions to your emotions or actions. Some inu reactions are ritualized, when one is hurt, another will lick the wound to aid in the healing process. Another such example is the Rite of Declaration, one such tradition between kin.*

*Declaration of what exactly, Jiji?*

*Well, Lord InuYasha, this rite is crucial when family or other as close as kin come into some dispute or conflict, especially if honor has been offended, or if one has harmed another. The rite is a formal pronouncement of fault and request for forgiveness from one relation to another. In this tradition, the injurer does not protect himself or herself and puts aside pride to admit fault and ask to be pardoned. It is a ritual based solely on touch, very personal touch, one that is carried out without words—but rather with instincts, sire.*

*Whoa, jiji. "Personal touch?" Between family members? You're not trying to say...*
My Lord! Living with humans has certain made you quite prudish for a male, hasn't *
SQUISH* ugh * floating to the ground* my lord is sooooo cruel *watery eyes and rivers of tears*

Watch it, jiji. I ain't being all girly or anything. Human incest has gross results... You don't know what happens to the pups when blood mixes with blood.

*The flea sits in front of his master and bring out his small pipe to puff* Ugh, but this is not the case with demons, milord. Humans and demons are not the same type of creatures even though some demons may take a human or bi-ped form to fit into human society or for ease of travel. Demons do not have the same constructions or weaknesses of human beings. Mixing the same blood in human is certain to produce deformities since human blood of the same line weakens the blood further—and even though this is common with humans, the royalty will still sometimes arrange marriages between kin. Sometimes the results are grotesque, sometimes not. In most cases, however, the weaker of blood, the weaker the offspring, milord.

However, demons are far different, sire. When a demonic bloodline compounds, the result is twice as potent. And so, combining the same line only amplifies an offspring’s power two-fold! As a matter of fact, it is common for siblings to mate and produce heirs, more powerful heirs. The great master, your father, was the product of two male siblings—an Alpha and a Beta—thus, his immense strength and prowess in battle was unmatched!

Keh. My human blood just dilutes his power anyway. I can hold my own, so that's enough for me.

Milord, you won't figure out if you are an Alpha or a Beta until your first Heat. Most demons hit their first time around one hundred and fifty human years old.

But that's demons, and I'm a hanyou so I don't know if I'll ever even... Well, what if I don't go into Heat? What then, jiji? Won't I be able to mate at all? I've never met a hanyou that's survived to the first Heat.

*The old flea seems to contemplate the questions*... Then, perhaps the human side of you will not determine you an Alpha or a Beta in demon terms. You will simply carry the scent of your father and not of your stature. Perhaps, due to your half-blood, you may come into heat later than full demons.

Keh. We'll have to see...but this Declaration ritual, jiji... it's about s-sex then?

No, sire, not at all. The ceremony is about admitting fault and re-establishing a connection. Ones that are not very close and loving to the injured party wouldn't bother with the ritual and merely apologize verbally for wrongdoings; to expose oneself or to show vulnerability is difficult for any demon—especially in matters of pride or honor (as you know this from your own experiences, Lord InuYasha). Yet, the ritual is conducted by those family members that might consider mating a blood relation or those that have grown up in the same pack and want to show genuine admission of guilt... Perhaps someday, should your brother, Lord Sesshomaru realize he has been remiss in his treatment of you, this ritual will be his best way of showing you his guilt and atonement.

Keh. Sesshomaru? Lord Ice-Cube-Up-My-Ass? I'd have better luck getting Mother's relatives to apologize, Jiji.

One never knows, milord. However, the feelings you say you have experienced are quite natural for a shiro inu-youkai, even one with human blood such as yourself. You are prone to have the instincts and desires of a demon as well as the emotions and compassion of humans. It is simply in your temperament. You may not wish other to know, but you are a young inu starved for some sympathy and kindness—the things humans need and demons require—have been denied you. It is
only natural you would want these things from you kinsmen.

...But, Jiji. Sesshomaru has hated me since I can remember. How—grrrr.

Ask, my lord, I will tell you if I know the answer.

Nevermind! It ain't important anyhow.

Ah, I see, sire. You are angry because you know your lord brother hates you, yet you still want his acceptance and acknowledgement. That is not unusual or unreasonable for any inu, Lord InuYasha. Naturally, Inus are especially family-oriented of all demon sects—compounded with your royal blood and your want of acceptance is understandable. Your great father was no different. He adored Lord Sesshomaru and gave his life so that you would live.

But...It makes me an idiot, Myoga. I know by now my brother will never accept me and probably kill me one day. I know that for a fact. If some other asshole demon doesn't get me, Sesshomaru eventually will. I'm the tainted bastard staining the bloodline.

This animosity is true, sire. Yet, your instincts do not yield to logic. Your instincts, even if you are under Lord Sesshomaru's sword, will still want closeness to him as your only remaining family. There is no denying your nature.

...Then my instincts make me weaker than my human blood. My instincts will get me killed by that bastard...

And, just as he once predicted, here he is—defenseless as he can fucking get. Human blood, it is.

The bonding rituals of the Shiro Inu are all intimate acts of affection and tenderness: embracing one another, kissing and licking in a similar fashion to pups, transferring scents to one another, nuzzling and assurances safety and warmth—all the things he had learned to scorn because he'd never have it (at least, he thought so until he'd met Kikyo...and later, Kagome). But all marks made familia distinction. Sesshomaru's saliva on his mouth, Sesshomaru's scent on his clothing, all of it marked the InuYasha as the younger brother. More disturbing, with this act, his brother is acting like a real brother for the second time in the hanyou's life. To have Sesshomaru touch him, really touch him after years of beatings, burnings, and bloodshed is almost too much for the lost and forlorn human to abide. He doesn't even move to strike out, and closes his eyes to hide the burning while the scent of demon lord and palpable press of Alpha aura clog up his weakened thoughts and senses.

The demon lord is actually lowering himself to touch the taint of their bloodline, nonetheless kissing him in the way of the affectionate Shiro Inu goes further in soothing InuYasha's hackles.

Half human he might be (even human at the moment), InuYasha has the instincts of a full-blood InuShiro demon. Perhaps that is why he has always gotten a twinge when Sesshomaru would call him "little brother" rather than "cur" or "half-breed." Some part of him—regardless of his attempt to squelsh them—still wanted to be part of a family, a blood-pack, regardless of how many times kin had beaten him, degraded him, or despised him. Inus needed family, thrived on close ties, and InuYasha has learned that his instincts are animalistic and reflections of what pure blood families felt for one another. Myoga-jiji gave him some of the basics, and he filled in the rest through experience.

Like now. In a small place deep in him, far from his physical body, a place in his spirit warms.

The wetness swipes over his lips again as the demon lord pulls back an inth, just enough to keep
the barest of contact. Sesshomaru's eyes are open, and he leans down to gently rub his cheek over his brother's in a parody of a pup asking an adult for forgiveness. In doing so, he is allowing his brother access to several vulnerable points on his throat and chest as well as taking the blow to his pride.

The risks are inconsequential, for in this small gesture, the demon lord has gained more in simple touch than his great father gained in lands, power, and wealth. With his brother in his arms, close to his heart, the scent of family touches the youkai instincts deep within him as well. His agitation and impatience, the need to gain power enough to keep those under him safe, the constant depravity of joy in his soul (that which makes his mask of stone so much easier to maintain), all of it eases just a bit more from something so simple as this touch. Sesshomaru buries his nose in the soft hair right behind his brother's human ear and sighs the smallest puff of breath. His jagged soul seems to finally have a reason to heal. Even if InuYasha strikes out at him with the dull sword or blunt little nails, the demon lord would not mind.

"This Sesshomaru declares his responsibility and wrongdoings against the youngest son of the Inu no Taisho—brother to this lord, weilder of the Tetsuaiga, InuYasha." The human's entire frame tightens, muscles clench at this admission. However, Sesshomaru will not allow him to pull away. Rather, his arms tighten around the human, and he re-evaluates how to continue. What might this Sesshomaru say to assure the hanyou's near-death does not happen again...?

"You are not prepared to forgive this Sesshomaru, it is asked of you anyway," as the ritual demands. "It will take time, little brother. Give the necessary time to prove that this lord is not telling falsehoods. Stay here in the home of our great father for the remainder of the night, and make the journey to the battlefields." The lord pulls back to look at his brother's face, his own returned to an unreadable mask. His younger brother had already seen him too much out of normal character tonight. "Would this be agreeable?"

InuYasha's expression, however, is enough to melt the lord's heart. Through his brash and impetuous behavior, the never-give-up mentality, the human's forlorn and confused look is so very out of place. The barely-there, salty scent is telling of how much InuYasha hurts, yet Sesshomaru cannot determine what is going on in the hanyou's mind right now; he is aware humans are more emotional in nature than demons (and his brother as half-human is more emotional than most) but his human night might make his agreement easier to attain. After all, his brother would have never tried to voluntarily take his own life—to avoid the pain of life in the path of least resistance. That was simply not InuYasha's way.

The human seems to shake himself and with a suddenly-angry jerk, wrenches back out of his brother's embrace—apparently needing the space. His never-ending well of anger seems to overflow again, and that broken look is gone from the human's face. InuYasha raises a clenched fist and bares his teeth to bite out:

"...Fine, asshole. I'll stay tonight. Tomorrow, we go see who's trying to invade the Western Lands."

"...Will you consider believ—"

"Don't push your luck," the tone is harsh, still scratchy and half-hoarse. "You pulled off that ritual without choking or puking, so congrad-a-fuck-ulations. Doesn't mean I'm buying into all this new, touchy-feely shit. I give my word that I'll stay and help you slaughter some foreigners. Be happy I'm givin' you that much."

Nothing worth having is easy to attain, but the demon lord's natural face is (for once) not reflected in his golden gazy, "Very well. Do as you like. The guest room shall be safe for this night."
A cough in the corner surprises them both. The brothers have forgotten the two remaining demons in the room.

"Milord," Shin bows at the waist, his face solemn in the torch light. "If I may? I scent blood in the air."

InuYasha straightens noticeably, hand hovering over the hilt of Tetsuaiga. Fucking human senses! Goddam. Were these guys supposed to beat me if I fought against Sesshomaru?

"Ah, Shin..." Sesshomaru nods at his healer, thankful for the reprieve. "Little brother, this is our family's healer, Kenshin. He has been an advisor and resident healer under our father."

The fox bows low before the human, "Master InuYasha, I'm honored to meet you. I was good friends with your father and saw to your mother during her pregnancy. It is good to see you now, a grown and powerful young demon."

Behind the fox, Yao Xin's jaw drop with an audible noise. In all the time he has served the royal family with Shin, he has never heard the fox speak a full sentence with formal language. Hell, he'd hardly heard the fox utter a full sentence without profanity—not even when Sesshomaru retuned to the castle. The crass, blunt fox had no need of pretty speech before tonight.

However Shin, after only a few moments reading the young inu's aura while in his brother's embrace, understands more about the emotional and mental state of the temporary-human than Xin or even Lord Sesshomaru. His ability as a healer gives Kenshin sight that is beyond seers and sorceresses; his vision usually shows a cloudy film surrounding any that cross his path—the spectrum of faint colors waver depending on the depths and range of emotions and personality.

With this young hanyou, Shin witnesses a phenomena he's never seen before, even during all his years on battlefields. The strength of the young one's emotions is nearly solid color silhouetting his entire form. His youkai is frighteningly powerful, even trapped in a human shell, yet the weight of dejection, agony, loneliness are a tangible thing chaining the hanyou—not as apparent in his stance or even his eyes—but his aura cannot lie. Obviously, there is a desperate edge to him, and Shin is certain that little fall was not due to muscles giving out or a slip of his grip. This boy's spirit is desperate; he is in more dire straights than the other outcasts the fox treated in all his years as soldier and healer. He would need to be treated with a gentle hand and consideration or Shin could run the risk of pushing the boy even closer to this abyss. Information about the younger lord's past experiences needs to be a careful distraction once he gives the excuse of treating the superficial wounds with the real intent to show the boy some kindness.

InuYasha takes in the fox demon, from red and gray hair held up in a top knot between his pointed ears to the tips of his boots. The fox has not chosen a more human appearance as Shippo had, but maintains the facial features and snout of a fox. The scar over one side of his face and noticeable gray touch to his fur is more telling about his age. The human glances from his brother to the fox and gives the healer his characteristic, "Keh. Well, thanks, then, for treating my mother. Nice to meet you. Guess you know my name and all," his hands automatically fold into his sleeves with a flicker at the demon lord: see, you fucker. My mother taught me proper manners!

"I'm okay, though, these scratches are nothin.' It'll be healed by morning." He puffs his chest without even noticing.

The fox gives a friendly grin, his eyes crinking at the corners, "not life-threatening, milord, to be sure. But, if Lord Sesshomaru would allow me use of his guest room, you could be a kind soul to ease this old demon's mind and let me treat them anyway." A glance at the demon lord gives him a nod of approval, "Besides, it will give my old friend here, Xin, to put back the Go tile he stole from..."
me before we came up to see the goings on." Behind him, Xin quirks a brow, stroking the long braid of his fu Manchu, wondering if the fox is serious. He won the piece fair and square.

The confused human simply shrugs a shoulder without asking and follows the fox's gesturing hand to one of the three doors, which the human has seen nowhere else but Kagome's house in the future. He pauses long enough to eye the strange contraption that he hasn't seen in this era, and walks into the dimly lit room, treading carefully to avoid bumping into something in the dim light.

Behind him, Kenshin gives his lord a look, "Xin, would you have someone bring more of my supplies. I will need bandages and my special poultice for the young Master."

"Nnh. Of course Shin," flipping his fu, Yao nods and leans closer to the fox in the doorway, "and that damn tile is mine. It was my move anyway." Irritated at being ordered like a common wench, Xin resist the urge to give a smug look in return.

The unshaked fox merely grins, "I've already got you, foreigner. Three moves! Tile or no tile." before ducking into the lord's private guest room and closing the door behind him.

Yao Xin huffs, much like a younger pup, and walks past his lord to give orders to one of the men standing in the family wing. Sesshomaru, however, stands with his stoic mask to hide the fact that he is still slightly shaken from his brother's near demise and the weight of all the secrets he has been forced to keep.

Once the door closes, the Lord of the West lets out a single, long breath. Just like that, the scent of family is muted and his instincts ease. His desire to watch Shin treat InuYasha is replaced with the cold slap of duty—what he must do and what he cannot.

The demon lord sits heavily in front of the fire and gives himself a few moments to think—not even noticing Xin returning or sitting in the chair opposite of his own. Very absentee and almost, well, pitiful. Joking aside, Yao does feel sympathetic to his lord and Master InuYasha. Rather than give Sesshomaru advice or opinions, Yao Xin takes the glass decanter, a gift from one foreign nation or another, and pours his lord a much needed drink.

The guest room is pretty damn impressive in its own right. The fireplace casts shadows in the corners and dances off the walls. A foreign table and two raised chairs sit against the door probably leading onto its own balcony. First entry point to any demon that can fly or zip around in a frick yellow ball of light or have the handy ability to just appear out of thin fuckin' air. Only two windows, though, and one more doorway that could possibly lead to a sitting room or private bath. Only servants from there. Stay back from the windows. The floor is not covered in tatanmi, but instead has plush furs from fox, bear, and wolf. The bare stone between is, however, cold against his feet.

The human glances around at the huge futon on an elevated platform under a mural of a dog demon in true form baying at the half moon (which he guessed was Sesshomaru or their father). The room is not well lit enough for his eyes to fully make the identity out. Whichever it was, well, the dog had four legs; pre-Tetsuiga stealing asshole or the old man. Either way, a stab of jealousy flares in his breast at the strength and power of a true, demon form—the power of the full bloods...

Fuck 'em.

The strong voice in the back of his head whispers softly. As the healer speaks to someone, his eyes are drawn down. The futon itself looks to be softer than even the one in Kagome's room, the one in he actually got to sleep on comfortably—one of the few moments in his life that he slept deep...

The hanyou shakes all thought of Kagome out of his head, refusing to feel the stabs of pain in his
chest at the thought of her. Besides, no futon anywhere in the Warring States Era could be as comfortable as that one that held her scent. This one, well, it looks comfier than any tree branch he’d ever laid in (which must have been the thousands) but it would never top Kagome's.

The soft moment of nostalgia makes him twitch when the healer moves an his clothing swishes. The human's instincts scream at him for turning his back on Sesshomaru and the older fox healer just out of common sense. Even with the fancy setting, the whole palace makes his hackles rise with the pressure of demon power and aura all around his weaker form. But, the fox is only closing the door.

"Please, Master InuYasha, sit and allow me to look you over." The fox gestures to the table and chairs close to the balcony doors, giving the human an escape route should he need it. Kenshin knows how vulnerable and lost the human feels and is considerately giving him an instinctual bit of room. "Is there anything I can order for you, sire? Tea? Food? Sake?"

The human moves without giving the fox his back and sits facing the room, "I don't need anything," he replies in that scratchy tone. "I'll change back at dawn, so I don't need fixed up." Besides, having his wounds bandaged is too reminiscent of Kagome and the old days. No one since she has tended him.

"Ah, so you are human just for the night, Master InuYasha?" The old fox eases himself down across from the human. "That is comforting to know. Yet, be that as it may, your fingers and feet are bleeding, your body has endured some severe stress and trauma from the climb and the fall...and your scent, sire, is very telling about your mental state." The fox's eyes are open and understanding, his tone gruff and soft, soothing.

"It's fine. I've survived worse. Besides, we're outta here once dawn hits; apparently, there's a war about to start." The human's eyes become shrewd, "what do you know about this 'invasion'?"

The healer glances over his shoulder at the closed door and leans closer, conspirator style. Automatically, the human does as well. "I know not much, Master InuYasha, for milord has kept confidence with his advisors, but if you allow me to dress your wounds, for appearances' sake, then I will have an excuse to tell you what all I know and what I have heard."

As wily as foxes are known, the healer—well over nine hundred and counting—is clever, crafty, and compassionate for all his dangerous appearance. Something about the malnourished prince tugs at his sense of ethics. From the rumors and stories (and gossip from the kitchen maids) he has heard about the second son of the Inu no Taisho, he knows the young man to be as strong and valiant as his kin (for how many can claim to have survived a fifty year enchantment, cast by a priestess of the highest caliber no less!). The young one has also suffered more than any other that has been exiled by his people, for the subtle layers of scent wafting off the half-demon makes even the fox's natural distaste to rise—an underlying trace even humans would scent and react in accordance.

Something is off about this hanyou, and the healer can fain imagine how other prejudice demons and humans may have abused this prince that should still be a child.

A respectful knock on the door is his supplies, and Shin give the human a reassuring grin before retrieving his poultices and bandages from a pouting Xin.

"How badly is he injured?" Xin barely whispers, eyes darting to the seated demon lord behind him.

"Won't know until I look," the fox replies, "keep the lord busy." He ducks back in the room and begins to set his supplies on the table.
The human sighs, looks out at the dark sky, "I'm tellin' you, this ain't necessary."

"I assure you, Master InuYasha, it does indeed matter. The lord will expect to scent my special poultices and see bandages whether you are hurt badly or not. He's a stubborn sort, as you well know. Sometimes he cannot say what he thinks but still expects everyone to understand."

"Wouldn't know, never much talk from him except how I'm a disgrace and a stain to our family's name." The human's tone is matter-of-fact and to-the-point. His bitterness and pain over rejection is buried too deep for words or tone.

The powerful herbal scent wafts between them as Shin turns back to the young human, "perhaps everything is not as it seems, Master InuYasha. Appearances can be deceiving." He reaches a clawed hand out for the human's own. A momentary hesitation and the soft, human hand is held out for his inspection. The healer keeps himself from huffing at the bloody hands raw from stone, but merely dabs the torn tips with something that stings like a bitch.

"You know something I don't, fox?" The human talks to keep himself from a wince.

"You are but a kit in comparison, master. I know a great deal of things you may not." Shin places some small bandages around the lord's sore hands and wraps each faster than any human doctor could. "But, nothing can hurt if you keep your mind open to multiple possibilities."

The human huffs but doesn't fight when Shin starts on the other hand. "Sesshomaru be damned, tell me what you know about this war."

A fighter, eh? Probably doesn't know what to do with himself otherwise, the fox remembers his own years in the line—a medic/warrior that wielded a sword for slaughter with one hand and the herbs and bandages with the other. Rather than continue hinting at Lord's Sesshomaru's sworn yet hated duty, he gingerly rubs his poltice on the scrapes. If the young master used fighting to deal with his life, then Shin would humor him.

"The northern raiders have long been a thorn in the side of this land. The advisor you met, Yao Xin, was once a raider to this land before your grandfather managed to convince him to stay on as one of his most trusted warriors and friends."

"The guy with the long hair on his face and the funky armor?"

"That would be him," Shin smiles, "he knows a great deal about the workings of the Northern demons since they are unlike our society. Their demons do not take after animals or take power of the animal as in this land, but are powerful in an entirely different way. Yao Xin is one just as this. He has no 'true' form as your father or brother, but his power is great regardless. To allow him keep his honor, Lord Sesshomaru has not forced forbidden secrets of his people but has used him to learn about their culture. Judging by confrontation past, it's been clear we're more civilized in fighting style and honor while the Northern raiders are only concerned with goods: food, cloth, riches, and slaves. But also, who can kill the most enemies in the bloodiest way possible...I remember hearing they first came to these shores in small groups during your great-grandfather's time, sacking in the night and quickly leaving before any soldiers could be dispatched. When your father took over the Western Lands, the raiders returned twice, for your father went himself and slaughtered each group that came, later, Lord Sesshomaru accompanied him. However, Yao Xin did advise him on the times of year the raiders would come and what tides they would need to sail to this land and back, and the Inu no Taisho decided to handle the matter himself in a more expedient manner. I recall he even sent their corpses back on their ships, raided the ships for whatever supplies could be had, and sent it back to the Northern lands. Eventually, the raiders no longer plagued the coast."
"Until recently?"

"Until recently." The old fox kneels by the human's feet and gently grasps an ankle to pull the foot up on one of his knees. "From what I have been told, the raiders are actually from the north-west and call themselves Mongolians—they could have begun by attacking the Northern lands of the island, but found this land to be better for slaving." He uses his claws to carefully pry small rocks out of the abrasions on his lord's calloused human foot.

"So these Mongols decided to wait until my father died and try coming back more n' a hundred or so years later?" The human doesn't even wince at the small pebbles coming out of his bleeding toes.

"From what I have heard, yes, Master InuYasha. Four years ago, our spies spotted several foreign ships off the coast that were not allies or traders from lands to the West—those we have been trading with for some time now," the fox glances up, "from them you see some of these different furnishings." Shin nods to the door and the table. "But it is not traders that are gathering in the lands across from our own, the spies have seen them gathering more men and weaponry for a possible attack. It has been long in the making, but they seem to be close to advancing."

The human nods, face thoughtful, "so, my father probably used the Wind Scar to kill the bastards the last time they invaded, and that's why Sesshomaru needs me here. He'll need the Wind Scar and the Backlash Wave if there's an army waiting to pounce on his head." Soft cotton is pressed to his foot and wrapped securely.

"Taking out hundreds with one blow would certainly be beneficial, Master InuYasha—however..." the healer shuts his mouth and wraps the foot with his poultice to aid in the recovery. He pulls the other foot onto his knees to begin the process again.

"All right, come out with it," the human replies. "You wouldn't start it if you didn't want to finish." He folds his arms and looks comically like a replica of the Buddah.

The healer sighs, "well, milord. The last time your father went out to face the raiders, he took the only warrior he trusted to fight at his side—Lord Sesshomaru. It may be that your brother only wishes to have family at his side to face the bandits yet again. He might want you to fight with him in remembrance."

A bitter and sarcastic laugh wells up in the human's abdomen, escaping before he can swallow it back.

The healer sighs a bit before starting to wrap the second foot, "as I said before, milord, keep an open mind. I am no Inu demon, obviously, but I have served under your family long enough to know what matters to your bloodline: family. Only honor, strength, and power matter more than family. I ask that you remember your brother was barely out of puphood when you were born, and he has had to shoulder the responsibilities of most of this island on his own—not just warring with the other lords for his rightful place politically, but he has made a name for himself in order to be feared. It is really so farfetched that he would finally understand what kind of an ally he has been missing all this time?" Shin does not need him to answer, "but, keep your judgments until your brother proves all your doubts. That is all I am trying to say milord."

The human, emotions still somewhat raw, sees the wisdom in the old fox and sighs. "We'll just have to see, healer. We'll have to see."

Kenshin looks up and is somewhat relieved to see the young one's aura has lost its' denseness; the swirling colors are more opaque and the color itself less solid and more of a mixture. His
depression has eased a bit. He thinks the young one would be all right until he turns back to his half
demon form. Shin places the second foot back and grins up at the human.

"We certainly shall, Master InuYasha. But for the time being, do you play 'Go'?"

Sesshomaru drains the craft of sake while Yao Xin yammers away about the mounting tension on
the shoreline. Those Northerners have gathered dozens of ships and three thousand men as far as
the spies have seen (perhaps more lay in wait for a signaled attack) and the weaponry seems to be
made of steel, the usual curved swords, spears, shields, and something new—something the spies
described as "a steel and wood rod with a boom of the end®." This weapon Sesshomaru has heard
of before; the one that kills one from a distance—"guns" that have no aura, no power, no honor.
They are not wielded by strength or skill but only require aim.

The lord needs to see this dangerous tool work before the rest of the plan of attack begins; his main
battalions were already moved into place—which took the most time to achieve since the coast is
far from his palace, the forest of InuYasha, and the hiding place of Naraku. Four years to get
everyone, mostly, and everything into place for a full-scale attack. Far enough that three day's walk
would get the armies on all sides in place. The plans do not actually include his little brother
joining the clash or Tetsuaiga's influence on the battle. While waiting for Kenshin, Sesshomaru has
already decided to take InuYasha directly to Elders. The demon lord can no longer bear to keep the
secrets—he is weighed too heavily as is.

The door to his personal guestroom opens, and the laughing fox steps out with his characteristic
woven bag and fangs bared in a grin.

"Nothing to worry about young Master, I'm sure your Lord brother will at least allow you to have
the floor to rest your weary self upon..."

Sesshomaru and Yao Xin stand as the human guffaws behind the fox, "nah. Floor's too good for
the human, but he might let me hang by my toes outside the window. That would be an honorable
solution."

The Lord's stony face deepens into displeasure, "this Sesshomaru's kin may stay in the guest room.
The futon should be sufficient for his rest."

The human smirks at him and seems somewhat calmer than before. The impending doom feeling in
the lord's chest eases. He glances at the resident healer, "and the human does not suffer permanent
injury?"

"No milord, nothing that won't heal by morning or so."

"Excellent." Sesshomaru moves to stand before the human, pleased InuYasha can meet his eyes
without flinching. "Do you require anything, little brother? Dawn is not long away, and you may
rest before the marrow."

"I'm good, thanks." The human keeps it simple, calmer with his hands buried in his sleeves. "We
set out at midday, right?"

Sesshomaru only nods.

"Good. I'll be ready. Night." The human closes the door to Sesshomaru's own guest room in his
face.

The Lord was ready to speak before the door closed; he waited too long. Perhaps, though, his
brother needs time to himself to gather his emotions and plan of action. The shudders are locked in
the guest room, so Sesshomaru would hear whether or not his younger brother would attempt jumping. He could scent blood through the door and is confident he can stop the human in case desperation forces InuYasha's rashness again.

Sesshomaru turns to his two advisors, his mask of indifference painted over his weary features. He gives both a short nod, "this Sesshomaru appreciates your help with his younger brother, Shin and Yao. All should retire for the night and approach tomorrow with a fresh outlook."

The two demons share a glance before looking back to the lord they have watched since his return to the side of the Inu no Taisho.

"If you prefer we stay and keep our eyes and noses aware, milord, we would gladly do so." Xin replies calmly. Shin gives a small nod in agreement.

Then, a small break in the exterior of the feared Killing Perfection: his eyes actually soften, loose some of the chilly effect. "This Sesshomaru appreciates your devotion...however, that is not necessary. Sleep well."

With that, both demons bow and show themselves out; both are not happy leaving their lord standing in the middle of his meeting room with eyes that almost, almost show how raw he feels inside.

Chapter End Notes

*Actually, gunpowder wasn't introduced to Japan by the Monguls, but by the Portuguese traders (that traveled with Jesuit missionaries) in the height of the Warring states era (1594), but I thought it would be cool to get the trading aspect in.
Watching the sun come up is always associated with the pain of the change and relief. Another night of survival. Another opportunity to appreciate his strength and enhanced senses. Yet, InuYasha can't seem to find it in himself to be too terribly excited. After all, his human form had fully expected to die.

However, sitting his tainted, half-demon ass on Sesshomaru's nice sheets just makes the whole situation a little more sweet—hopefully he'll be able to annoy the shit out of the Lord of the West in others ways before the whole war gets started. Moreover, this new day brings about the new challenge, the new battle to be won. High and mighty big brother needs little brother's power to fight—it's so very fitting somehow; the arrogant bastard has to swallow his massive pride and ego to accept help from a fucking half-breed. And no, no no no, not just a fight, not just a battle (with him on one side and anywhere from one to hundreds on the other side), but a real war. He had to fight to protect a nation, the land of their father. Sesshomaru apparently can't pull it off on his own. Sweet. Fucking Sweet.

"InuYasha. It is time for the morning meal."

Speak of the demon and he appears. The voice from the other side of the door has no inflection—it could be like the old days; the same tone of voice announcing "Die, pitiful stain that you are."

Yet, hearing his name in that tone just appeals to the hanyou's sense of vengeance. Sesshomaru is and would strain himself to be nice (fricking cordial!) to keep the younger demon in service to the West.

The hanyou bares his fangs in an evil smile. *Just wait asshole. Pay back is going to be a *bitch.*

II

The informal dining room (the one not used when statesman, shoguns, and other diamyos come to visit) has a traditional table that seats forty on both sides with comfortable cushions at the front for the lord. Breakfast (when the absentee lord is present) consists of all the major advisors and other counselors to dine. The servants and staff have a room off of the kitchens for meals.

This morning, the heads of all the infantry, the main advisors and castle healer are all waiting in antispation for the brothers by the time they make it down from the family wing. The youngest lord had never been seen by most of the castle occupants and his appearance last night has caused quite a stir. Only a few details about him has made it through the gossip circles, primarily that he wears the crimson robe of the fire rat made by his sire. It seems the whole castle is holding it's breath to catch a glimpse at the long-lost prince.

InuYasha, meanwhile, has not spoken to Sesshomaru, but the lord hasn't really spoken to him either except to announce breakfast. Trying to keep his senses open for any impending attacks, the hanyou kept his other eye on the surrounding of the massive palace. Something about the place (the spirit, the aura, the atmosphere, whatever you'd call it), eases a large empty abyss deep inside him—one he hadn't realized existed until the two came upon the main staircase and there, decorating the wall, was a portrait of his lord father...standing behind his mother, Lady Izayoi.
The hanyou paused noticeably, eye comically wide to find such a relic here in his bastard brother's castle when all his mother's things had long ago been burned by her own family. Sesshomaru pauses as well, giving his sibling time to fully look at their father's face unimpeded for the first time in his life. The lord of the castle had known, had waited, for them to come upon the painting. He wanted InuYasha to see the two together displayed for all staff and visitors to see; he hoped the hanyou would realize the importance of the painting and its' placement. Perhaps these underlying hints would make the hanyou more susceptible to the truth.

In silence, Sesshomaru waited for the hanyou to speak, to ask, to say something, *anything* before they moved on. However, his brother remained in pensive silence, hands hidden in his kimono sleeves, and ears perked up until they slid back in his hair. The younger demon turned abruptly to walk down the staircase, leaving Sesshomaru disappointed and oddly... disturbed. The lord almost calls out to his sibling, yet the time for more explanations will have to be much later.

Their entrance into the dining room, however, had expected results. Each person stood and bowed low to the princes of the West of they pass, showing respect to both Sesshomaru and InuYasha. Surprisingly enough, InuYasha did not flinch at the powerful mass of youkai but carried himself straight, tall, and proud as an example of their royal bloodline. He even gave a few regal nods to those that bowed the lowest. Just as Sesshomaru had once prepared himself for the mocking and contempt of his father's advisors and other demons under the banner of the West, the lord is certain InuYasha's ramrod stiff spine and swiveling ears are indications he is preparing for the same.

However, should one, *just one*, at the table utter an insult—he wants to crack his knuckles in anticipation of a bloody, satisfying kill. *"For the days before this title bound me in decorum"* the lord gives an inaudible sigh as he comes to the head of the table, glaring at the advisor to the right of his chair. The bowing demon immediately backs away. Sesshomaru glances at the hanyou and gestures to his new (unknown to InuYasha) place at the table beside the demon lord.

Before taking his seat, Sesshomaru faces his most trusted advisors and generals as the Lord of the West. Everything in his countenance and aura demands attention and submission. The gathering rise out of bowing to give him and the half-demon beside him full attention.

"As many of you know, this Sesshomaru's great father, the Inu no Taisho, brought glory and honor to his bloodline. He fought, bled, conquered, negotiated, and finally made peace in this, what has become the Western Kingdom. In all that time, he was only able to see one son grow in his footsteps as an honorable ruler. Now, it is time his youngest pup also follow the path he walked. This Sesshomaru has not been able to fully welcome his younger brother into the great palace of his father, for the Elder Council had long ago ruled that the second son of Inu no Taisho must prove himself worthy of his bloodline through his own deeds, his own strength, and his own sword before allowed to claim his place in this great hall."

The hanyou's hands almost fall out of his sleeves while trying to absorb Sesshomaru's long-winded speech. The bastard has more surprises in the last day than in the last hundred years, and the hanyou is understandably disturbed and skeptical. His eyes narrow and dart to the other nobles standing across the table; his ears twitch and slightly swivel. Of course, he's heard (through whispered rumors and stories) of the demonic council: a group of 'better-than-you,' bad-ass, old-ass demons that keep their noses in the goings-on of the island. This is why the bastard came to get him? Some fucked-up sense of duty to these demon elders or some shit?

"That time has finally come." The lord's eyes fall on his brother, and with him, the demons size up the hanyou that has surpassed legend. Like his father before him, the hanyou has proved his honor. "Here, before you, stands InuYasha of the Shiro Inu Clan, Prince of the Western Lands, slayer of the demon Naraku, wielder of the Tetsuaiga, and blood of mine blood. Welcome him home."
InuYasha barely manages to keep himself from flinching as thunderous applause follows Sesshomaru's speech. With straight back and (he hopes) indifferent expression, he turns to the congregation and, remembering Mother's lessons, gives a proper half-bow with hands at his sides—something he hasn't done longer than he can remember. His eyes, however, do not leave the group standing before him. He makes a note of expressions that are less than friendly or those standing stiffly by their positions at the table. As he rises, he glances at Kenshin and the guy, Zin or something, from last night. Both are wearing pleased expressions and clapping heartily along with the rest.

Through the noise, the hanyou can see but not clearly hear everything that is being said as advisors lean into another in several places throughout the gathering. Not that it matters, really. This little welcome home bash is only for a few hours until he and Sesshomaru get moving to the site of the impending battle. The hanyou does not believe for a second that he will see this palace again; when his usefulness runs out, things will return to the way it once was, and the home of his father will once again be off-limits. Yet, InuYasha cannot help but be a little grateful he has at least seen the palace once in his lifetime. For him, that is enough to make this little side-trip worth the pain in the ass.

His ears visibly twitch and swivel, gathering sound other than the sharp crack of applause. 

 Returned from exile...not as hideous as I expect...only a pup!...scent is atrocious...

Keh. Assholes.

The congregations sits as the lord does, and InuYasha manages a to keep one ear slightly cocked slightly even as he pulls a Sesshomaru-like face—maintaining an indifferent, neutral expression. Servants bring silver platters laden with demonic delicacies (at the lord's request, a small celebration for his brother's presence). The numerous raw meats, vegetables, fruits, noodles, fine rice, and delicious soups are laid out with mouth-watering aroma and expert presentation. A servant then waits beside each guest to get his order and fill the person's plate accordingly. While not having partaken in this ritual of the elite since his mother's family banished him, InuYasha knows what to do. The young raccoon demoness faces him patiently, eyes lowered.

"What would appease milord's appetite this morn?"

The hanyou sets his elbow on the table and drops his face into one hand, sarcasm dripping from his tone, "any chance for ramen?"

III

Council Chambers, Elder's Island

The remaining ten gather, seating themselves at the traditional table. Their massive library, full of the knowledge from around the vast world, carries a myriad of scents that are both comforting and strengthening. For so long as the Elders have lived, other nations have thrived and fallen—many lost tomes reside in this great hall, and a majority of the Council members have spent what would amount to decades reading through the spans of papyrus, rice paper, thin shavings of bark, cloth tapestries (that carry the legends of long-forgotten lands and ancient dynasties), and more. Five out of the remaining eight have read each piece of history, absorbed each word of wisdom, and learned from the errors of forgotten rulers.

Of the ten, one is a shiro inu demoness of noble blood, Arikura, who reins the Council in when events call for their personal intervention; the second, a white tiger demon, Byakko (who has been accepted by humans as "the God of the West") remains the second in command and first warrior; third, an elder bird of prey, Tengu, sends summons when all the Council is needed and maintains
communication; fourth, a wind demoness (also worshipped by humans as God), Fujin, wills the
elements and is fierce in battle; fifth, an ancient cat demon that had long severed ties with his kind,
Goryo, is wizened beyond many of the Council in ways of war—the scars littering his lithe form
and the armor he is never seen without are testaments to the horrors he has seen; sixth, a fox demon
that began the traditions of fox magic and trickery, Hakuzosu, is the planner of strategy; seventh,
one of the first tree sprites grown into a powerful fairy, Kujimunaa, remains the Council's spiritual
advisor; ninth, the famed water dragon from human lore, Mizuchi, grows to the size of a mountain
can kill two hundred enemies with one blow. The final member of the Elder Council is one that is
unable to move, Bokenso from the great forest of Edo, is magically linked to the others through his
system of roots.

The nine gathered, a hodgepodge of ancient power and blood, fill the room with pure youkai—
even though each tempers his or her own flavor of energy.

Greeting and formalities concluded, the nine gather for the growing concerns in the Western Lands
not far from their island.

"From what we know thus far," Tengu begins, his blue and white shimmering feathers ruffle with
breath, "the foreigners are amassing soldiers and weaponry at an alarming rate. We have counted
numbers into the thousands, the number of ships approximately a hundred, and more weapons than
we have seen before. We still do not know how many more will show by day they intend to
attack."

"The armies of the West have kept an eye on the situation and are planning a counter strike. Half of
the army has already immobilized; the Western Castle will be defenseless if this plan continues,"
Hakuzosu, the fox with silver eyes and streaks of onyx throughout his red and white coat, muses
while baring his teeth in a semblance of a smile. "The plan is a good one... if the Monguls are in for
an all out attack."

"And what do you think they are really up to?" Byakko, golden eyes intent on the fox, asks while
his huge paws lazily fiddle with the buckles on the leather straps across his chest.

The fox gives a wider grin, "why not take the Western headquarters while the army is busy? Then
the battle is won."

Fujin, ankle-length ebony hair constantly flowing in a breeze that seems to touch her alone, holds
up a hand for attention, "the Monguls are a proud but barbaric people. They have long lost much of
the power in the blood of their natives for magic; only a few elementals are born each generation.
However, they have made up for it with unbending will and tactical maneuvers. We do not know
of their plans, so it is best to be prepared for anything... that is if we are to interfere." She casts a
speculative glance at Arikura.

Likewise, the others turn their speculative gazes toward the unspoken (yet acknowledged) voice of
the Council.

Her golden eyes remain empty of emotion, like an ice storm in the middle of the winter months,
cold enough to make even the staunchest warrior flinch. She stands slowly, gracefully, a pillar of
alabaster in a pure white kimono with the lightest blue thread stitching—kanji boldly proclaiming
her House and status, 1shotainushi —pulled tight to her tiny frame. She is fair of face with the white
hair of all pure shiro inus; indeed, a deceptive beauty hides a deadly huntress.

"The late Inu no Taisho once sent these invaders from the shores of Nippon," her gentle, dulcet
tone seems to amplify in the Council chamber, and she turns to the far southern wall (in which
several shrines are set in small nooks) and bows her head silently to his memorial. "He did so
without interference or aid from us or our soldiers." Her hands fold together in proper etiquette, "Here, two hundred and fifty years later, they have returned due to our dealings in the region," with this, her expression actually changes. The corners of her mouth turn up in a cruel semblance of a smile. "Now, our plans have come to fruition. If the youngest Prince of the Western Lands is indeed wanting in strength, power, and courage, then he will fall at the final battle and leave the elder to rule alone. If both Princes are a taint to their noble bloodlines and unfit to rule, we shall intervene to assure both will fall and a new line, an honorable ruler, shall take the Western throne."

Goryo straightens from his haunched position over the table, making the sunlight gleam off his armor and twin blades strapped to his back. One milky white eye and clear brown eyes fixing on Arikura. The cat rumbles in dissatisfaction. "As has been proven on numerous occasions," he begins (and immediately gains the attention of all, for he is not a demon of speech but one of action), "the sons of the Inu no Taisho have proven their worth—over and over. They did what we could not, destroy the Jewel of Four Souls. Neither used selfishness or vanity, neither used it for their own personal gain. The boy did not use it to become a full demon. The elder did not use it to bring back his late father." The cat's eyes narrow and sweep the congregation. "This farce has gone on long enough—it is a dishonorable act to discriminate against the sons of the West due to one's own prejudices." Arikura did not flinch at the subtle barb, but her eyes narrow on him (only the most trained eye would discern the minute tightening of her features).

Mizuchi holds up a hand to break the staring-down between the cat and dog. "Of course Arikura has a history with the Western Lands—which may color her perception. However, the situation remains crucial. Considering the West is the most powerful Kingdom in Nippon—made so by the Inu no Taisho and maintained by Lord Sesshomaru—nothing yet has happened to expand its borders. The only explanation is that the Great Trial of the youngest has turned the eldest. He is no longer the strong, untouchable young pup that stood here before us four hundred years ago. The embodiment of a ruler." The dragon stands, tips of his claws still touching the table, "if he is weak and inept, it is our duty to take him out of power."

"Is it now?" Tengu retorts. "I thought our duty is to those in Nippon—to maintain the balance of power. If the West overwhelms the other nations, then the balance is thrown."

"Taking out the weakest ruler does maintain the balance," Byakko replies, "and the West is the most turbulent as of late. It needs a ruler of worth."

"So more bloodshed is to bring peace?" The soft voice breaks through the rough males, "have we not learned in all our years that, at times, the honorable ruler is the one that is just, that is strong of heart, and powerful in his compassion?" Kujimunaa's gentle face almost shames Mizuchi.

"In times of peace, compassion for the weak is boon. But in times like these," Arikura sighs gently at her fellow female, "we live in constant bloodshed and poverty. Hundreds of roving groups slaughter innocent humans and demons without pause; the number of samurai is higher than ever before. And more, the humans are gaining hold, and we, the demons, are slowly dying out. For the future of our kind and the future of this land, we must make endeavor to make the best choices for all. A ruler must be strong of heart and of sword, or the final result will be the end... of us all."

IV Back with the Princes of the West...

Sesshomaru is uncertain if his younger brother could be anymore infuriating than he is being Right. Now.

Preparations to depart for the shores are complete. Leaving two hundred soldiers to guard the palace is the most he can spare, not to mention that each soldier is already on double-shifts and making more weapons to stock pile (especially arrows) to make up for the mass amount leaving
with the foot soldiers. In a few days, the smiths of the castle would replenish swords, shields, and spears would be ready.

The only setback: a half-breed with puppy ears.

InuYasha had left breakfast with a small bow and literally vanished. First, while Sesshomaru had met with his advisors and had seen to preparations for departure, two servants from the kitchen ran frantically into his office and stated their food supplies had been raided. Rice bags vanished, cured meats gone, dried fruit missing. More than thirty baskets were simply gone into thin air. One of the servants was packing the second cart of food when he noticed the first was completely empty! No one demon could eat a whole cart of food, and no one from the kitchen, the scullery, or the barracks knew what happened. None of the guards in the inner courtyard had seen a thing! They would need at least another two hours to replace what was gone.

Less than an hour later: a smithy from the armory came to his office—hammer in one hand gripped so tightly, the lord thought the handle would splinter into pieces. Ginkoru, one of Sesshomaru's favorite weapons smiths, is one of the few humans in his employ. Largely built (for a human), Gin is nearly as tall as the lord himself and twice as broad; he is a clean shaven human (due to working around large plumes of fire, or so the lord assumes) and always carries the scent of sweat, blood, and iron. However, his anger and irritation is the main scent emanating—the lord mentally groans.

"Milord!" Gin pauses, takes a deep breath, and bows low in respect before continuing on.

"Something troubles you," Sesshomaru begins (while still reading the inventory list of supplies and soldiers) to let the human know his lord is ready to address Gin's issues.

"Aye, sire. It seems mischief is afoot!" Gin sinks down to one knee, "I know this may sound like madness, milord, but hear me out."

"What has occurred?"

"Gnomes, sire. Thieving little bastard gnomes!...Pardon me language, Sesshomaru-sama but they're after me, I dare say."

At this, Sesshomaru stills. Slowly, his head rises and turns to look at the smithy directly.

"It's the only way to explain it all, sire!" Gin hurries along, "first, the newest swords I finished just vanished from my workshop! I went looking all over the place in case one of the men picked 'em for the journey but, no sire, there they were sitting along side the sheep in the stables! So, I brought them back and the five spears Kenshin-san ordered were gone too. When next I looked, they were on the other side of my forge! I swear to the Gods I put them with the rest of the completed weaponry! Then, I just passed it all off and started building the fire for another sword, and somehow, the accelerant was knocked over into the vat—I nearly burned my eyebrows off!—and then,"

"It seems," the lord smoothly interjects, "there is indeed mischief afoot." The lord stands, "it is not the work of mythical creatures, this Sesshomaru assures you Ginkoru, the guilty party will be dealt with."

The smithy sighs (seemingly in relief), "thank-you milord!"

No sooner was the smith gone then two maids (twin raccoon sisters) were bowing low at his office door.

"Allow me to guess," the lord starts.
"It isn't our fault, sire!" The first one bewails without raising her head, "we are certain we cleaned your personal bedchamber as perfectly as always!"

Blink. Blink.

"What… has occurred?"

"The whole room is destroyed, milord," the other sister whispers in fear.

*Enough of this.* "I am certain I know of the culprit. Return to your duties. Have my rooms cleaned again."

The Lord of the Western Lands storms out of his office before more can come to his door.

Meanwhile, the younger of the two siblings is lounging on the highest balcony of the palace, munching on a pilfered apple. The days are as cold as the night, and the trees afford him little cover unless the branches are covered in snow, so his favorite perches are out. No shelter from the biting cold on the freezing rock. Luckily for him, returning to his half-hanyou form assures him the biting cold is not as detrimental as on humans; cold: hell, yes. Pneumonia, frost bite: nope. The fire rat robe is meant for protection from demonic attacks, swords, spears, thunder, fire, ki blasts, crazy humans with sticks, well, at the time “sits,” but not so much for cold weather. He had always depended on his half-demon blood to save him from human sicknesses. Today, however, he feels overly hot and tingly since changing back. The coldness actually feels pretty good.

Regardless, he's out here to avoid the eventual shit storm brewing in the Western Palace. The hanyou is certain a line is already forming outside his brother's office door from all the crap he'd already pulled this morning after the incredibly uncomfortable breakfast. The advisors and guests at the lord’s table had posed too many uncomfortable question to him:

"*How good to see you, milord. Will you be staying here at the palace?*"

"*Shall we be graced with your presence at the next meeting, sire? I am certain your opinion on the current trade routes would be much appreciated.*"

"*I have heard of your adventures gracious prince. In your opinion, have the Western Lands been overseen properly?*"

"*I am certain you know of the carnivorous demon attacks in the last three moons have been thwarted—was that your doing, InuYasha-sama?*"

"*We are honored to welcome you back... Is Lord Sesshomaru giving you the position as his advisor of war? Or his magistrate? Second diamyo?*"

Was Sesshomaru—Lord Asswipe—any help whatsoever?

Hell fucking no. The tight-lipped bastard just looked down his nose at the table full of advisors and then at InuYasha, expecting him to answer all these stupid questions. Like Sesshomaru actually wanted to know if a fucking hanyou thought of trading and shit.

InuYasha, always one to think strategically on his feet, replied with, "Keh, nothing has been decided yet. For right now, we're concerned about kicking the hell out of the invading army that are threatening our lands and our people. When that's taken care of, we'll worry about the rest."

For him, it was a *masterpiece* of bullshit. He even said it in the nicest way possible! If his arm could have reached that far, the hanyou would have given himself a hearty pat on the back. Even
Sesshomaru seemed surprised he came up with that load of crap off the top of his head.

Since taking off from the advisors, his mischief had been somewhat innocent while waiting for his lordly brother's preparations to be finished so they could get this show on the road. If he had any clue where they were headed, he would have already been on his way without having to follow his brother like a puppy. But, he had no clue where the battlefield is or is comfortable enough to ask someone where he should be heading. So, waiting it is. Of course the hanyou understood the necessary planning it takes to get a thousand men and supplies moved in a three-day trip to where the hell ever (just because he has always fought either alone or with a small, mobile group doesn't mean the half-demon is stupid), he is still restless. Doing shit to make the whole ordeal more difficult for the asshole is just an added perk. Boredom and the hanyou had never mixed well.

Throwing his apple core over the edge of the balcony, the hanyou balances himself perfectly and stretches his lithe frame, hoping to alleviate the tingly feeling in his hands and arms. Numerous popping of his joints fades in the distance. Below him, hundreds are gathered in block ranks, carrying weaponry, bags, and bed mats. Numerous carts are hooked to demons baring more supplies (the ones he'd stolen and distributed to the castle children had apparently been replaced). Soon they would move out.

The hanyou hops down from his perch and makes his way back through his brother's guest room and makes his way out of the lord's chamber and down the family hallway. He keeps his expectations low, yet the servants scurrying past him still take ample time to bow low as he passes. He sneers to himself, not even acknowledging their respectful bows, wondering how long this false sentiment will last. Whatever Sesshomaru told his people (or whatever threats he might have made) could not change a lifetime to hate and bigotry. InuYasha would not put his belief into two days. Keep your mind on the bigger picture, hanyou, he thinks as he takes the stairs, win the war and leave this place behind.

Perspective gained, InuYasha pauses briefly at the painting of his mother and father. He means to move on after a glance, but the hanyou stops and even moves closer. His golden eyes inspect every detail from the hem of her ornate kimono to the tortoise shell hair piece. His eyes move back to hers, still and yet so real as only a skilled artist could portray. The lines in her face or the crinkles at the corners of her eyes, all characteristics he can remember, are not present in this picture, nor can the young hanyou tell if his mother is pregnant with him at the time the painting was done.

Here, her eyes are softer, her smile genuine, and her stance leaning toward the towering demon at her side. Her outer kimono is not the usual pink one he had become accustomed to; rather she wore an outer kimono of white silk with a Yuzen design similar to the red cherry blossom-like design on Sesshomaru's kimono. This kimono, as beautiful in its simplicity as her other, more ornate one, is one the hanyou had never seen. The way she glows with happiness and serenity beside his father makes her son's heart ache. This painting shows more than InuYasha can understand: had she been here long enough to be painted? How had she made it to Takemaru's castle to give birth to him? Had his father abandoned her just to die and then felt guilty about it later? What happened...?

Oddly enough, why is his father not wearing armor?

"You have been causing trouble for this Sesshomaru, little brother."

So lost in his musings, InuYasha didn't hear or scent his brother's approach, what the hell is wrong with me today? I've already changed back—how did I not hear or scent that bastard? Never one to turn his back on an enemy, the hanyou turns to face the demon lord. As usual, the expression is coldly disdainful.

"Dunno what ye talkin' about," he lies without a flinch.
"This Sesshomaru is certain you don't," Sesshomaru replies.

"You got plenty of supplies anyhow," the hanyou turns back to the painting.

Suprizingly, no rebukes are returned. "True," the demon lord also observes the portrait, used to the pangs of guilt in his chest when he looks upon the happy faces of Lady Izayoi... Come Sesshomaru, feel your younger brother moving.

"I'm surprised you would let this stand here," the younger says after a few moments of silent contemplation. "The two of them together, I mean."

Sesshomaru turns to regard InuYasha, the anger behind those pranks forgotten. "The portrait remains as a tribute to your mother's grace and sacrifice. She was much beloved here—by all in the castle."

The scoff is not unexpected, "except for you, right?"

Something in the demon lord snaps at that comment. Before he considers his words, his oath, "...I adored your mother."

Eyes widen as the hanyou slowly turns, "who the fuck are you trying to kid?" The slow simmer of his anger turns up a notch. The fucking nerve of this asshole!

"I do not lie..." he hesitates only a second, not even realizing he is not using the royal person, "your mother was more kind to me than my own. She would allow me to put my ear to her belly and listen to your heart beat in the womb."

InuYasha is at a loss of this discovery; he sputters for only a moment before his tongue sharpens, "then why exile her after I was born? You hate humans so damn much, and me 'cause I have part of her blood."

"Has this lord ever said, specifically, that he hates you, little brother? Has it ever been uttered exactly that I hated her?"

Damn, that really makes the hanyou think hard. Their encounters had always been more oriented to InuYasha dying, being a taint, being a fucking half-breed, and having the sword. "Well, you know, saying "die" and shoving your hand through my gut is a hell of an indicator, bastard. Leaving her and me in the hands of cruel human relatives, letting me grow up in the wilds, saying I'm an abomination due to her blood in my veins... gee Sesshomaru why would I ever think you hated her?" The bitter ring does not faze Sesshomaru in the slightest.

"You were not there for the first meeting, how do you think you would know what happened?"

The elder challenges.

Bitterness churns along side anger. InuYasha's muscles tense and hands curl into fists as he snarls, "I didn't have to fucking be there, Sesshomaru. Let's see. Why didn't I grow up in the Western lands? Why was she exiled to her death after our father died? You sure as hell didn't raise a hand to help him save her from the burning castle, and you didn't take her in after it was all said and done, did you? She had to go back to her bastard people and die! You had the power to keep her from dying, but you didn't raise a fucking finger."

"Have you ever considered I had no other option, little brother?" Sesshomaru moves, hands moving quickly to capture his brother's shoulders and hold the younger demon still. His voice rises, "I am a powerful demon, InuYasha, but I am only a daimyo of the West. There are others I must answer to."
This, the first admission, makes the level of anger lower an iota. *Wait, what? What the fuck is he getting at?* The younger's eyebrows draw together, "what the fuck are you trying to say? Did someone make you abandon me? Make you hate me? Make you want the sword for your own? That's not fucking likely, asshole. You get some sick pleasure out of making me bleed."

The grip on his arms tightens enough to cause slight pain; the elder inu's face changes, actually twists with some kind of... pain. This isn't just regular ole' Sesshomaru pissy-ness. No, there is hurt in his golden eyes. The hanyou's pulse jumps.

"Has the damned flea told you *nothing*?" The lord leans down to put the two eye-to-eye, "inus are family-oriented demons. I am naturally inclined to care about your health and well-being! We are siblings. What other reason could keep me from you, you, all that I have left in this world? Why would I want a relic of our father when you are my last living link to him?" Pain blossoms in his chest, decades of loneliness well up in the pit of his stomach. The knowledge that he would only be able to cause his younger brother pain when next they met made him ache. *Stop. Stop it now. This is not your place.* 'Damn,' the inu lord thinks to himself and releases his sibling before more comes tumbling out. Sesshomaru turns back to the painting—thinking he could just feign nothing has been said.

"Uh-hu," the younger replies in an unsteady tone, trying for false bravado. "Like I'm suppose to believe you went so far, *two hundred years too far*, and someone just decided you don't have to hate me anymore." The younger brushes off his sleeves as if pretending the grip of his brother left some imaginary wrinkles while he tries instead to get a grip on himself. "You can only fake disgust for so long, *brother*.*

"Think what you will. This Sesshomaru is allowed to say no more."

The hanyou's eyes narrow, his mind churning at the possibilities. *Allowed? Who could possibly have power over someone like Sesshomaru?* "Keh, whatever. I'm sure you'd say just about anything to keep me at your side for this war."

"That is not true," the tone is softer again. "Soon, you will know the truth. We leave immediately for the southern shore." Difficult as it is, the demon lord keeps his duty in mind as he turns away and starts down the stairs again, his feet like lead that take him away from unburdening his soul.

Yet, his ears pick up the sound of InuYasha moving behind him, following. A shift in his peripheral vision shows the flash of red at his right hand.

"I dunno how to take this touchy-feely crap, Sesshomaru," the hanyou states while they descend, "but don't think for a second that I'm letting my guard down. I said I'd help you, not that I'd let you fuck with me. Got it? You got something to fucking say, then out with it. No more cryptic shit."

"This Sesshomaru expects nothing less than your usual paranoid self, little brother." *Not when I have been in your place before—doubting Father's every move and motive.* "For now, focus on the matter at hand. The war looms, and all will need to be on alert."

"Good. Long as you know what I'm about. Let's go kick some invader ass so things can go back to the way it was."

At the bottom, Sesshomaru pauses abruptly and looks sharply at his sibling.

"What now?" The hanyou asks warily, also pausing in mid-step. His body tenses for a snap movement.
"...Is that what you really want, Inuyasha? For this Sesshomaru to go back feuding with you, fighting you at every turn? Did we not work well together against the cursed sword and the hanyou Naraku?"

His ears perk. *What the fuck is going on here...could there be a possibility...?* "At least I know what to expect from the old you. This new Sesshomaru... I dunno what you'll do next. Better the bastard I know than the bastard I don't." The younger replies honestly, *better the demon I know to hate rather than get to like him and be let down, like what happened the first time I met him*...

The demon lord regards him for long moments, some sort of assessment going on behind his golden eyes. Finally, the elder starts walking again. "That is fair," is spoken over one shoulder.

V

The caravan of Western soldiers follows at a slower pace than the Lord and his younger brother. It will take three full days of traveling at demonic speed for the army to reach its destination. In less than a day, Sesshomaru and Inuyasha can be at the shoreline while traveling in Sesshomaru’s light form. Thus, in the courtyard of the palace, Sesshomaru is able to touch his brother for a second time without having to maim or defame the hanyou. He silently rejoices.

The battalion and supply carts leave through the main gates with several generals watching over the progress while the brothers watch them go: Inuyasha with confusion and Sesshomaru with determination.

"Now, little brother, we go," Sesshomaru, with no sign of his inner trepidation, reaches out a hand.

In turn, the latter eyes the offered hand with mistrust and confusion, "ain't we following?"

"The mode we shall use to travel is ten times faster than by land or animal. You and this Sesshomaru have a stop to make before reaching the attack zone. There are others with their spies that have more information than the West has gathered at present." The offered hand opens more fully, "travel with this Sesshomaru, Inuyasha."

At that, a request made softly, the hanyou hesitantly takes the hand that had (more than once) spilled his blood, battered his body, and betrayed his trust. Unexpectedly, the asshole's hand is warm and soft, not like the hanyou's own leathery skin.

He does not have much time to concentrate on it, however, when Sesshomaru's youkai begins to wrap around him, softly vibrating against his skin—like hundreds of tiny bugs all over him. Inuyasha's own energy began rising in retaliation of the feel of his older brother's power, not in a stand-off or offensive move... but in a way he cannot explain. The hanyou's confusion triples when his brother's arms move to wrap around him, their chests pressing together, and their bodies fitting into one another. The younger becomes pliant, molding perfectly against his brother's armor, his head nestled under Sesshomaru's chin.

"This might feel strange, but bare with this Sesshomaru," the warm breath against his ear makes the younger suppress a shudder and hide his reddening cheeks. With this distraction, he does not notice the compaction of his physical form into a sphere of light. The two brothers, through demonic magic, condense to the cellular level; as they are pressed so close together in this singular form, Inuyasha cannot tell where he leaves off and Sesshomaru begins. The only thing he can tell is when their combined form levitates off the ground and shoots through the sky.

*How in hell is this happening?* He is not speaking, his words would have been lost in how fast they are moving. More like his thoughts are hanging between them. He can still feel his body:
heart beating, lungs filling, arms and legs tingling. His eyes can only pick out the scenery flying by in blurs of colors, surrounded by the glowing yellow of Sesshomaru's intense youkai.

*Have you not noticed this Sesshomaru is able move quicker than the eye, little brother?*

*I always just thought you were super faster, faster than Naraku*

*It is not simply a matter of speed, but more of demonic magic and use of youkai. While fighting, this lord is able to disappear and reappear behind an enemy. One that could not scent this Sesshomaru the air until the reappearance—ready to attack from the side or behind. It is quite a handy ability, yet it takes an incredible amount of concentration.*

*Keh. Just use it on me, right? Figures. This is much faster than walking.*

*Indeed. It is, however, just as complex to keep the spell going over many miles. This Sesshomaru does not use it as a mode of transportation very often. I find two-headed dragons are the only way to fly.*

*...Holy shit. Did you just make a joke? A real joke?*

*That was this Sesshomaru's attempt. Do not expect it to be a common occurrence.*

*Damn, if they're all that bad, I hope not.*

*Quite cruel, InuYasha.*

*Just get us wherever the hell we're going. Yer usin' up too much brainpower on this ball 'o light thing to make any good jokes.*

*Hn. I will have to endeavor to fulfill your comedic requirements.*

*Keh, how about you tell me why the fuck you've hated me all these years instead. That'll fulfill my need to know why this sudden change of heart. Why treat me like shit when family means so much to inu demons? Don't give me half-assed answers, either. Try giving the truth a shot.*

*The matter is more complicated than just a short time will allow, and thus whole story cannot be told at this time, as this Sesshomaru already stated. However, what you have gone through at this lord's hands is not uncommon for royalty, InuYasha. Many siblings or families attempt to murder another for various reasons. Our father spent two hundred years trying to destroy this Sesshomaru before he would accept him as his son and heir to his legacy... For most of this life, peace was an unknown concept from childhood until much later—he hunted your elder brother with a vengeful need to destroy. He came close to killing this exiled inu more than once.*

*Even if he did not have eyes or a physical form, Sesshomaru feels the impression of eyes upon him.*

*You will have difficulty accepting that your brother is something other than your own consistent devil, but the location is within sight and any further questions cannot be answered by this Sesshomaru. Perhaps you will find that the devil you do not know is one you may actually trust someday.*

Slowly, the tiny ball of light drifts to the ground, and two full beings stand at the base of the Elder's sanctuary. The elder silent and unimpressed, the younger thoroughly confused at the complete lack of answers he was hoping to finally squeeze out of the tight-lipped lord. It seemed Sesshomaru political knack for answering nothing is an art the tell-it-like-it-is hanyou hates. With a huff, he glances to the huge spire with every intention of making it a quick look before wringing his brother's neck. The glance, however, takes his breath.
Of all places he expected to finally see, this is not even close to his mental picture. Sesshomaru had said they were going to see someone with more information (more spies, InuYasha took it)—so, he expected some hidden cave in the side of a mountain, or a secluded little hut in the middle of the forest, perhaps some hamlet deep in the swamps, well—maybe an old hermit at the snow-covered top of the far mountains (something to alleviate the growing heat he is still experiencing would be nice). Hell, he was even prepared to go traipsing through craggy desert or a hidden underwater cave. Is that what he gets? Hell no. Not even close.

The immense ivory tower stands at an alarming height, pristine and graceful. The hanyou has never seen a structure as the one that rises out of the ocean before him. His mouth opens automatically, ears lay back, eyes widen as his gaze follows the length of the tower to ogle at its magnificence, unaware of how cute his amazed face is to his older brother.

The demon lord merely smirks at the puppish look, drinking in the unfamiliar expression on InuYasha's face. He can image how his younger sibling will react to learning new things everyday with the same expression of awe and wonderment. He can almost image how it would be to have his sibling stand with him at everyday meetings, at battles for the safety and security of their people, at dinner when the day has wound down and they can be somewhat at ease...

"Well, this is where we find our contacts, huh? Nice place, but how do we get up there?" The hanyou interrupts his thoughts, and Sesshomaru glances at the shorter. His eyes narrow on InuYasha's face, red tinting his cheeks and forehead, a fine sheen of sweat on his upper lip. Their journey should not have made the young one so warm. Sesshomaru opens his mouth to comment on the hanyou's appearance but watches the questioning look in his brother's golden eyes morph into irritation. He does not want to annoy InuYasha before he is to meet the Council and decides discretion is the better part of valor.

"Only demons are able to reach the top, little brother. It is the final step in your great trial—the answers which you seek are here." Sesshomaru replies enigmatically, "This older brother hopes you are prepared to meet the forefathers of demon kind."

Without further ado, Sesshomaru quickly reaches out to wrap an arm around InuYasha and jumps into the air.

Landing on the balcony, all of Sesshomaru's old memories revive—driving a metaphysical fist into his abdomen. This, his own mind, is an enemy he cannot fight with claws or swords. He takes back his arm and looks down into his brother's confused face.

"I have followed orders and left you in the darkness for long enough, little brother." The words from his father's mouth give a much-younger Sesshomaru pause. Standing here, on this balcony, after his father dumped him unceremoniously on the stone floor, Sesshomaru readies himself for another bloody brawl with his hateful sire...until those words: "I have left you in the darkness for far too long, my beautiful and powerful son," gives him pause. No royal first person, no tense muscles ready to strike, no weapons at the ready...

"I have abandoned you, bloodied you, hated you to make you into this powerful warrior. Worthy in all respects." Not trusting this newfound sentiment of love (expecting some surprise attack), Sesshomaru bared his teeth and claws at the Inu no Taisho, "spewing more lies, bastard?" "No, my son. Never again. I have abandoned you to the wilds, bloodied you, hated you—all to make you strong enough to stand at my side as an honorable ruler."

InuYasha bares his teeth, ignoring the opulent double doors right in front of him or the breathtaking view from the top of the tower. "What the fuck is going on here? What's with all this shit all of a sudden?" Panic starts to blossom in the hanyou's chest and turns to instant adrenaline,
making him hotter and prepared for attacks.

"Are you setting me the fuck up you son of a pox-ridden bitch?" Images of the un-Mother, of their past fights, of Sesshomaru's lust for Tetsuaiga all float around the hanyou's mind as he backs up a step with hand already on the hilt.

The demon lord holds up both hands in surrender. "No. The elders you are about to encounter are anxious to meet you due to the reputation and deeds you have achieved in your exile. They have the answers to your questions." Sesshomaru steps aside, one arm gestures to the massive double doors. Seemingly planned, the doors open outward and beckon InuYasha inside. "You're answers lie within, Sesshomaru. It is your choice on whether or not you wish to have them." His father gestured to the double doors, and they swing open without even being touched. It was all too surreal for the battered and abused young inu. Yet, if his hated father finally wanted to rid the world of his first-born, the "abomination" to the name of the Shiro Inus', then so be it! He would fight whomever, whatever lay beyond this door. Sesshomaru sniffed at his father as he started to pass, resisting the urge to spit at his father's feet.

"If you enter now, all you have wondered will be explained. If you do not, your brother can never tell you the whole truth." The elder simply states.

The hanyou's hackles rise more as his mind works frantically to interpret the words,'Can' never, not will never. What the fuck am I getting myself into? What's the trap? Who could be strong enough to hold power over the Lord of the West...? Not someone I'd stand a chance against. Not in a million suns...But I'll never get this chance again. So what if someone of these fuckers want to kill me? That's nothin' new. 'Sides, like to see 'em try to take me out. Confidence renewed, the hanyou straightens.

"Don't make me fucking regret this, Sesshomaru." The hanyou speaks to himself, but the demon lord bows his head in recognition.

In his flaming fire rat robe, InuYasha gives Sesshomaru a wary glance and precedes the demon lord. However, his ears swivel as he keeps track of his brother's movements at all times.

Down a small hallway is one of the best rooms the hanyou has ever seen. It is a massive, curling library. Shelves line the wall that curves into a circle with windows high above allowing soft sunlight to make the room bright, cheery. At the apex of the circle, a dais erected with special tatami and a large, traditional table holds the so-called elders Sesshomaru brought him to meet. Or so the hanyou assumes. The power radiating from the four is enough to make any demon think twice.

Sesshomaru keeps himself from flinching at the scene before them: the same library stacked full of tomes, a gathering of lifetimes and knowledge. The young inu is in awe at so much and angry that he wouldn't even be able to read a single line. Not that the four seated demons would allow him the attempt; he sneered as the stood, ready for anything...

InuYasha's hands find the folds of his long sleeves while looking at the assembled demons and demonesses seated at the table. Two males and two females. All four stand as the doors behind the inu brothers swing closed. His hidden hands automatically lower an inth to be closer to his sword.

"Weapons will not be necessary at this meeting," a golden voice lights the room. The white-haired female speaks with cold disdain, like he offended her or some shit. "There will be no violence here at the sanctuary of the Elder Council."

The hanyou's eyes narrow dangerously, a rolling growl purrs in his chest.
The same female reaches out a pale hand, "come forward InuYasha, son of the Inu no Taisho and
great hero to the demonic world." He can tell she is a shiro inu just by her hair and eye color in the
human form, of course her towering height is another indicator; moreover, InuYasha notes, she is
one of the royal line. Her graceful bearing and breeding is obvious in every move... the half moon
on her forehead gives him a slight pause and eye dart to Sesshomaru. She is a woman accustomed
to having power, at least by the punching feel of her youkai and the boundary she keeps on it.

The second female exudes a motherly air with a softer power signature. She is closer to the human
species with delicate features, bright violet eyes, and slightly pointed ears that set her apart from
mundane humanity. This woman reminds him of his own mother, her quite strength and soft
expression makes him want to move closer to her just by unconscious association. Even her
kimono and folded hands remind him of his mother's stance. He refuses to be drawn in by her.

The two males are in animalistic forms. The first male is ancient; InuYasha can tell by more by the
knowledge gleaming in his one seeing eye than the subtle rumble of power that marches over his
skin like a constant drum beat. Also telling of his battles are the physical characteristics, the other
eye is covered by a milky white film and the fur by his face, hands, and forearms are dented with
scars. A demon would heal many of those wounds unless he had seen countless battles. Just as
telling, the old cat wears armor that—unlike Sesshomaru's—is dented and scarred as the wearer.
This is the first cat demon InuYasha has ever seen that has grey streaks in his brown and golden
coat; it is also the first cat demon that hasn't wanted to maim him upon initial meeting.

The second male is a grinning fox, and his exuding aura makes for instant mistrust even though
InuYasha's hackles are already on the rise. The damn fox doesn't look a day older than the hanyou
himself—but has a power signature strong than Sesshomaru's. His grin looks sadistic. Bile rises in
InuYasha's throat, his eyes dart to his icy cold older brother, and he subtly turns an inth so his back
is not to his brother.

The woman's hand is still out and she stands shock still, like she's a cold statue of indifference. Not
one to be cowardly, InuYasha lets his hands hang at his sides while his ears swivel and twitch for
the sound of movement. Slowly, the hanyou strides toward the four with head held high, keeping to
one side of her outstretched hand just in case.

Seemingly miffed at his defiance, the powerful female looks down her nose at him and lowers her
hand while looking on with a screwed, calculating gaze. She's sizing him up, and he recognizes it,
looking back up at her on the raised platform. The other three move to stand at the edge when
InuYasha refuses to look away first.

"Welcome to the sanctuary of the Demon Elders." The motherly one greets him, abruptly severing
the stare-down with her words and a dainty hand on the sleeve of the female inu. "I am Kujimunna,
friends to your mother, the Lady Izayoi. This is Lady Arikura, the voice of our council and former
mate to your father, the Inu no Taisho," at this, InuYasha's ears perk slightly. Ah, this is his bastard
brother's mother. How fucking wonderful. "This is Goryo, one of the greatest warriors in demon
history," the cat nods at the hanyou with a solemn expression. "And finally, this is Hakuzosu, one
of our brilliant tricksters."

Kujimunna steps down from the dais to face the younger inu; her expression is gentle, sorrowful
once she sees far beyond the outer exterior and fearlessness to pain, loneliness, and hoplessness
behind his golden eyes. In mere moments, she knows how close he has come to the abyss. They
are almost too late to save the poor young one from his greatest enemy: himself.

"We have watched your progress and received reports from your trainer, Sesshomaru. It is good
you have finally made it here," Kujimunna smiles at him with that motherly air.
"Wait a second, trainer?" the hanyou looks back at the silent bastard in the corner of the room. "What the fuck is that supposed to mean, Sesshomaru?"

The demon lord stays silent and still, his eyes distant from the spectacle across the room.

"Answer me you son of a bitch! What the fuck is she talking about!" He takes one step toward Sesshomaru, having e-fucking-nough of this beat-around-the-bush bullshit. It's time for some ass kicking.

A tiny, dainty hand on his sleeve, however, makes him pause. Kagome's hand on my sleeve... but no, the elder lady caught his sleeve between two fingers. "I have made tea for your visit, and some of us have gathered so we may tell you of The Great Trial and answer what questions you may have regarding why you have been exiled from your homeland and your lord brother sent to train you."

Great trial? What, being a hanyou? The inu's eyes narrow suspiciously on his brother before returning to the powerful yet gentle demoness.

"Well, I appreciate the tea but no thanks. Until I'm sure this isn't my asshole brother's attempt at stealing my sword or my life, I think I'll stand here." He gives her a short nod, and tried to carefully pull his sleeve out of her grip by crossing his arms. "So? What the hell is this exile crap and who decided it? What did I do, as a fucking infant, to deserve exile other than be a half-breed?"

Arikura's eyes narrow in some displeasure, and InuYasha is willing to bet talk of his mother grates on her nerves. But, the demoness glances at Sesshomaru, "if you will give us time with your brother, Lord Sesshomaru, we will send him back to you shortly."

The demon lord gives a short bow, his eyes never leaving the gathering. "InuYasha, this Sesshomaru will be outside should you have need."

The hanyou raises his lip in a snarl, "yeah, if I need someone to shove a hand through my gut, I'll yell for ya'."

The demon lord huffs, turns on his booted heel, and strides out of the meeting chambers.

Chapter End Notes

So...the truth is beginning to come out ;)
The demon lord stands in this cursed place, watching the sea crash into the shore. It seems nature has decided to echo his foul mood, and the waves reach heights that would frighten humans to fall far upon the sand and rock. While the scene is breathtaking, Sesshomaru is lost in memory; the pain of his past catching up to him in the present.

Before, when his father first revealed the secret of the Great Trial, he had been an impetuous, hardened young demon. His hatred had taken almost two hundred years to dissipate—not too long after Lady Izayoi became his father's mate. She was the pivotal point that truly made him trust in his father, made him respect and adore his father, made his believe in father as a parent and an honorable ruler. Yes, Sesshomaru had learned all the techniques of political maneuvering and governing a large area with diverse subjects even with his signature cold disdain—the mask that kept him from allowing the Inu no Taisho too close to him emotionally. However, the soft spoken human woman, her gentle demeanor, her soothing hands patting his cheek or the top of his head had slowly broken down the icy layers of mistrust. She knew him to be hardened and powerful, and still, she gave him nothing but tenderness.

Meeting her had sharply contrasted the meeting of his blood mother. The cruel Arikura had been his father's first mate. She was not someone that existed in his memory until the day his trial ended. Going to her to find out more about the Medio Zengetsu was a desperation move; after their first meeting, he would have preferred never seeing her again...

_In the large library, the young inu demon narrowed his eyes in mistrust—his instincts on the very edge for when the four seated demons would turn and lunge. His hands and feet were tingling in anticipation. However, the demoness—the one with the half moon on her forehead—stood first and came to the edge of the dais._

_Sesshomaru, son of the Inu no Taisho and the Killing Perfection, welcome to the Sanctuary of the Demon Elders. It is time for your exile to end and for you to take your place as a Prince of the West._

_The inu turned to his hated tormenter and spat, "what matter of trickery is this? Another plot to eradicate me from your precious bloodline, Lord of the West?"

_No," for the first time in his memory, his father voice is soft, almost gentle in a strange way. "Your father tires of hunting his only offspring. It is time the burden is lifted from both our shoulders._

_The inu glanced at the strange woman while keeping his back pointed to the wall rather than his sire or the four powerful demons, "You have my ear, woman. Do not waste it."

_"I am Arikura," she replied stiffly, her expression taking on a colder mask then his own. The truth could not have been more obvious. "I speak for the council and am also the one that birthed you two hundred years ago. You will show respect, Lord Sesshomaru. It is by our hand that you have been trained in the wilds of the North, South, and East. It is also by our hand that you will be free._

_"And what must I do for such a kindness?" The sarcasm wasn't lost, nor the fact that he hadn't moved closer as requested._
"Merely allow us to tell you the story of The Great Trial and remove the marking scent of a banished one. Come closer so your mother might see you."

"Mother? No woman that would abandon a child is a mother." He replied, "tell me this story so that I may be on my way."

She gave a nod to the Inu no Taisho, whom turned and walked out through the open doors after a sympathetic look to his only son...

After the four spoke of the trial as training for nobility and the small ceremony to remove the taint from his very scent, Sesshomaru had left without even bidding her farewell. She was no mother to him, and the only reason he had referred to her as such was to assure her cooperation gaining his attack. It also helped that he would need her later on to bring Rin back from the Underworld, a feat which amazed him simply because she was a woman that despised humanity and probably thought having humans in his pack made him weak. However, since that very episode, he had to wonder if she really (in some twisted way) had a bit of affection for the child of her womb. Why else save the child if not for Sesshomaru's sake?

Shaking his head in the here and now, Lord Sesshomaru—far from being the young pup of that long ago day—considers what his next move will be after InuYasha emerges from the council chamber.

Yao Xin is already organizing the mass of troops into regiments and attack squads. Surely the dragon soldiers from the North had arrived as planned and hordes of two-headed aerial tactical transportation would give them excellent advantage over the land-bound invaders. The East dispatched 2,000 soldiers back when the Sesshomaru's head advisors-in-charge of making decisions for the military, of lawmaking, balancing the coffer and the budget (the few that stayed loyal to the bloodline when Sesshomaru took his father's place) made the decision to send messengers for him in the forest outside Edo and also the head lords of other three kingdoms. Of course, he expected his immediate allies—Northern Lord Ishiro and Eastern Lord Daichi—to respond with military aid. He had not, however, expected the Southern Lord, his closest opposition, to offer weapons or soldiers at the Western Land's request so the palace may be fortifies. His own had spotted spies making it to the main land (that would certainly put the South at risk and is enough of a motivation for him to be cordial). Thus, back at the Western Palace, Shin and Matsu Shikazu kept one thousand troops on two constant shifts. Spies and lookouts with speed or explosive powers had been in place for three moons—lightening, fire balls, powerful ki blasts are quite visible in a pinch.

So, they need to be present for the actual attack in less than two days when everything would come to fruition... that is if InuYasha would continue to follow him after this little meeting with the interference of the demonic world. With the younger being so volatile, the demon lord has not been able to plan whether or not the Wind Scar, Backlash Wave, Barrier-breaker, or the Dragon-scaled power vacuum, or Adamant Barrage would be a main attack in battle. Rather, he planned only his own soldiers—should InuYasha decide to join them, he could put his younger brother out front to take out large sections of enemies. A perfectly acceptable political move. One that makes him feel like a complete ass. The last thing he wants is to perpetuate the "this Sesshomaru needs your hanyou ass for Tetsuaida" idea already in his little brother's head.

What would Father do? My acceptance of him did not come easy, yet he took every moment with patience and love that I have never known during the trial. As much as I despised him in those first years, each lesson, each sword strike, each meeting with Lords and advisors were all conducted with respect of my position in the kingdom...
"Mi lord," the voice from above bring a small sigh of irritation—politics.

"Tengu," the mask slides effortlessly in place, and an unshakeable assassin waits as the flapping and swirling wind settle. Iridescent blue-green feathers and sharp green eyes sets the Elder aside from the ordinary birds of prey. "Is there news of the impending battle?"

II

_The year 1280:_ *Kamakura bakufu rules Japan for the humans; the demonic world is not gathered under a single, ruling body. Mongolians tried an invasion of Japan for the second time and failed._

Inu no Taisho, Lord of the Western Lands, stared at the oncoming Mongolian invaders from atop the sandy shore on Kyushu. His large paws had sunk to the ankle in the loose shore (but also, the immense weight of his true form, a massive white inu) and somehow managed not to squash the elemental demon standing at his side. The tawdry vessels carried over 40,000 humans and what he could only assume, due to the overwhelming stench of _other worldly_, were demons—weak and useless demons being destroyed while his golden eyes looked on. His air troops and boats were backing off for the final blow. The same trick as nearly fourteen years prior: three of his best water elementals teamed up to bring the _Kamakazi Mae Shi: Divine Wind of Death_. Let the humans of his lands think it was merely some kind of natural disaster. What they did not know wouldn't hurt.

His eyes narrowed, watching with keen eyes as his son (in bi-ped form) delivered one final group of invaders from living before the young demon formed his ki cloud and jumped off the flimsy boat. Long of limb, even in his late stages of adolescence, Sesshomaru was certainly going to be a demon one would hesitate to contend with; his speed and technique had improved considerably in such a short time back in the Western Lands. Once Sesshomaru truly trusted him, then they could break the secret to his own true form. Once? Perhaps _if_ is a better question.

The general sighed from his stance at the top of the battle, and his old advisor, Yao Xin merely glanced his way. Only Yao would understand the general's depressing thoughts in this moment of victory. His son was the one regret in his long life—merely watching the boy fight is enough to give Touga an aching chest. Yes, Sesshomaru was incredible in battle; yes, his swordsmanship has improved greatly over the last few decades, but the coldness in his son still bothers the father. Certainly, the fallout from his own Great Trial had been followed by monumental distrust and doubt of his sire; yet, the general had soon found his sire worthy of trust and from there, he could forgive and learn. His sire was no ruler, had not conquered any lands to call his own, but was only part of a small pack of dog demons. However, that small pack was his father's center. Every move made was based on what was best for the small 'family.' In this respect, Touga had no choice but to learn to trust his sire's decisions since his father's true self was one that cared for family over himself. Touga had seen this selflessness and respected it.

As it stood, Sesshomaru had no such desire to see the man inu no Taisho was. Even now, the younger inu stands down with the foot soldiers on the shore, watching the elementals gear up for the final attack while allowing the home naval forces to return to shore. The lone figure in white (while the rest of the soldiers wear traditional uniforms and armor) stood out from the rest as the sky darkens in impending doom for the foreign invaders. Rather than stand at his side, Sesshomaru stayed close to the fighting.

Touga raised his head, throat opening for the fearsome howl that tore through the ranks of his men. Slowly, his empire (the one he would one day leave for Sesshomaru) came together—this war another defining factor in whom would support him in administrative power. In another few decades, he could establish himself as ruler of the West and have a bit of ease. Perhaps one day he
could find another mate, mayhap one that would not leave him, and have another child. First, however, was contending with his first-born. Touga was determined his son would eventually stop looking at him with loathing and distrust.

At the sound of the howl, the elementals cried out and released power into the wind and water—cumulating the waves bigger even than the inu no Taisho's full dog form. Shouts of fear and dread from the invaders as they were crushed, cries of victory from the soldiers, the massive crash of water meeting water, all fight for supremacy and made the battlefield that much more triumphant. His sea demons ('water gods' from what the humans believed) were already out to save his soldiers still in the water and kill any surviving invaders.

It seemed months of planning came to a successful fruition. Touga's eyes moved to his son, stillness surrounded by chaos; however, some things would still need his personal hand. The great general moved closer to his men, simultaneously reverting to his two legged form, battle armor and all. He walked through the droves of his cheering men and came to stand by Sesshomaru in the midst of it all. He looked over, hoping to see something other than cold disdain on his son's face...

Yet their eyes met, for Sesshomaru was looking at him as well. In all the goings-on in the victorious aftermath of battle, Taisho could only hope the road to acceptance would be less unstable, uncertain. He hoped Sesshomaru would eventually be able to confide in him rather than just learn from his techniques. But, there had to be a starting point. Slowly, the general let the corners of his mouth lift in a small smile. Surprisingly enough, his son—the coldest demon Taisho had ever known—returned the gesture.

III

Back in the Sengoku Jidai (three hundred years later)

"—and so, you know why your own sibling has forced you from your father's lands and home. He may not truly recognized your rightful position in the Western Kingdom until this council decides you have proven the honor of your bloodline and releases you from exile." Lady Kujimunna sips her tea delicately, "we have had difficulty agreeing on your behalf, Lord InuYasha. Please do not think we have taken your life from you on a whim."

"...

Open mouth, suck in a breath, close mouth.

That's about as far as InuYasha can think at the moment. The personal turmoil of the last few days (hell, the last few decades) semi-prepared him for a whole rigmarole of reason why he just wasn't fucking good enough to live in the high-class demon world. Reasons that, as a matter of fact, might be good enough to drive him to seppuku with the dishonor he caused the great demon general just by being his half-blooded offspring. He'd walked in this room with a whole head-full of notions that this whole "answer my questions" bit was going to be the longest put-down of his life. Possibly be the end of his short stint on this world—'cause really, why else would Sesshomaru get so nice all of a sudden and insist they come here first if not for some kinda beat-down waiting? But this crap was not at all what he'd been expecting. Not some "every demon of royal blood goes through this unbearable shit."

To top it all off, his limbs are starting to get stiff and he's hot enough that sweat is making a thin trail down his ramrod straight spine. The more this whole story goes on (dating from the first tribe of shiro inus), the sicker he begins to feel. He had passed the last couple of days of heat and nausea off as consequences of the human night (he always suffered some physical aches and pains before and after humanity) and the freezing cold working its way out of his human form. Demons did not
suffer human sickness but as a half-breed, anything was possible. Maybe the reality made him ill because Sesshomaru might not be jerking him around this time—maybe the bastard actually wants to be a family? Strange, but the evidence is starting to pile up. After driving back the invaders (and his 'usefulness at an end), he'd see how all these sentiments would change. Regardless of the what-ifs and after-the-facts, the room is too hot and his stomach is playing some kind of rolling game in his abdomen; both good reasons why his attention is waning. But this, this trial to make some sort of angry warrior out of him was a huge load of bullshit. Their reasons and excuses just piss him off even more.

"...So Lord InuYasha, it is a customary and necessary protocol for those in power of the land," Goryo the Wise continues and fixes the ruined eye on the younger hanyou, now at their table with his hands in his sleeves and the power of his rising anger flaring his youkai. "The Great Trial is one of the best kept secrets of the purest bloodlines. You happened to be the last Prince born, and the final one we have agreed to put through exile."

This time, the youngest (with surprising calm) holds up a hand for attention. His anger is palpable, but his control is hard won in the last five years. "Let me just get this straight," he begins slowly. The four demons give him their consideration, and the interest is a little unnerving.

"So, you're telling me that, basically, Sesshomaru cast me and my mother out of our home and the Western Lands after my father died saving our lives because of your order in this traditional training period for upper-class brats. That, without going through this hell like my ancestors did, I wouldn't have been accepted as a Prince of the West and the other three nations wouldn't recognize me at all. It could have caused a civil war."

Kujimunna smiles gently at the slightly sardonic tone. "In a condensed version, yes, Lord InuYasha. The history is to assure you of how important this tradition is to many rulers and explains why your blood kin would try harming you time after time. He was put in this position by our compliance to this custom. Family must be the ones to hunt an exile, to train that exile. Sesshomaru, as your sibling, was our only option even though he has expressed his wishes many times over the years that you should not have been subjected to the trial as the second son. He has wanted you to stand at his side for quite some time."

"Uh-hu, what the fuck ever. "Then why the hell was I forced into the trial if I'm just supposed to be his advisor? I'm not even going to be the damn Lord of the West."

"As a hanyou," Lady Arikura continues, "you will be met with prejudices from the other rulers of this land as well as the people. Your very birth was threatened by a human that kidnapped your mother with the intent to kill you both, and, unfortunately, that kind of hatred you have also experienced in the demon world, young one. The trial will give them the proof they need of your strength and prowess, your worthiness to lead. However, the Council needed to be certain of your strength before we could remove the tainted scent and return to you your title. This means that you may not rule while your brother lives and if he produces an heir; yet, if he dies in battle, you are next in line. To avoid an uprising should this happen, the trial is a necessary evil to assure the people you will lead them with strength and honor." Her tone turns snide at the end, and InuYasha can definitely see her real opinion of him.

The gears in his mind work now that some of the shock has worn off. All this was so I could live in the West without the people bitchin' and complaining about a half-breed? Well, fuck... It's not like I asked for it, and it's not like I want a goddammed title anyhow!
"That would make sense if I wanted a part in the rulings of the West, which I fucking don't."

Lady Kujimunna nearly chokes on her drink of tea at this admission. Goryo gives her a gently rap on the back as she coughs delicately. Once her throat is clear, the three stare at him in a state of shock—not want to rule? Unheard of! No other exile, two thousand years of the Great Trial's existence, had ever refused title and power once they knew the truth of their birth and origins. This hanyou is certainly setting a new precedent.

"Look, I'm the sword-swinging guy, the beat down guy. Because of the hell I went through my whole life, there's no way I could do a damn thing to help Sesshomaru except be in his army if I chose to stay in the West. I fight to repay my father's memory and because he gave up his life to save my mother from death. Don't give a flying fuck that he saved me. Hell, it woulda been better for everyone if I hadn't been the stain on his bloodline. But, I will respect his sacrifice and take up for the weaker ones in his lands. That's the honorable thing to do." He stands from the table without bowing, hands still in his sleeves and close to his sword. The young half-breed steps down from the dais to regard the three stricken members of the council. "I don't want shit, not the birthright, not the title, and not Sesshomaru's fucked-up approval. Thanks for telling me the truth an' all, it explains a lot of the questions I had." He gives a little half wave before turning away.

"Wait, hanyou!" Lady Arikura stands, her cold expression even icier to proclaim her intense displeasure. "You would defy your father's wishes and ultimate sacrifice to stay in the demeaning position of a solider? An exile? You are a disgrace to his blood, a weakness that should be purged after all!"

The air changes in the blink of an eye. Her anger swirls her youkai in a pressing pulse against his skin, a living heartbeat in the room.

"Lady-!" Goryo is also on his feet, glaring murder at her.

Another temper peaks. "Keh! So that's the real story, eh?" The hanyou shuts down, his eyes empty and cold. "I am the weakness, the taint of his blood? Am I the one that put a child, Kami know how many children, through hell? The reasons don't matter, but you decide to torture fucking children and I'm the disgrace? How many others went through what I did? How many died in the wild because they had to prove themselves to these fuckers?"

In a move so fast, even the angry hanyou is shocked at himself, he is up on their little table with sword pulled, extended, and pointed directly at the angry Lady Arikura, the tip pressing oh so gently against the moon on her forehead. A slow dribble of blood eases down her pointed and delicate nose; he has to give the frigid bitch credit, she doesn't even flinch. The other three do not move. He doesn't care; his senses are heightened in his anger. He could hear flies fucking right now, and he'll know if one moves to attack. At the moment, he's going to give this frigid bitch a piece of his mind!

"Tradition be damned," he roars at her, "The only thing this stupid Great Trial will do is make royal assholes! Look at the daimyo's in the past few centuries. Gods damned, the demon world is a mess. Being hated and hunted and isolated don't make a ruler that will do his best for the people, it'll make him heartless and cruel. The demon rulers sit in their big, fucking castles and do nothing. They let murderers run free and slaughter peasants for fun." Golden eyes narrow and the scalding heat of his own youkai turns up a notch and his body heats beyond measure, "you wanna talk about dishonorable, lady? Mothers abandoning their young is dishonorable. Marking an innocent child as a taint to his bloodline is fucking dishonorable. Letting someone hated his whole life rule over those that hunted him is dishonorable!"

His childhood memories claw through his mind's eye in a grotesque slideshow of agony and aching
loss; in reaction, his power lashes out without his conscious knowledge and the books, parchments, and sketches tremble with his anger and the ghosts of past pain. His hair flows around him in the pressure from his own power surge, and his clenched jaw shows elongating fangs. His eyes flicker from red to gold while the hand remains stone steady. His inner demon paws at his insides, aching to get out and ravage these fools.

The young inu has never wanted to kill someone more than he does right now. Sure, he wanted to rip out Naraku's vicera while the bastard was still alive ('cause all the people he screwed over), but knowing these fuckers had a personal hand in the shitty way the demon world ruled just makes his skin itch to shove the blade right through her skull. "Elders, my fucking ass. Why the hell would I want to be part of this shitty system you've got going here? The demons and humans need strong rulers, not brutal assholes that only know about survival. How fucking stupid can you be?" Without moving his sword, he leans closer to the narrowed-eyed female, "but what's worse, what's really fucked up? You didn't throw me out of the West 'cause I'm a hanyou, did you, bitch? You put me out just 'cause you fucking hated my mother, and that shit is pretty fucking dishonorable now, ain't it?"

In that moment, the woman's eyes went from cold to pissed off. Oh yeah, he touched a nerve. The power crackles sharply and her features twitch.

That's fine, you fucking bitch. Transform! I'll carve you the hell up...

"This is not the place-!" Hakuzosu is too late to stop the backlash.

Her power sends the room into chaos. The initial pulse of power sends the hanyou flying as well as flings bound tomes and parchments flying every which way in mini tornadoes of power. The entire tower and floor rumbles dangerously with her dissatisfaction as the hanyou catches flawlessly himself in mid-air and redirects his landing. In mid-air, his hand hovers over the hilt; he's ready to pull the Tetsuaiga and give as much good ole' beatdown as he possibly can against the wall of power he knows he's probably no match for. Well, that's nothing new. He might not have a chance in Hell of beating her outright, but he could certainly do some pretty fucking impressive damage—for all the others like him, that got beat and left alone as children, he could take some form of revenge.

He softly lands, balancing perfectly on one of the shelves, watching the female inu's eyes burn crimson and her fangs elongate. C'mon, bitch, let's see that ugly face!

He should pull the sword!

He should use the Wind Scar to demolish this fucking place to rubble!

He should give a little payback for his lifetime horror show!

But, no weapons. She had no weapon, only her power and true form. His inner sense of right and wrong rails against him for using a weapon against a woman, an unarmed woman at that. However, an invisible wave, the sound he catches in a heartbeat, flows through the room and he barely darts away in time to avoid being cut in half.

Her power is like a sword! He glances at the destroyed shelves, appearing as if a giant sword had cleaved into it. She's using her youkai like Tetsuiaiga's Wind Scar.

Lady Arikura stands from the table, her hair floating gently with the raw youkai pouring off her in waves. Her face contorts, eyes red with her inner demon, "you dare to demean the Elders, pup! You believe we much such choices so lightly!" Her jaws elongate, fangs sparkle deadly, "you
dishonor yourself and your noble lineage with these accusations." The medallion around her neck flashes momentarily and she whips out a hand and flings a trio of more deadly, invisible waves. Behind her, Goryo shields Kujimunna from the backlash.

In a snap, InuYasha tries to leap out of the way as more parchment flies. The first two miss him by a hairsbreadth and the third hits him full in the chest like a wall of stone. His body hits the shelves with a sick thud; he spits blood and the air in his lungs on impact, his body making a three foot deep gash in the wall. Paper flutters over him like sakura blossoms and the hanyou is still, his hands flop lifelessly.

Hakuzosu turns on the angry inu, "you've killed him! A hanyou cannot withstand an attack of a daiyoukai."

"Then he is unworthy to stand beside the Lord of the West," she dismisses with a sniff. "He dishonored himself by his own words."

Goryo, standing infront of Kujimunna, lets loose a deep hiss of displeasure. "You've forgotten yourself, Arikura. This is no way to deal with an exiled one."

The inu lifts her lip in a snarl, ready to retort in justification of her actions—

"Keh...," eeks from the hole in the library wall. Goryo's eyes widen; Kujimunna gasps, and Lady Arikura merely blinks. The fox, however, merely grins. Of course, they have all heard the stories and rumors of the hanyou's undeniable luck in battle as well as of his uncanny ability to stay alive against the worst circumstances, but face to face battle with a full demon elder should have signed his death warrant. The hanyou's bones should be crushed!

Crumbling noises echo sharply as the body moves, the limp hands clasp the sides of the wall, and muscles move as the hanyou pulls himself out of the crater. "Just goes to show you assholes really are...ugh...fucking stupid if you think...uh...one measley," his ears appear, "pox-ridden," his arms strain, "bitch," his bloody face, scowling and angry, "could take me out that easy!" He pulls himself standing with relative ease, sneering at the surprised female inu.

"You might be some kinda powerful, bitch, but I haven't even started yet." Swish. Tetsuaiga transforms as it slides from the sheath. If she's going to use her power like a weapon, then I guess it's on!

Instead of getting angrier, Lady Arikura lifts her head and lets out a full-throated laugh.

IV

Sesshomaru and Tengu both look to the closed council doors in a single, smooth motion. The tower rumbles under their feet in an unnatural quake. The feel of power eminates, raising the hair on the back of the demon lord's neck. The feel is similar to his own. Mother does this thing. The disrespectful bitch...

A feathered hand on his arm starts him since so few would dare touch his person without fear of losing the appendage. Tengu draws back immediately,

"You are...growling, Lord Sesshomaru."

He has also moved a step toward the door without being conscious of it; his body is twisted to make his way to the entrance and blow the doors right off the hinges. Quickly, with Tengu looking on, he takes his left hand away from his pulsing sword. It reacts accordingly to his own need for
battle and ("Sesshomaru...do you have something to protect?") need to come to his brother's side. The lord's own lack of control is actually embarrassing. The vibration of his chest eases and Sesshomaru forces himself to calm. Bursting into that room right now is not an option; as he has been InuYasha's whole life, Sesshomaru is prohibited from giving aid. Until the scent is removed, the Lord of the West is sadly powerless.

V

The room itself must have some kind of magical spell thingies to keep the destruction from getting too bad (or so he is guessing); his attacks haven't destroyed the outer walls or other shit like the table and dais. Keh, demon made shit just stands up better to an all-out brawl.

InuYasha holds up Tetsuaiga to block another intense ki attack, the force still shoving him back several feet and leaving gouges to mark his tracks—for fuck's sake! The Dragon Scaled Tetsuaiga still can't cut through the blasts. He's only able to hold the wall of youkai from slamming into him, keeping him away from getting up close and personal with the beating. Worse, the bitch isn't generating enough youkai to create the Wind Scar, and the Adamant Barrage didn't even touch her. Whatever fucking spell is going on made the shards of diamonds disappear completely. Finally, his normal slice and dice, cut through the wall of power, is sadly ineffective. Her last attack caught on the edge of his blade, but the sword cannot cut it. He is frantically thinking of what to try next while keeping the doggie bitch at bay. She doesn't seem interested in up front attacks like Sesshomaru, but her ki blasts are similar to the attacks from Tokijin...

"Give in," the lady pauses, not even winded. "Admit defeat and you may walk out alive."

Sweating from exertion, InuYasha curls his upper lip in a sarcastic smile, "Keh! As if, ba-ba. Why don't you take the kid gloves off and give me a real fight?"

Yup. That was a good one. Lady Arikura's hands wave again, and the hanyou makes a fast calculation, no time to swing... he holds Tetsuaiga in front of him side-ways and hopes to the Buddha... "Bakuryuuha!"

Regardless of loss of momentum, the sword bursts into light as her wave of power hits the sword first, and his youkai wraps around it to form the swirling vortex of wind. With a warcry to deafen the god, the hanyou shoves the sword forward, willing with all his might that his power would drive hers back.

The look on her face is fucking priceless as the twin twisters spin back on her. The other three demons dive out of the way just in the nick of time. Lady Arikura, facing her own demise, seems unconcerned while she is silently bracing for the blow but knows she will be saved by her own magic. The medallion around her neck throbs a beat of power and the twin twisters respond, bypassing her by mere inches. On the tail of those thunderous attacks, however, a certain hanyou is in mid-leap with sword extended in front of him and murder in his eyes. He's timed it perfectly, for his up close and personal jump to be hidden by the swirling youkai—she didn't even see him coming.

He brings the blade down with a cry, his target not to shove Tetsuaiga straight through her breastbone to the other side. Nope. He makes a precise swipe and severs the necklace holding her medallion! The magic disc goes flying, spinning to hit the shelves and fall out of her reach.

While the hanyou did in fact suprise her three times in one attack, the lady does not phase out of the way but stands still when he plants his stance and instantly swings to bring the tip of his blade back around a breath from her eye. He disarms her without bloodshed.
Again, the stare down is silent for long, painful moments with only the breathing of the three other elders echoing.

Finally, "not bad for an old hag."

"An adequate beginning for a rude, half-blood bastard. You might actually prove a challenge to any ordinary infant should Lord Sesshomaru acquiesce to train you to use that sword."

InuYasha sputters, "why, you-! I did more for this sword than my old man ever did!"

"Then why not use one of the new attacks more effectively rather than try the Bakuryuuha, as if I would not have seen it with my own eyes on many occasions? Not a smart move, son of my former mate."

Fuck. She has a point. "I could have broken the barrier in here with red Tetsuaiga and blasted your ass...but then all the books woulda been destroyed." He blusters off the top of his head.

One of her finely sculpted brows rise under his sword, "ah, so the spell on this room deterred you? Excuses, excuses, half-breed."

"Not excuses." He snarls, "Bottom line, bitch: I might be a disgusting, filthy, bastard half-breed, but I'm sure as hell not a cold-blooded murderer," his head jerks toward the other three elders, "no matter what kind of royally screwed-up system you've got going on here or how much ya might have it coming. I might hate you for what you did to me, for what kinda hell I had to go through, but I gotta have a better reason than that to kill you outright. Just because you're all cruel and sadistic sons of bitches doesn't mean killing you is the honorable way to stop you, even if yer making more murderin' assholes with this stupid trial shit. My luck, I'll be the one to clean-up after your messes anyhow. You got any idea how many crooked, blood-thirsty bastards I've had to kill in the last hundred years? That's the end results of your Great Fuckin' Trial crap."

And in those words, the lady still under his blade loses some of the cold disdain in her eyes.

Kujimunna breaks the tensions with a sigh, looking at him with her calm air and small smile admist the mess of their meeting room, "what you say has weight, Lord InuYasha. Is it cruel for us to damn children to the wilds? Absolutely. We have no illusions about the wrong of our actions; however, at times, the greatest evils are necessary to achieve the greater good. Do you or does your brother meaninglessly slaughter innocents? Did you not spend the last seven years defending the weak and helpless?"

"Don't be stupid, I killed Naraku for the Jewel and power. I just killed those bad guys 'cause they pissed me the hell off. Besides, Sesshomaru only wanted Tetsuaiga for power and kicks anyone's ass that just happens to piss him off. Not very fucking honorable, now ain't it?" Well, like me, for example...

"Do not lie to us, Lord InuYasha," Lady Arikura speaks from behind the blade, "why did you really kill the half-demon Naraku?" Her voice has changed to something softer.

"I wanted to be a full demon! That's what I would have wished for if the girl hadn't taken the wish for herself!"

"You lie," Goryo interjects, catching him in the untruth. "Why kill the demon Naraku?"

"I wanted the jewel for power, so I wouldn't be anyone's prey ever again!" The sound of his back molars grinding is the next indication of the hanyou's anger at being challenged. His youkai starts radiating in a wave of heat.

"I wanted to be a full demon. I wanted Sesshomaru to claim me as his brother so he'd stop trying to kill me!" His temper hits another notch.

"Lies," Hakuzosu interrupts with a mad smile, muscles tightening as the young one's aura fills the large hall with scalding, stifling waves. "The demon Naraku would have made a deal with you to give you enough of the jewel to become a full demon if you had made a deal! Why kill him? The truth, hanyou!"

Arikura presses her forehead a little further into the blade, "Why, InuYasha? Why did you make the final strike at the demon Naraku! Why have you continued to fight for the last five years even though your human priestess is gone?"

Finally, the truth breaks free of him, his self-imposed chains shatter. The hanyou's former fire flares along with a blast of youkai, "because he slaughtered everyone! He stole other demons to use for his sick plots. Gods damned! He used human corpses to kill their own families. That sucker deserved to die so there would be no more victims!" The echo fades and he is breathing a little harder than necessary—daring any of these older-than-crap, snarky demons to demean his logic. "I could only get my honor back after I killed him. There was no other way."

The cat slowly takes up his forgone tea cup, delicate in his scarred paws, "you wanted to save the innocents, InuYasha. That is why you fought him so long. So others would not suffer as you had suffered, regardless of the hatred and discrimination you suffered at the hand of humans and demon alike." The one good eye regards the inu, "and you are the product we hoped for that would come out of the Trial... You would make a fine ruler." He gives the hanyou a half smile as Kujimunna smiles widely at his answers.

Shock makes his eyes stay gold and widen a bit at the compliment. His heart is pounding, the heat making his face flush. For a moment, he is unable to retort but soon finds solid ground under the reality crumbling at his feet. In a second, he pulls his former mantle of behavior around himself.

"K-keh, no one would follow a fucking half-breed. Anyway, I'm here to follow my brother into war, not to take some ranks with elitest fuck-heads." Slowly, the Tetsuaiga reverts back to its' rusty form, pointing harmlessly at the demoness' forehead.

"Your great-grandfather was half human and not of royal human blood," Lady Arikura replies smoothly, not even reacting to the blood dripping down her face. "He was well-respected in his tribe."

Finally realizing that he's been trapped in some elaborate test, the hanyou pulls his weapon back. The sword is re-sheathed without his gaze meeting any of theirs, and he steps away from Lady Arikura. The moment of calm helps to ease the red staining his cheeks, his body cools down as his temper eases.

The lady moves to retrieve her medallion, the small nick on her forehead already healed. "He was the ancestor that eventually begat your father, Touga. And, much of his strength, his innate sense of what it right rather than what is easy, has come to the fore in you. So it seems at the present. You are hardly out of adolescence, still a pup with much to learn. With the knowledge your lord brother could bestow, you may grow to be a force to be reckoned with, Lord InuYasha."

He glances over his shoulder at her, cheek still red and heated, eyes with a dull glaze in them. His guffaws would do him no good here; being merciful is not a weakness in the eyes of the three watching him struggle to come to terms with so much so fast.
"Even as a ruling heir to the West, would you return to you mother's kin and slaughter them for casting you out? For the torment they caused her?"

"They ain't worth the wasted stroke of my sword." Proudly, his throat is working again.

"Of course," and the ice lady actually gives him a small half-smile as if her point had been made.

"InuYasha," Kujimunna speaks his name gently and the hanyou catches a breath at how much she sounds like Mother. "While this may be difficult for you to believe, we do not make these decisions easily. Nor do we make them without suffering."

She makes a gesture he doesn't see and a pinpoint of light appears a few feet from his face. It spins and grows while he watches in numb silence, and it becomes an orb the size of his head. In the glow, he sees Sesshomaru carrying the unconscious human him through the night to the Western Palace, and the look on his brother's face is so sad the hanyou can't even conceive the demon in the orb and his brother are one and the same.

"But there is more you should know, Prince of the West." The orb glows and goes white. All of a sudden, another face appears. One he's only seen in a blurry projection: his father's face. "It is not actually our decision to send any children through this ordeal. Actually, the families of exiles are the ones that ask us to continue the tradition." She comes forward enough to touch the hem of his sleeve, "in your father's final papers, he wished that you would go through the Trial as he did before you, and hopefully, would aid in lending you strength he did not live to lend you."

What? But...why would he.. How many fucked-up tests did he set up for me before his death? This revelation stings, but InuYasha sucks it up and just breathes as the image of his sire fades and changes again. This time, the orbs shows a very familiar backdrop: a dark forest covered in snow...and a small child in the fire rat robe running frantically from predators trying to kill him. Blood and bruises cover his face and hands, but it doesn't keep him from running full speed to escape the monsters tracking him by scent.

"All the pain, all the trials you have face, we have witnessed," Goryo states, explaining the image in the orb. "Many young ones have turned pitiless and vicious during the ordeal...and most of those have fallen to their own gluttony and cruelty before reaching maturity. In their very hearts are the seeds of evil. However, those that survive to adolescents, such as you, understand the problems and strife of your people and make an effort to protect the weak. Ones like you gain the insights of an honorable ruler, and that is why demonic royalty damn their young to exile. Now that you have passed, you may ask the lords of the North, South, and East of their own trial."

"No one else," Hakuzosu interjects, "only those of the highest bloodlines know of this tradition."

For the love of the Gods... InuYasha looks up as the orb goes dark once again and loses its image. He scans the faces of the four elders, and voices his primary concern:

"...And Sesshomaru?" The hanyou asks hoarsely, "how do I know this isn't just some fucked up plan of Sesshomaru's to earn my trust so's he can get what he wants?"

"Simply said, time, Lord InuYasha," Kujimunna answers softly as the kind look on his brother's face fades as the spinning orb shrinks as it grew and returns to nothingness. "Only time can give you the assurance you so desperately wish to have."

Scratching the back of his neck, the hanyou mumbles "yeah, figured ya might say something like that. Couldn't help but try, I guess" makes Goryo hide a chuckle under the semblance of a cough.
How naïve this seemingly seasoned inu still is, and the scent of his impending heat fades to less than even distinctive now that he was calming a bit. However, the full blown adult initiation will undoubtedly cause problems with this little invader issue that most the other nations seem to be incredibly interested in. Of course, only Sesshomaru could talk the North, South, and East into a nation-wide collaboration, but too bad the young hanyou on the edge of heat and personal revelation would be stuck right in the middle. Goryo wonders fleetingly if they should have issued the young one be presented after the combating rather than before. But Lady Arikura took care to make him come before, just to watch the outcome.

"So," the hanyou sighs, "that's all of it? Anything else I should know or—I dunno, do before I go?"

Kujimunna gives a small nod, "your scent must be purified before you leave, milord. We will remove the mark of the exile, and then you are free."

_Free...sounds kind of nice, actually. _"What is removing the mark going to take?"

"It will be painful, Lord InuYasha, that is for certain. However, I think you are strong of heart—well, at least enough to survive."

VI

The door to the main council chambers opens with a silent swoosh, and the demon lord picks up the nearly nonexistent noise. Day has bled into night and removing the scent could take several hours. He is still paying attention to Tengu's information, mentally cataloguing the weapons count, but his ear is cocked slightly toward the noise. Four separate patterns of footsteps echo off the walls as his younger brother is taken to the cleansing chamber where his scent will be purified. For the first time in many years, the elder brother is able to fully _breathe_. The world is suddenly not simply blurring out of focus—a semblance of living.

_It is over. The trial is finally over...

The bird of prey cocks an eyebrow at the Western Lord, waiting for an answer to his question.

"The West thanks you for your information. Even now, the army is moving into position for the defensive, and attack measures are in place for the palace and further down the coast at vital entry points." Another door swings shut down the hallway, and voices fade.

"I take it, then, that you would not need more air support?" The wiley bird, his beak lowered a bit so his eyes regarded the lord.

"The dragon-riders are many, and the other lords have provided soldiers and weapons to the cause. Should you desire to send your birds of prey, they would be welcome among the forces granted they do not turn on the warriors once the bloodlust consumes the weakest."

"A known risk to dealing with my less civilized brethren," the bird replies in a bored tone, "any I send will have keepers. Kindly tell your men not to slaughter them on first glance." With a shake, Tengu's arms seem to simply flow naturally into great, gleaming wings.

"This Sesshomaru will spread word, yours are not to be harmed."

"Then, we shall meet again two days hence. Should Lord InuYasha be somewhat...indisposed...I shall see him at his Introduction Ceremony at the Western Palace."

"If he decides to join us in battle, you will see him." The demon lord now raises a
brow. *Indisposed?*

Tengu gives a coughing snort, "not what I mean, Lord Sesshomaru. You shall smell soon enough. Good day!" With speed of most demons, he is streaking toward the sky with a thundering beat of his powerful wings. He will return to the high nests and get the troops ready to immobilize.

The inu merely watches with a calculating gaze; his sense of smell is his most honed weapon and Tengu's barb is not amusing in the slightest. As one of the elders, however, the bird will have some reason for his snark. The truth shall reveal itself eventually, and Sesshomaru has far more on his mind than the bird. If he were not so controlled, he would sight for the trials yet to come.

**VII**

"Miserable, thrice-damned cold," trying to stay warm in the harsh wind off the sea, the long, ebony length of Xin's fu man chu has little icicles dangling off the tips. Of course he is used to extreme climates and conditions in his native land, but it is customary to keep the cold away by movements of battle or hunting. Just standing around with his thumb in his arse is getting a little irritating. Not only have the main generals arrived ahead of the main forces, but nothing can be done until the rest arrive two day hence.

To make matters worse, Matsu Shikazu, head general of the ground troops, isn't even shivering. The young human is one of the few in Sesshomaru's armies and the only one with any rank. While the demon lord has little respect for humanity, he has seen a few with potential and allowed those few to join the ranks of the Western demons rather than pledge fealty to one of the constantly warring human shoguns. If the humans survived along side demon soldiers, then their prowess is that much more established and respected. Shikazu is one of the elite.

"It is the perfect time for attack," Shikazu replies offhandedly while scanning the horizon for any tiny indication of the invaders or spies. "The bitter cold will prove an obstacle in their favor."

"How so? Even if they reach the shore, the water will be a frigid death trap."

"If one falls in, of course. But, our men face the same possibility when we send ships out to meet them."

"Hn. Demons will survive, but our spies tell us the majority of them are human. Fewer are demonic than when the General held against them."

"True, but they are more in number, or so I have been told."

Behind the two, in the canopy of trees far from the shoreline, the awaiting soldiers prepare. Separate camps are scattered for twenty miles; with allies from other nations, this battle would be a historic conflict. Lord Sesshomaru had many great legends spun about his skills in battle, yet he had only led his full standing army into two skirmishes before now. Both victories for the young lord who (as is usually unheard of) commanded his soldiers from the font lines, throwing himself head-first into the fray. The lord, like his father, preferred to take personal action against previous interlopers or threats to his people. He usually only sent troops in time of natural disasters—but not with the threat of bloodshed. The motto of an honorable ruler: *show prowess and power when you have something to protect.*

"We will fight bravely regardless," Xin finally states, "the will of the Gods be with us." He raises a brow at the human, "but while we wait for our two lords, tell me: do you play Go?"

A half smile cracks the human's somber face, an unwilling smirk. "Do not even tempt me to beat
you, demon. You have no wish to shame your ancestors."

"Brave words for a little bag of bones like you, human! Let's say we make a wager or two..."

VIII

"Breathe," Goryo whispers from the hanyou's right hand.

_Gee, thanks. Not helpful._ InuYasha thinks because speaking is too much effort at the moment. Besides, the floor seems like the perfect place to get some rest, at least until his fricking body decides to get with program and start—hm—moving and stuff. He spits out a mouthful of blood on the nice, clean stone and clenches his teeth against the second round hum of power. The first wave had crashed into him like falling into a stone wall at full speed. It had felt like his body was being torn apart at the seams...

Time has lost meaning. He could have been here for a few minutes or a few hours. The only consistency is the pain, wracking him with uncontrolled spasms. His fangs have already sliced through his lip and tongue.

The main part of the final ritual in the "path of the exile" is to get the scent marker removed from his natural smell, or so Lady Bitch told him. After his mother was kicked out of the West, Arikura came to her with Inu no Taisho's last wishes and to magically bind the marker to his natural scent. Even though most the population of Japan detested half-breeds regardless of bloodline, apparently most people didn't have to put up with the kind of shit he is accustomed to—you know, life threatening fights and shit. The whole marker thing kind of explained why so many people tried killing him, in every village and glen. No matter where he journeyed throughout the island, there were those that enjoyed being unnaturally cruel.

Well, Kujimunna let him on the little secret of how the scent affects everyone. Human and demon alike. The fact he had a pack at all was nothing short of a miracle—especially with a monk and demon slayer in the mix. The council attributed his little pack's loyalty to his natural abilities as a leader and one that would make the right choices. While Arikura prepared everything for the ritual, he'd tried to bluster again—repeating his claim that he'd wanted the fucking jewel to become a full demon and that's all there was to it. The humans knew it, every fucking person they met along the way knew it, and even Kikyo knew it after she was raised from the dead.

The fox didn't believe him. The cat just smirked like an irritating bastard. He wanted to go into the history of why he wanted the jewel in the first place (not that it would probably matter to these guys), but everything was ready—Arikura gave a Sesshomaru-like sniff and came at him with a knife.

Naturally, the ritual to remove the marker is complex and requires not only some heavy magic but also a bit of blood. He didn't mind donating to the cause, giving Lady Arikura enough to draw a complete circle with him as the epicenter. Her chanting had started out slow and whispered, but she had picked up speed and volume when the others joined in—with that chant the circle itself started to hum around him with a soft, silver glow. With that magic, the hanyou's hair stood on end and his skin crawled in revolution.

At the climax of the spell, the circle closed in on him. He had only a few fleeting moments to wonder if he'd been fooled and walked into a trap anyway before the magic slammed into him full force. The raw power seems to cover him, itching and burning his skin under the robe of the fire rat, and then the pulling sensation started. Like two giants trying to pull his arms and legs off, the magic feels like it's trying to pull his body in half without the physical sensation of his skin tearing. The spell is trying to pull the scent from his body and youkai maybe? _Fuck, does it matter?_
Even though the process is an excruciating trial on its own, he refuses to scream or give in to the nausea (he'd never live it down if he threw up rabbit all over the floor). In between waves of pain and magic, he can hear speaking but not really make out who is talking or what's being said over him. The only thing that gives him strength to keep conscious is his pride. He's spent god's knew how long writhing inside the circle; his body twitching and spasming with each new wave of magic. The burning doesn't go away.

"Once more, young hanyou," Lady Arikura's voice seems so far away, yet he can't be bothered to raise his head to see where that bitch really is. "We have left you too long. The marker is stubbornly resistant."

*Story of my mother-fucking life!*

The hum rises to vibration marching along his spine, growing more intense that it rattles his teeth, sinks into every cell of his body. The magic is changing, alters in a different method. The only thing he can really see is the winking glow of Arikura's medallion in the distance.

"Again!"

The magic rakes him like metaphysical claws, scraping the scent from his skin. Behind clenched teeth, the hanyou cries out.

IX

Night has bled into day and day into afternoon. It has been so long that the demon lord's relentless pacing only pauses when other council members come and go at their leisure. He has not eaten or slept, not while the pulses of magic still reverberate throughout the tower. He passes the time switching between meditating and pacing. He also focuses on what the future might eventually hold—for the West, for InuYasha, and for himself. The winds of change are stirring.

It is a few hours after he should have taken the mid-day meal when slight noises make his ears perk. *That sounds like...*

A second noise sends an uneasy vibration down his spine. The third is an audible cry. It's not a cry of being struck, not a cry of landing with a victorious swipe. It's not a cry of being chased or needing help. It's a sound Sesshomaru has never heard his younger brother make. Even when he ripped the pearl out of InuYasha's eyes, even when he burned his claws into a small wrist, even when he shoved a whole hand through meat and viscera, the soft noises of agony without the hope of defense makes the previously controlled instincts of the demon lord rise to the fore. He feels the overwhelming need to barge in and demand they cease!

*The young inu sneers as his precious lifeblood spills into an ancient bowl; blood that will be used to mark a circle of power around him. He glances at his sire, standing in the corner with arms crossed, merely watching the preceedings. This could still be a trap, a final attempt to erase him from the Inu no Taisho's bloodline. Removal of a scent marker could just be an excuse.*

"This will be quite painful," his so-called mother informs him as she traces the ring around him.

*He doesn't give her the honor of his words, but merely scoffs at her much too late concern. Pain? It matters not to him. He has lived his entire life in pain, dealing with agony on multiple levels—physical and emotional. He has honed his control over his features and actions in all the time he's been exiled, and the young inu would be damned if they broke him now...*

*Brave words when he is writhing on the floor in the worst pain of his life. Worse than countless*
beatings and battles, worse than having his own sire despise him; worse than having his arm cut off. He is crying out loud in less than an hour after the process began...

Now, it's InuYasha... InuYasha is in there, suffering more and more.

From out of nowhere, the elder Byakko simply appears out of thin air to wraps two burly arms around the moving dog. The tiger merely hefts the younger demon off his feet to keep the red-eyed Sesshomaru from breaking down the council door. However, the hanyou inside utters another muffled cry, audibly in agony, and the animal in Sesshomaru—unable to give into its' own instinct—finally snaps.

He becomes a clawing, kicking, fighting savage in the arms of the tiger elder that is twice his size and strength. The dog's jaw cracks sharply with the attempt to bite the tiger (who is actually straining for the first time in a few centuries!) holding him back from his kin in pain.

The animal howls in rage, ending on a throaty growl that sounds somewhat clear... “Yyyyyaaaashhha.”

X

Just when he can't take it anymore (is actually ready to beg for the pain to stop), his own youkai roars and rejects the spell that has been placed on him for the majority of his life. His power, and not the elder's spell casting, is what frees him.

The power in the circle abruptly splinters, exploding in a conflagration of blinding light. The pressure of it is enough to heave the hanyou's broken upper body off the floor for as long as a breath before it vanishes, and he smacks back down on the stone—chest heaving in painful gulps of air. His spine is on fire while hands, arms, legs, and feet tingle strangely.

Is this what dying feels like? It's not like being pinned to Goshinboku when the arrow struck; that wasn't painful...it was calm.

Rustle of kimono and Kujimunna's knees are in his spotty sight, her face wavers in his vision.

"Lord InuYasha?" Something is wrong with his hearing. Her voice is distorted, and his ears give a twitch to try clearing out the sound.

"InuYasha?" Her soft hand touches his exposed cheek gently.

"I-...is it done?" His own voice is hoarse, but the sounds in the room are becoming clearer—someone is running out of the room and a growling outside echoes through the open door.

"It is, milord. It has taken most of the night and half this day, but you have survive the ritual and your scent is purely your own."

She keeps talking, but the inu on the floor is zoning out, waiting for his senses to stop being numb and pick up sight and sounds again. He glances up at the elders, ignoring the gray spots eating up their faces. All four are looking over him. The roaring in his ears finally dies down enough that he can hear some crazy shit—something like Sesshomaru growling at him. The ruckus draws his attention to the doorway, is that bastard coming in here to take Tetsuaiga while I'm powerless? The hanyou barely moves his head so he can see the source of the noise. His eyes widen, his weak and trembling arms try to push his upper body off the floor.

This isn't cool, disdainful, asshole, lord-of-the-fucking-West Sesshomaru; this is ready-to-change-
into-a-man-eating-dog, insane-as-shit Sesshomaru. Eyes crimson, the elder struggles against Goryo and the huge white tiger trying to hold him back. The dog's snapping jaws come perilously close to Goryo's jugular before the cat darts back. Already, even though he couldn't fathom moving two seconds ago, his body knows *bad news* and scrabbles backwards less than a few inches into the circle before that's enough. His rubbery legs aren't working, but he bares his own fangs in aggression.

"Yyaasha," the demon growls, red eyes glowing at the still form on the floor. The lord's chest heaves, arms caught in the tiger's hold.

**Sesshomaru's not pissed?**

InuYasha fails to rise but lifts an unsteady hand out to Sesshomaru, mouth open but no sound coming out. He wants to tell his brother to calm the hell down but still can't manage speech.

*Get to him!* The demon roars in the back of the lord's mind, and he heartily agrees.

His arms and shoulders heave, legs give way to fling the tiger over his head with full strength. Byakko doesn't expect the move and is thrown head-first into Goryo. It is the first time in many years the two elders are taken by surprise. The white blur passes them (in a huddle on the floor) and comes to the blood circle on the floor. When the demon lord should *not* have been able to pass through the remaining magic creating the circle, he takes a single step inside and moves to kneel by the hanyou.

The demon gives a single whimper/huff for the waves of pain coming off the re-born youth.

Lady Arikura stands watching in a state of stupefied shock. Her golden eyes are comically wide while she watches her offspring reach out to Sesshomaru, mouth open but no sound coming out. He wants to tell his brother to calm the hell down but still can't manage speech.

"Ah, so now you see, milady," Kujimunna whispers from her right.

"See?" The lady has to visibly straighten herself, "all I observe is my son's ability to break my magic. This does not prove his prowess as a ruler or that he may someday surpass his sire. That still remains to be seen."

Lady Arikura scowls even more as she catches Hakuzosu grinning madly on her other side. But, the three merely watch the elder brother gently lick the younger's cheek and nuzzles his nose against the triangular puppy ears. Another low whine echoes in his throat.

"S-ess-ho-maru," reassured his brother isn't going for the Tetsuaiga, one hand covers the hilt just in case... But, as he has wanted to do since puphood, InuYasha just allows himself to lie against his brother's armored chest, giving in to the demon's ministration. For some crazy reason, he can feel and is soothed by his brother's heart beat—even through the armor. With his own pulse slowing, their hearts are crazily beating in rhythm...

"Dammit... ya ass...gotta calm down. Going demon ain't gonna help nothing." The hanyou closes his eyes with a sigh. The intense aura around his brother gradually eases to a tolerable, non-fatal
A nose snuffles along his hair, forehead, and face to scent him.

"Keh. Wanna make sure I'm clean now?" InuYasha asks sarcastically without bothering opening his eyes.

"Yes," but the tone is strained. "The marker is no longer mixed with your natural scent."

"Gee, fantastic. I need a minute, then we're outta here. Time to kick some invading ass back to their own lands."

"Soon. Our armies are not expecting us for another two days. There will be time for war once everything is in place, little brother." Sesshomaru murmurs against the half-demon's hair.

Calmer, he silently curses Tengu for not telling him the problem plainly. InuYasha only has a few hours before his maturity cycle would start the first stages and in less than three days from hence, he would have to mate (either take a partner or be taken until completion). If they go into battle with the younger reeking of Heat, both sides of the army would fight one another for him. The effects could be disastrous, both for the success of the West and for the reinstated Prince.

The low growl in the base of his throat is stifled before the younger can hear it. Just the thought of some invading soldier holding a weakened InuYasha on the ground and taking his pleasure is enough to make the demon lord's careful control bend precariously once again. He pulls the younger even closer to his body, gently rocking to soothe while looking at his mother, Kujimunna, Goryo, and Byakko over InuYasha's puppy ears. They give him a shallow bow (seemingly ignoring the murder in his gaze) and leave him with the hanyou to conquer the next step alone.

Chapter End Notes

This was really hard to write :\
Might of the Strong

Chapter Notes

This is a long chapter #sorrynotsorry
Fighting, bonding, dragon riders and stuff.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

From the open doorway, Lady Arikura regards the two on the floor of her personal ritual room. The circle (its' excess energy dispersed by the hanyou's own youkai) holds no dangers, and the room is back to dormancy. The beast in her son has abated, and the younger pup recovers from the separation without difficulty—it has taken the majority of the day for the hanyou to return to one hundred percent and night is beginning to fall. As she hopes, the energy of the younger's aura is slowly yet certainly settling back into calm patterns. It seems he would not suffer long term effects of such a difficult ritual, or that his youkai would have been damaged from removing a part of scent marker...in actuality, once he hits his maturity, the real power in his blood will manifest, and the West will have quite a weapon on their side.

Watching the two, the lady sighs very gently. Perhaps, well, perhaps she could finally be at ease with her own pup for the first time since he was taken from her arms and left in the woods to fight...or die. The first time she met the adult he had become, here in this tower, moved the lady in a way she did not believe possible. Of course she felt pride in his survival and prowess as a fighter, but his absence from her side is what ultimately drove her from her mate, Touga. His decision to put their offspring through the tradition was her duty as an Elder to carry out. Her secret hatred for him grew into a thick, cancerous mass, one for which forced her to leave his side and his castle. She completed her duty, fully expecting her son's hatred for her upon their first true meeting. However, his accusations still added to the pain in her heart—Sesshomaru would grow to forgive his sire, of whom doomed him to exile, but would never have a kind word for her. She sacrificed her son's affection for tradition's sake, and it would leave a bitter taste for the remainder of her life.

His disdain for her only compounded when she came to take the hanyou child and his mother from the Western Castle, once again earning nothing but hatred for the sake of her late mate's wishes. It was the only time in eight hundred years that she actually feared for her life. Her son's rage scorched the servants around him, and two of her fellow elders were felled by his poison and his sword. He struck them down, but did not raise his hand to her, less than a few feet from the bodies.

"You would take all this Sesshomaru has, and cast it out into the world that curses its' very conception. Truly, woman, you are the epitome of vanity and shame. Not an ounce of maternal compassion exists within your breast."

"...it is because I am to honor your father's wishes and the path he wishes both his sons travel that I will deny my maternal love and, instead, take the role of villain. It is not for you to decide your brother's fate, Lord of the West, but for his tribulations to determine the ruler he should someday become."

Her only hope manifested when he sought her out for the Mediou, and to save a human child, no less! Even with that mask of indifference mixed with disdain, his eyes had changed. This, her first sight of him in four hundred years, and she knows her son is no longer the coldly distant monarch
she once believed him to be. Hope, her hope, would not die out, not now that the younger is finally through the trial alive. Besides, who knew what the smart-mouth, brash young hanyou might do to change his sibling for the better. They might make an exceptional ruling pair after all, but only time would tell. Her difficult decisions to carry out Touga's will had hopefully led them for the better.

However, she once would have said that Touga would have ruled for a millennia and join the council. Yet, her strong previous mate had been felled by a simple human—not a great warrior of human lore—but a simple samurai. It would then be simple fate that a hanyou would eventually be the downfall of her own son as the offspring falls not far from the sire.

Lady Arikura finally feels the burden of her age as well as the curse she and the other Elders agree to bare by influencing the present. Their own lives become secondary to the needs of the country. In the shadows of the door, the great sorceress seems to falter.

II

The Elders can damn well wait. The Lord of the motherfucking West silently demands time for his younger brother to collect himself before they would be moved. The swine could stand in the doorway all night for all it mattered to him; yet, should one of them nudge a dainty foot over the thresh hold of that door, and he would actually be happy to show them how easily he slaughtered two previous Elders without even breaking a sweat. And oh, oooohhh did he momentarily hope for one of them to move or speak; his whip and poison would be finales, slow ends for the bastards that crossed him and his kin.

The four, however, seem to be respecting the invisible line (or fear his demonic energy breaking loose). Whichever. With his recovering brother still shaking with a cleaner scent finally in his arms, this Sesshomaru couldn't possibly give a flying fuck. His gaze remains focused on the curled bundle of red in his lap—InuYasha's attempt at caving in on himself after the intense shock to his system. The minute trembling of his strained muscles combined with his own experience tells him more than he already knows about the effects of the spell—this ritual took longer than his own. Unlike human magic, demonic magic has more impact since demons have their own source power, youkai, to pour into a spell or curse while humans needed to harness the power of nature or of their own Gods in the case of monks and mikos.

However, amalgamate a demon's blood as well as the youkai of several extremely powerful Elders (added in the hanyou's stubbornness that probably caused the scent to be resistant for removal), trauma and exhaustion are predictable results. The true question remains: would he be forever scarred? Would his own senses reject his new scent?

Lord Sesshomaru knows from personal experience that the removal of the scent marker is also in the dangerous realm of demonic magic; a practice few truly master partly due to eventual insanity of sorcerers and sorceresses that believe themselves to be some sort of deities after prolonged exposure. More so, demon magic is often used for twisted and nefarious purposes, and stories of backlash have kept practitioners of magic to few that are heavily trained before they are loosed upon the world. Finally, the effects of the removal, like all demon magic, have a costly consequence on the body and mind of the weak. Some did not regain themselves afterwards—the shock of their own scent changed was too much for their senses, especially since inu relied on scent for identification.

It is Sesshomaru's slight fear for the hanyou. Strong-willed and obstinate as he is, he should be fine. But, there is always a chance...

InuYasha sighs and his muscles begin to uncoil. After a moment, he seems to become aware of his surroundings once again...he doesn't even have to open his eyes to realize where the hell his ass is
planted.

Faster than Sesshomaru has ever seen him move, the hanyou jerks away so hard and fast, he lands halfway across the room in a crouch before the elder can do more than blink (it's a bluff, however, the demon lord can smell the adrenaline that sudden kicked in and knows the boy will probably fall over if he really has to fight at that moment). Trying to look as non-threatening as possible, Sesshomaru keeps quiet and merely waits for the younger to speak—pointedly ignoring the annoying parasites hovering in the doorway to watch the show. He keeps the calm façade, but his insides churn with the bitter flavor of the past.

Kneeling on the damned stone floor, bile still rose in his throat. The ritual has been hours of torture, and he has come through it, finally. It feels like his skin has been pulled off slowly, but no bleeding, raw wounds remain. It is his very spirit that has been peeled, and he has no idea how long he has lain here, trying to get his breath back and healing in the aftermath. Fighting the urges of nausea has taken at least twenty minutes; he doesn't really understand it's his own changed scent that sickens him so violently. The younger Sesshomaru made every effort to swallow his morning rabbit back down in his gut. Vomiting in front of the Inu no Taisho was not acceptable: no weaknesses could be shown. So, he just concentrated on breathing and staying upright even though his arms are shaking like an infant's. It took him a few minutes to manually re-orient his surroundings and senses while coping with the change in his own scent and the violation of his person the ceremony forced.

Movement.

The silver head snapped up as his hackles immediately rise, low growls already reverberating in his chest. Touga paused in coming forward and held up both palms in a non-threatening gesture of peace. For the first time in his memory, his father is not wearing any swords...or an expression of neutrality. His father's face, the concern made Sesshomaru forget about the sickness and straighten, his growl trickled away, but he remains wary. The Inu no Taisho continued to move slowly forward to finally kneel down less than a few feet in front of the son that despised him. Golden eyes met, Sesshomaru scrutinizing while the elder inu took him in from head to foot. He is already prepared for a spew of taunts and hatred.

However:

"You have made your father proud... so very proud, my son."

The words Sesshomaru had been pining for fell from his father's lips. Here, on this floor, he finds redemption... Salvation! Deliverance from being the stain to his bloodline, release from exile. His father really came to rescue him from the wilderness? Sesshomaru caught a sharp breath, his eyes mysteriously stinging. Only in his years as a young pup can he even recall crying, and the sensation is so utterly alien, he glanced down at his hands to be sure his own poison wasn't oozing from his fingertips to cause his eyes to water. But no. Nothing.

To his utter shame, the breath ended in a half-sob, half-whine. His chest felt too tight, and he automatically panicked. No one could see such weakness; his humiliation was complete. Whirling to his feet, Sesshomaru stood with his back to his father and gathered back his iron-clad control before making his father regret freeing him from this forced trial.

Taisho stood immediately, one hand already reaching out for his only offspring.

"The pain will pass," the dulcet tones of Lady Arikura's tone cut through the father/son moment and the younger inu could turn to look at them both. Near mirror images of stillness, and he reflected them both...
Reality is back, somewhat. The hanyou is finally filling his lungs in a wheezing gasp, staring at his elder brother and taking in the few seconds in which the lord's face is less than still. His eyes, Sesshomaru's eyes are wide and... and sad? Two days ago I didn't know that dirty bastard even had facial expressions other than pissed, pissed off, and royally pissed off, and now I might actually believe he's not a total cocksucker! The bastard's emotional side has surfaced again, too many times in such a short time that InuYasha is figuratively floored.

Meanwhile, unbeknownst to him, the expression on his own face is as close to broken as he's been since his mother's death: ears drooping, eyes full to overflowing of so many emotions, mouth drawn into a tight line. He wants to believe, Gods how he wants to believe! The only thing the hanyou has ever had faith in is his own claws and his innate sense of right and wrong—his knowledge of what is honorable and his refusal his baser desires that would really make him what everyone always claimed him to be: a filthy, disgusting, bastard half-breed. It was fine before now, perfectly fucking fine to believe in only himself and his fighting skills (well, later, much later, he gave a little, teeny bit of trust to that ragtag pack of humans). But now, now, he wants to look into Sesshomaru's twisted face and be able to trust its' sincerity. His instincts scream for the chance to have his family; but, the past would never go away. His mind and warrior's heart war within. The forces of demon and human again tear him apart as he stares into his brother's eyes and fight his instinct to strike out.

With his own eyes, he'd witness the demon—the instinctual responses—in his older brother rise to the surface and come to his aid. For the first time in his cursed existence, his sibling acted actually like it.

The hanyou's mind reels with implications once his senses come back; if his brother's instincts reacted like that...then this trial bullshit is real. Had to be, right? His brother didn't hate him, didn't want him dead, didn't want his sword. It's a first, but Sesshomaru aiding him, concerned for him, is one of those deeply buried yearnings in the hanyou's subconscious. Besides, if Sesshomaru wanted the sword, he could have lifted it in the last ten minutes instead of holding InuYasha in his lap like a puppy. But again, the hanyou had imagined this occurrence, fantasized the "what if's" in his life if Sesshomaru had been there to be his brother rather than his source of misery. What if he'd been born a full-blooded demon? God, would he have gotten mixed up with Kikyo and the cursed Jewel? Would he have been sealed away..?

The young demon's chest aches, and not from the ritual nor from his new, cleaner scent (one that makes the inside of his nose itch). Fuck, the hanyou has to blink fast as the realization finally slams into the strongly-built, pre-conceived notions of his life. The world comes crumbling apart at his feet as reality shifts dramatically, here, in this white tower. If it's real, I'm not a fucking failure...an honorless exile... Sesshomaru wouldn't have hunted me if he didn't give a fuck about me. He wouldn't have brought me here if he didn't want me...right?

In reactions, InuYasha's eyes sting slightly (just like that time when he thought everyone was dead at the hands of the Band of Seven); in reaction, he completely freaks-the-fuck-out.

Whirling to his feet, the hanyou has to turn away for a moment so Sesshomaru doesn't see him pansey out with water in his eyes. That would totally kill any self-respect he had for himself.

Think manly thoughts, think manly thoughts, think manly thoughts... Slaughtering Ryukotsusei, killing spiders so Kagome wouldn't scream and make my ears bleed, being poisoned, smacking around ogres, knocking Shippo in the head, cutting off the bastard's arm, using the Wind Scar for the first time, saving Kagome time and time again, the monk's perverted hand, Sango knocking the shit out of him, watching Kouga get beat a few times before I saved his furry ass...
"InuYasha,"

_Fuck! He's right behind me._

More together, he turns with hands in his sleeves to hide the fact he is slightly shakin, "Keh! So, it's over, big damned deal. When do we leave?"

The demon lord softens as respect and pride swell in him so that he finally gives the hanyou a very small, almost not there, smile, making the younger's eyes widen to the size of dinner plates. "Little brother... this Sesshomaru—I—am so very proud of you."

That's it, _mother-fucker_! Why didn't the bastard just fucking pull his act-like-a-bitch switch? Those few words touch a place in him that none have ever seen, a place that never expected to be reality: the place that has gained his brother's acceptance. The hanyou's face heats even more and the damn water is back.

Instinctual reaction takes over, and the overwrought inu intuitively draws back and yells to cover his intense feelings, "who the fuck are you trying to kid?" Deep breath in, "proud of a hanyou? Proud of your bastard brother?" _Kami, kami, I'm dreaming, I'm under a spell...No, he's got all this magic here, for what real purpose? It could be like with the un-Mother; he needs the magic circle to negate Tetsuaiga's barrier! Maybe he needs me to give up ownership to him! Well, _fine_, mother-fucking, _fine_!_

Sesshomaru's golden eyes widen a fraction, one hand coming up to stop the tirade, but InuYasha jerks further away, already pulling Tetsuaiga still in its' sheath from his sash. Ignoring the part of him that sees the sword as an extention of his father, he throws it at his brother's feet with a flick of the wrist. The motion shields his fast blinking to keep the liquid from spilling down his cheeks.

"There! There it fucking is! You want it, asshole? You take the goddammed thing, I'll give it to you! It's yours now. It's what you want, _what you've always wanted!_ Now stop playing this fucked-up game. Great trial bullshit, my ass!" _I can't take anymore_ almost spills out of his mouth, but his pride bites down. He just watches with teeth bare and fists by his sides—if the bastard doesn't take the sword, well, if he doesn't take it...then maybe...maybe...

Sesshomaru looks down at Tetsuaiga, the remains of his father, and back up to his sibling, his brother. _What would Father do to make him believe...? His whole life of pain, and it all comes down to the gift Father made to protect his youngest son. Why did this Sesshomaru have to start this nonsenesnse with the fang in the first place? Nnh, necessity, that is why._

With his face smoothed into calm lines, the demon lord pointedly reaches down and places a single fingertip on the hilt of the mighty weapon. His eyes, however, stay on his younger brother's face...as the barrier of Tetsuaiga does not react to his touch and burn him.

The hanyou's jaw drops in slack-mouthed surprise. The single finger becomes his hand grasping the hilt, and a surge of nostalgia strikes him in the chest. Tetsuaiga could not give him the same connection to his father as holding this piece, the one that was meant to protect. His gaze darts to it briefly in a moment of pain, but he comes a few steps closer to the red-faced hanyou. His hand falters a bit but still reaches out to turn the sword around and offer it hilt-first to his purified kin,

"No games. No swords. No lies."

The two stand, staring each other down, with Tetsuaiga hovering between them.

Finally, the hanyou's eyes dart down and back up to his brother. "The minute I do, you're gonna
shove your arm through my gut again, ain't ya?" But, from the look in that son of a mangy bitch's 
eyes, InuYasha knows better and his voice has a hoarse catch, like he knows the truth.

"Take it and find out for yourself."

Hesitantly, InuYasha begins to do just that, wrapping his fingers around the hilt. Sesshomaru moves then, too fast for the eye, and is wrapped around his younger brother before the latter could escape. The embrace is secure but not crushing, not painful. A clawed hand strokes down the length of InuYasha's hair, and Sesshomaru's cheek is nuzzling against his own in an attempt to soothe the distraught hanyou. The other hand rubs calming circles on his back. The chest InuYasha is pressed against vibrates with a gentle purring, and the Tetsuaiga clatters, abandoned on the floor. InuYasha's chest flutters frantically as he tries to breathe, but... strangely enough, he doesn't fight to jerk away. His arms can't shove Sesshomaru away, not with the calming motion of his hair being stroked... just like Mother used to do when he was a little pup. Only memories of his mother could make him feel accepted and... safe.

Before long, the hand in his hair finds the triangular ears and starts scratching the base of first one and then the other. It had a desired effect in that the hanyou's knees knock together and a strange feeling races up his spine. The tight muscles in his back and arms, the tension and intense distrust is being slowly replaced with a warm and tingly feeling the hanyou has never experienced—not even with Kagome.

"This Sesshomaru has never wanted the sword, little brother. Only you. Only you." The demon lord haunches over the younger and lays his face in the crown of InuYasha's hair. The younger sucks in a painful breath at the feel of something wet on his ear. Not spit or blood or a lick. Oh gods... His own eyes are overflowing again, and he can't wipe them away since the bastard is holding him too tight.

"Never again you be given up to the wilds. This lord will do what he can to make you believe in him—no matter how long it takes." That voice, the one InuYasha expected to send him to the afterlife with disgust and hatred, wobbles. Sesshomaru doesn't care about the Elders in this moment, doesn't care that his stinging eyes spill over, and doesn't care that his brother can smell the salt in the air between them. His inner instincts purr with contentment; his constant state of unfulfillment is easing at this very moment.

"You just need me untainted to fight the war, so your men don't attack me, you sonofabitch" the younger grasps at straws with desperation. If he can pick this situation apart, then he could keep his dignity, fight in the war, and tell Sesshomaru to go fuck himself later.

"You do not need to fight for the West or for this lord. The impending war was used as an excuse to free you from exile." The voice is thick.

"Gods... Gods... This—This is real..." InuYasha's voice chokes.

"Yes, my brother. Yes. This is real."

Pride be damned. Like a dam falling, his shield of brash strength falls. The young hanyou finally, finally, sobs in earnest; two hundred years of pain begins to wash away and the seeds of a new beginning sprout in the heart of a warrior.

III

"He needs a few moments, then he and this Sesshomaru will go."
The young hanyou is overlooking the sea from the Elder's balcony, white hair blowing in the breeze. The demon lord understands the need for a few moments of solitude to collect one's thoughts and stands back in the sanctuary, content to watch. The only annoyance in this perfect moment is standing slightly behind him just as calm and serene as she could be. However, the demon lord has more pressing matters to worry about than his bearer. In his light form, he is fast enough to get InuYasha back to the Western Palace and settled in a locked room (safely away from any enemies and guarded around the clock) with enough time to make the battleground.

His thoughts are interrupted:

"The young one is not ready." Something about his mother's voice is strange—different than her usual demeanor. The demon lord's eyes slide to catch her profile out of his peripheral view.

"This Sesshomaru's nose works perfectly well."

Slight pause and a sigh. "I have... a solution for him."

Not a good one, that is for certain. "One of your many "kindnesses," Mother?"

"Not one that will prove to be once he reaches full Heat. It is a potion. One that will give him seven days and seven nights without symptoms; the drawback is that his Heat will be twice as intense once the effect wears off." She moves with a swish of her kimono to face him. "I will give him this since he desires to fight the invaders for your lands."

Unconsciously, a snarl curls Sesshomaru's upper lip, "there will be time for other wars. He is still young yet."

Her son's dismissal irks the Elder, but she merely changes the subject. "Has he any prospects to ease his Heat now or would you leave him in agony until the fighting is finished?" Her sarcasm touches the animal in her son that is still raw with regaining its kin. His eyes churn with hatred as he slowly turns to give her the full blast of his gaze.

"He can be given a potion to make him sleep through the first heat, and this elder brother will tend to him when the fighting eases—not that you need concern yourself with him."

The bitterness in his voice makes her eyes widen. Even brought here for the end of his own trial, Prince Sesshomaru has always been emotionless as a winter storm. This attitude is a different side to him she has longed to witness for the majority of his life.

"I do not hate your father's second son." She states slowly, bluntly.

Sesshomaru scoffs, "what lies you speak, as though it matters."

"I only hated the boy's mother for taking your affections from me, my son." The admission is as bitter on her tongue as poison berrys used to make love potions, but if she is hopeful for a relationship with him, then the truth must come to light. They must be able to meet on some kind of grounds.

"There is no one to blame for this occurrence but you," he spins on her, "Lady Izayoi showed this Sesshomaru the first female kindness of his life. She is the one that deserved the title 'Mother,' and you cast her from the Western Lands out of spiteful jealousy."

"And you believe I would do so, my son? That I would dishonor tradition for my personal feelings?" The Lady Arikura asks gently.

"You would cast your own offspring out into the wilderness. Why not do so to the Inu no Taisho's
"And yet, now that you know your father's wishes, my son. Do you still hate your mother for taking Izayoi from your household?"

"You are unworthy of this Sesshomaru's hatred. His scorn, his disappointment, and his ambivalence, yes." Well-told lies. Did he hate her for taking his pseudo-mother even at his father's request?... Yes. Yes, he did. As an Elder, she had the power to refuse the Trial, to keep his brother home in the West.

Her shoulders drooping an inth surprises the demon lord—perhaps he is merely seeing things. "I see...Then, perhaps you will accept this gift from your mother as a bridge to the gap we have suffered." Her dainty and deceptively tiny hand holds out a simple silver flask. "Have him take half of the potion as soon as possible. Then the final half when his symptoms start to manifest yet again."

In his own exile and later position as a ruler, Sesshomaru knows the subtles to trickery and subterfuge. "How does this lord know you do not seek his brother's demise under the guise of aid?"

She does not flinch at the accusation, but it is an effort, "all of my kindnesses come with a price, Lord Sesshomaru, as you must have realized when I opened the Mediou for your child—yes, I opened it, but it was up to you to save her and only your compassion for her allowed the stone to bring her back from the afterlife. This is no different than that time. I give this to your hanyou in exchange for the excess time I kept him in exile...and for our part in the rise of the demon Naraku to be his ultimate test. For that pain, of the priestess Kikyo's death and his seal to the God Tree, I would offer this small respite. Besides, I would gain nothing from the hanyou's death but would actually regain a bit of my honor for finally coming to his aid. Therefore, take this or do not, my son."

Long moments of his eyes narrowing on her, gauging her answer. Finally, without thanking her, Sesshomaru sweeps the flask from her palm and strides away to leave her staring at his back. There is no need for idle threats should the potion prove poisonous for his sibling; two hundred years of appeals to bring InuYasha home assures her how important the young half-breed is to him. No, Lady Arikura knows the penalty. Rather than focus on that distasteful woman, Sesshomaru fixes his eyes on the vision in red before him—the natural scent of forest and sun, wind and rain, clean and crisp—floods his senses against the heavy aroma of an inu youkai's oncoming heat phase. Again, the demon lord is caught up in his little brother's freedom.

He moves to stand by the younger's side at the balcony's edge, watching the tide roll in to crash against the shore.

The red tint to InuYasha's cheeks is not phased by the icy winds blowing off the sea and blowing his silver hair; the symptoms are getting worse. Judging by the scent, the hanyou would have less than two days before the full onslaught weakens him physically. It would not be prudent to mince words or waste time.

"How fare you, little brother?"

The younger turns, ears crook with puppy-ish innocence. His eyes and expression, however, tell a different story. The golden gleam has aged so much in such a short time. Less than two days (two eventful days!) have passed since the younger was plucked from the wilds, and the demon lord firmly reminds himself to respect the torturous last few years InuYasha has suffered without a pack.
"Dealing." Deep breath, "this—well..." He absently scratches behind his ear in a reflex action.

"It is a great deal to cope with, this Sesshomaru understands." Slowly, he takes a few steps closer, immediately noticing the younger flinches automatically and his hand hovers over the hilt of Tetsuaiga. Very gently, "As your brother has sworn, he will not harm you anymore. This Sesshomaru is a demon of his word, and this is no trick."

Another deep breath, "yeah, yeah... Sorry about that but—"

"It will take time," the elder replies in the same tone, "you have been trained the majority of your life to fight your brother. All these years of anger and reactions will not ease within a day or a few or even longer... You and this lord will have time to forge a new relationship as brothers instead of enemies." Slowly, giving InuYasha time to step back or away, Sesshomaru lifts one striped arm and lays the palm of his hand against InuYasha's cheek. The younger one's eyes widen a bit as the thumb swipes over his face and no claws sink into his skin. Just as easy, the taller demon leans down to press his forehead against the other's.

All the heat building under InuYasha's skin comes to the fore while he stares up into a face that is not so different, yet is, than the one he is used to dealing with. The mask of cold calm is there, but his brother's eyes are not the same he is used to seeing. The act of giving back Tetsuaiga has made the hanyou re-live key moments in his life when he questioned Sesshomaru's real intents. Well, the asshole was right about one thing, coming here did answer some of the questions he's always had.

The block of emotion in his chest from the last day of pain and revelations keeps him rooted to the spot, his forehead pressed against his brother's. Part of the reason he came outside is to try cooling his feverish skin and rid himself of the increasing ache in his spine. His other symptoms could be backlash from having the scent marker removed: the ache in his skull, tingling in his chest, arms, and hands. He can even pass the fever off as this whole trial thing coming to a close. But, staring up at Sesshomaru makes him forget all that crap and actually have a bit of hope that they could really have a chance at working things out...

_I have left you in the darkness long enough..._

_Die..._

_You are safe in my care, this Sesshomaru swears it..._

_Taint to our Father's great lineage..._

_Nothing like this shall occur again..._

_You will never be anything but a pathetic stain in this Sesshomaru's bloodline..._

_No lies..._

_Your death will be at this Sesshomaru's hands, half-breed..._

Panic wells up abruptly and the hanyou steps back abruptly, unable to take his brother's golden eyes full of acceptance and serenity rather than hatred and disdain.

"There will be ample time," the elder repeats, "and this Sesshomaru will try to be as patient as possible." The animal side of his whines at this sentiment; it wants to hold their sibling, roll about in his purified scent, and feel the touch of kin once more. The demon lord, however, can deny his inu urges for the good of his brother's well-being.
"...Thanks." InuYasha sighs, rubbing his neck in an attempt to nonchalantly alleviate the strange tingling. "Should we get going or something? I mean, these guys probably don't like me too much after all the crap I said to them in there...and, uh, keh, I kinda destroyed their book collection."

It has been a long day, and Sesshomaru does not wish to stay here long enough to demand an explanation of the battle between his brother and mother. More so, a glance at the horizon only shows the final vestiges of the sun disappearing over the mountains. There will be ample chances for the re-telling another day. "There is time for setting up a camp for the night, if that is agreeable?"

The hanyou nods slightly, "good plan. Tomorrow we can start out for the shoreline and get this fighting shit over with. A nice war might be what I need right about now."

"Hn," the weight of the flask in Sesshomaru's haori reminds him that talk needs to happen before getting to the battle ground. "Fighting will help for a while."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

The demon lord turns to face the landscape, subtly giving an elegant shrug, "after...After this Sesshomaru was released from exile, all he desired was to fight. However, it did nothing. Before, fighting proved your brother was stronger, faster, more capable of surviving regardless of what the great General said. Afterwards, fighting did not aid in cope with Father's acceptance or the change. Fighting did not mean the same, nor did it give any reprieve for the anger."

*Who woulda thought, me and Sesshomaru actually talking like this?* Curious and not wanting this moment of peace to end, he asks, "What changed for you...well, between you and the old man?"

Sesshomaru's head turns for just a moment so that their golden eyes met before he looks gently away, "In all truth...your mother...played quite a part in bridging the gap between Father and son."

The younger catches a breath, staring incredulously.

"...This Sesshomaru was never comfortable with the Inu no Taisho, even after the exile was over. He fought beside the general, learned from the general, made political decisions with the general, ruled along side the general...but could not be at ease in the general's presence. Not until Father met your mother and brought her to the Western Palace did this Sesshomaru believe he was sincere in his claim of paternal feelings. Lady Izayoi...is the one that convinced your brother of his father's authenticity."

The younger couldn't have been more surprised if he'd been hit by a flying monk with a tainted hand, "Ka-san?* Maybe he was serious about not hating Mother."

"Indeed. Lady Izayoi...was the first female to show this Prince of the West any true kindness." The voice of his bad-ass demon lord brother is too soft, and InuYasha arches brow. "She is one of the few humans that has earned the respect of this lord."

*... Maybe, her death makes him sad too, but som'more stuff makes sense now.* "She never spoke a cruel word against you. Always wondered why."

"Now you know...Someday, this Sesshomaru will tell you much about the past—before and shortly after your birth. Not now, but some day."

The younger nods, hopeful that his older brother will keep his word—in more ways than one.

IV
The two inus had set up camp far from the ivory tower, had hunted dinner for a certain starving hanyou, and had a roaring fire before Sesshomaru told the younger of his slight problem.

"Heat? Feh, that's why I've been fevering and stuff..." InuYasha, sitting comfortably against the trunk of a tree, watches the fire burn rather than meet Sesshomaru's eyes. The slight tinge of embarrassment at the subject matter makes him slightly pissed off...oddly enough, who knew his brother would actually be the one to talk to him about his maturity? "It won't be a problem; I'll take care of it after the battle."

Since leaving the Elder's place, InuYasha has been fighting his own body every step of the way. With the scent marker gone and residual magic still affecting him, his senses are extremely off base. At first, standing on that balcony with Sesshomaru behind him, he felt a very real thrill of fear that maybe his scenses were permantly fucked up somehow since his nose didn't pick up the normal barrage of things around him. His hearing, it seems, is also suffering. No matter how many times he twitches his ears to gather sound, he can't seem to pick up anything further than a half mile. Shit, it took him waaaayy too long to find dinner as it was. But, some of his inner anxiety eases when Sesshomaru starts explaining what Heat is and how it affects demons.

But, his trepidation returns when Sesshomaru starts speaking again.

"You are much too close to be able to fight. Facing the Mongols...would prove dangerous to you. Other demons, even those in the Western army, would fight one another for the right to mount or be mounted by you. Combined with demonic blood-lust, one may even mate you...to the death."

Holy shit. He's serious. "Fuck," is breathed softly in reply. "The invaders would be forgotten an'..."

"Yes." Simple.

"...So, how long does Heat last for normal demons? It may not last as long for me since I'm a half-breed. Y' never know, it might not be as intense as full demons." Maybe my senses will get the hell back to normal by the time we get there. Then, I'd be able to defend myself against any fucker that might try to get at me. 'specially one that wants to slit my belly open at the same time.

Sesshomaru shrugs elegantly, "That is uncertain, little brother. You are very late in what this Sesshomaru assumes is your first Heat?"

The hanyou nods, cheeks redder still.

"And are you...untouched? Completely?"

Blink, blink.

"A virgin to both males and females?" The elder specifies.

Does he mean...? Gah, of all the times I've imagined actually talking to this bastard instead of fighting, this is not the shit I wanted to say...

Another nod and deeper blush. "I kissed a girl, twice. That's about it." He's reluctant to admit this much, but the possibility of rape scares him more than he's comfortable disclosing.

"Hn. Unfortunately, kissing is not intercourse, little brother. This will prove to hinder you more than if you had experienced intimacy before this. Most demons hit the first Heat around one hundred fifty years...since you were sealed to Goshinboku, it is possible that is why you are so late in your maturation period. However, the first Heat coupled with the first sexual experience makes the intensity more severe and could last for up to a fortnight in the most extreme cases."
The younger lays his head back and sighs hard. "Dammit..." A fortnight?

"...Do...InuYasha, is there anyone you would prefer to have see you through this time? Anyone you would be—comfortable with intimacy?"

The hanyou's eyes actually meet his brother's; it takes effort for Sesshomaru to remain completely passive and not flinch over the flat look.

"No one in their right mind wants to fuck a half-breed, Sesshomaru. So, if you have a dungeon in the Western Palace or something, I can be locked there. If not, then I'll go to my forest back closer to Edo and hide in a den or go to Miroku and Sango at the Slayer's Village... the fuck I'd put them in danger, but Sesshomaru doesn't need to know I'd probably just find a well-hidden cave and take my chances.

The demon lord actually sighs and draws InuYasha's attention. "There...is another viable option should you want to take part in the battle."

The hanyou hikes a brow in question.

Sesshomaru pulls the flask from his haori and holds it in the fire light, "this potion will give you more time before the full onslaught of your Heat sets in. If you take half the potion now and half when it begins to wear off, you will be able to fight for about seven days. However, the side effects will have consequences."

The curious hanyou tilts his head with one ear crooking slightly and takes the silver flash.

"Your Heat will be twice as intense if you use this method to postpone it. That is the only problem. You should be thinking of one that may be willing to mate with you when the time comes. There are many of whom you have aided through the years—would not one be willing to give you aid in return?"

Twice as intense? Shit. The younger stares at the small flask engraved with a baying inu in full form. I've suffered intense fevers on my human night, but seven days is going to be a bitch. Don't have any other option though. Hell, if this is just poison, then that solves the whole problem anyway.

"...Keh. Like I said, no one would willingly fuck a half-breed. Son of the General or not, I'm still a taint to his blood line. But, seven days would give me time to get somewhere secure..."

"This Sesshomaru swears he will make certain you are cared for either way, little brother. You do not have to concern yourself; no one will be allowed to harm you against your will." The elder inu is well aware his virginal little brother does not see the double entendre in his words...there would be time later for explanations. Besides, InuYasha's eyes are glued to the offering while his mind works on his next move. Put off the Heat and fight with the West, or refuse the potion and leave now to prepare himself for the worst.

Feh. Death is inevitable anyway. Opening the flask, his eyes remain on the elder as he tips it and drinks deeply.

V

Yao Xin watches his section of soldiers run through their paces; hand to hand combat on one side of the sandy shore and weaponry practice on the other. Should the enemy make it to their shores, it is imperative the infantry already know how to fight on the terrain. Luckily, their forces have reached the shores sooner than they had anticipated and have time to prepare before the two Lords
of the West arrive.

Earlier, he and Matsu divided up the soldiers in sections of twenty and had them scour every inch of beach and rock to become accustomed to the terrain should the invaders actually reach their shores. Sure, close to the castle, the ground is hard-packed earth and dirt, but here the environment is one some have not battled on before. Knowing one's surrounding could prove crucial should the Mongols manage to make it to land.

The world spirals down as a wave of power erupts from the north. It makes the hair on the back of his neck stand up on end, a recognizable youkai.

Matsu, even with his limitations as a human, also knows something is coming. "Assemble!" He yells, "Assemble!" For a human, it's somewhat surprising that super-powerful demons respect him enough to snap to his order and fall in lines according to rank. The shore is covered in soldiers when the huge white dog makes his appearance in the sky, temporarily blocking out the sun in his massive leap. For a moment, Xin has a sharp sting of nostalgia and time rewind. He sees that same shape snarling, drooling acidic death with the intent to end his life...

He blinks hard and the demonic dog is Sesshomaru, not Touga. Xin lets out a long sigh of relief, jarred back into the here and now.

Holding onto Sesshomaru's fur—transformed Tetsuaiga in hand—InuYasha wants to give in to his inner child and whoop it up. With the landscape tiny below them and the wind rushing through his hair, he feels a sense of childish glee—like he's finally getting to do something his inner child has longed to do for ages. The moment Sesshomaru suggested he transform into his inner dog, the hanyou felt a mixture of fear and excitement. From previous experience, he knew how formidable the bastard was as a towering mutt, but when the next statement assured him he could ride on his brother's back, he suddenly got excited enough that his ears perked.

"Really? I get to ride on your back?"

"This Sesshomaru's true form will give the troops the spirit they need before a fight of this intensity. You may ride upon your brother's back if you wish."

Oh yeah. Fuck, yeah.

He resists the urge to call out, but just barely. His fever and aches left in a rush after swallowing half the bitter contents of the flask; his senses sharpened again, and now he is ready for Ass-kickin-Palooza. He is hungry for battle (the chance to fight now that he no longer has to worry about being exiled and whatnot), invigorated at the chance to prove himself. This is the opportunity for a new start, away from the life of a half-breed bastard cast out of his father's lands. This war is going to be the first step. More so, riding on the transformed dog's back just seems to feed his youkai even more. His skin is itching, his hands tingling to bring Tetsuaiga down on some skulls. At Sesshomaru's mighty leap, the transformed dog howls an ear-splitting call meant to reach the invaders crossing the sea to make sure they realize the Western lands are ready for bloodshed. This call only raises the hanyou's spirit even more... This is what it feels like, to be part of something...

Landing on the beach before his men, Sesshomaru regally stands in full form with the half moon on his forehead radiating deep, violet light. His red eyes sweep the assembled soldiers with calculating thought, resting on the dragon riders and sections of elementals standing at attention. The boats have not been launched as of yet and line the shore in preparation. In the trees behind him, deeper in the sparse trees, the birds of prey caw in subdued tones—aware a real predator is close; the scent of Tengu assures him the birds will be allies rather than adversaries. He would have to tell Xin to
keep a close eye on the birds after the fighting, regardless. Yet, having the Elder present and on their side is more than heartening.

InuYasha hops off the demon dog with shit-eatin' grin giving him a younger appearance; he faces the army with his massive sword over one shoulder. His is so invigorated that it takes a second to realize the whole army (generals and all) is looking straight at him. He notices after a second and his smile loses its luster at being the center of attention. The huge white dog at his back gives him a not-so-subtle nudge of encouragement.

"InuYasha-sama," Xin bows low with both hands at his side.

In a mass move, the entire Western army and allies gives a fighting shout ("hwaaa!") and bow low before him. The beach full of bowing demons of every type, with some humans thrown in, give a little more proof of his new status.

"Yeah, Yeah," the hayou calls loudly, his voice carrying far along the beach. "So, -uh, oh yeah—Well, the fact that yer all here speaks for you. Just like me an' my brother, Sesshomaru, you feel responsible to keep the Western Lands safe... You fight beside us...and, well, you may bleed beside us, too, all in the name of this land that is ours to protect." Before their eyes, this former miscreant, a foul-mouthed, bad-tempered, quick-acting half-breed, turns into a charismatic speaker with charming bluntness and sincerity that flashes from his eyes as he emphasizes 'ours'.

"We're here today to make a stand against those that want to our lands, our women, our children, and everything that we got. Those are the enemy. That's why we're here." His sword buries to the hilt in rock, "This land ain't perfect, and bad things happen to good people some times, but this place is ours," clapping and cheering burst from the ranks, "... and no 'across-the-sea,' cold-ass, motherfuckin', my-ancestors-are-better-than-yers, invading cocksuckers are gonna take it! Not while I'm still breathing and hefting my sword!"

Calls and declarations erupt from the mass that agrees.

"Those invading bastards ain't gonna tell us how to live. They ain't gonna tell us who to follow or when to fight! They ain't gonna rule me, that's for fuckin' sure!" His voice carries over the din stirs more to raise their arms in agreement. "They think their better than us, faster than us, an' meaner than us! So, we're gonna show 'em their dead wrong! I'll be damned if their soldiers are better than any of you, or their weapons better than my Tetsuaiga!" Here, the legendary sword thrusts into the air for emphasis.

Even Shikazu cheers from the front lines.

"We're here, each and every one of us are here for the same reason. We're gonna defend what's ours!"

Weapons fly in the air, held aloft by the declaration. Spots of glowing fire from powerful youkai seal the pact.

"Tonight, we pray. At dawn, we attack."

VI

The war tent is in the process of being moved and re-assembled at the beach, formerly hidden back in the dense foliage for subterfuge. It is where the land generals and head fliers will set up base command. Several parties of stealth birds map the invader's progress as they paddle through the now tranquil oceans, lacking a breeze for their sails, to come ever closer to the shores of Nippon.
By dawn, they would be mostly through the wide, open space to be less than fifty miles off-shore. Soon as the sun peeks over the horizon, the ally boats would set sail to meet the Mongols head-on, thirty to fifty-miles off their own coast. Launched one after another, five groups of thirty ships would be deployed one after another to make a solid line of defense, with the back line able to break away and catch spare ships passing. While the elementals previously worked miracles for the Inu no Taisho, many could not function after a massive attack— most fell unconscious after use of incredible energy—and added to the high death toll. Thus, elementals are in ships but not on the back of dragons.

Foot soldiers line the coast in command of the secondary catapults in line with the horizon. The trebuchets are for short range attacks if the first line of defense breaks. Other soldiers are in-line behind the catapults with fire-shooting cannons (similar to Renkotsu from the Band of Seven) and an assistant to re-load. Behind the first two lines, armed foot soldiers are at the ready.

At night fall, the army stays on alert and camp out in their position, cooking what might be the last meal over multiple fires while the cooks run from station to station to give out bread and dry goods while meat is roasted by humans and picky demons or non-picky demons consume their fare raw. Soldiers on loan from the other nations camp out with the West, preparing for the attack. While the anticipation tinged with fear run rampant through men and demons (the basic surge of emotions before battle), the group as a whole eats, laughs, and tells stories as one nation rather than four. Their comradiarie will prove a strength in battle, for every soldier knows that he must trust the man at his back, regardless of North, South, East, or West.

Few exceptions rise alone from the whole; InuYasha stands on the beach, allowing the waves to lick at his feet. His keen senses focus on as far passed the waves as he can sense; he even concentrates on pulsing his aura to reach further than usual. Just as spies have reported, the slight waves of power roll across the endless stretch of blue. The invaders are out there, on their way to his shores with weapons and the new things called "guns." InuYasha has already been briefed of the plans for attack; he and Sesshomaru will take to the water with the rest of the first attack. He wasn't so certain of this plan, especially considering his powerful attacks would have enough force to blow him off of any ship, but Sesshomaru only had to say, "InuYasha will be at this lord's side while we attack." And, he was on-board. It would be fine—dogs are good swimmers after all.

The wind flirts with his hair, for once pulled into a top knot to keep the extreme length out of his face. He needs as few distractions as possible while in the middle of the blue since it is his time to prove his worth in the eyes of the people and Sesshomaru. This Great Trial business is still messing with, not only, his self-perceptions but also reality as he had previously known it. Not the demon Elders; nah, those sick fucks are powerful enough to crush him if he attempts retaliation for exile. Maybe in a few decades (when they are not expecting it), he might go back to pay them a little visit, or he could fuck the trial up by helping the next poor pup subjected to the wilds of Nippon. Yeah, that would probably be the best way to get back at 'em: make sure all the exiles survive.

But more so, his last human night now leaves him more unbalanced than before by his brother's complete change: Sesshomaru showing him patience and protection. The promise sealed by lips, making him slightly uncomfortable. Not a ruse (or so it seems so far). If he fights now, kills, wins, then life may keep on this track. His brother, the strongest youkai lord in the land, would keep claiming him as kin. Those cruel words (stain, filth, mongrel) might one day fade—if he only fights and keeps winning.

Fate...the universe's way of manipulating an outcome.

Standing solitary with the sounds of the army behind him, the hanyou cuts a figure untouched by the will of the world—only his exists. He will not fail. Not Sesshomaru and not the Western
Day dawns bright and clear, without the hint of fog. Before the sun peeks even a inch over the horizon, the army of Nippon is preparing for war. Armor is tightened, blades are sharpened, quivers are filled with arrows, spears are tested and final prayers to the Gods are uttered.

It is time to protect what is theirs.

Not able to sleep, the hanyou has unabashedly walked the beach all night in the blistering cold. He had ignored his brother's invitation to share a pallet in the Lord of the West's tent, choosing to use the quiet to keep watch with the guards on duty. His night, while watchful, gave him ample time to think about the changes in his life so far, and to come to some kind of understanding. He would fight with his whole heart, just as he had done to protect Kagome and Shippo, Miroku and Sango, if he is truly free from exile, then his duty is not to protect more than just a little pack. The Western lands is his pack now.

"My lord!" Xin approaches the hanyou without earning an indication of the younger's attention. He bows in a slight apology before speaking, earning a raised brow in response. "We are ready to launch the first battalion of ships at your command." The advisor clasps InuYasha's elbow discreetly turning the hanyou between the rows of ship.

"Mine? Keh. This is Sesshomaru's show—" Each captain is standing with crew beside the first wave, bowing to him as he passes, and the hanyou just huffs in good-natured annoyance with all the lousy pomp and circumstance. He knows his ship by two-legged demon lord shining white in the early morning hours, impatient (it seems) for the retaliating move to begin. They are close to dead center in the first line, first in the on-coming clash.

"And yours mi'lord. He awaits you at the head ship, and the others stand by in preparation." One arm behind his back, the other hand comes to stroke his fu in a usual tick.

"Hn," the hanyou gives Xin a scrutinizing eye, "you'll keep an eye on stuff here?" Remembering his conversation with the old fox at the Western Palace, InuYasha recalls the advisor's history. Well, he certainly wouldn't want to fight his own people after he left 'em (for whatever reason), so he couldn't blame Xin for staying with the land troops.

"Aye, sire. Not long before your birth, I waited while your father and Lord Sesshomaru went for, uh, negotiations. I will have everything in control for your safe return." "I'll keep Sesshomaru in line, you worry about the rest. That's all I ask." The hanyou replies with mock exasperation. "Long as that simple bastard doesn't blow us all to hell with his sword, the other guys ought to be pretty damn easy to take out."

The foreigner's eyes widen a mere second before he bursts out with laughter.

"Apparently that's my cue." Wiry grin in place, InuYasha pats the chuckling Xin on the shoulder and strides down the beach while working his tight shoulders and arms. All the boats are built with the same simple design to keep the other side from knowing which are crucial (ones with extra ammunition or ones with their prize elementals), or so he guessed. Well, maybe making a few super spiffy boats was just too much to ask for, who knew?

The upper deck could hold up to fifteen people for war while the lower deck holds ten men to work
the rudimentary system of power to propel each boat—keeping supplies and finicky dragons hidden until the invaders emerge. The first battalion remains spread out over the calm wave as the water elementals in the first, second, and third lines use minimal effort to keep the sea tranquil and water eddies clear for the crews to steer around. As the sun continues its' rise, the navy moves closer to the advancing Moguls. Three scouts meet the head ship, land dragons on deck, and dismount to kneel at InuYasha's feet (since Sesshomaru is currently below deck). The hanyou blinks for a second in surprise then guffaws loudly.

"They are incredibly close, armed with the new weaponry, milord. Precisely due North at five clicks an hour!" The first rider bows his head with the report.

With less than a moment to think about what he should say in moments like this, the hanyou blurs out, "Uh, good—good work. Fly back to tell our troops to send the next waves out. Warn them the fightin'll be on, so the sea'll be rough. Get some food in ya and come back for the hunt!" The grin on his face, a boyish excitement gleaming in the depths of his golden eyes, all strike the scouts as so similar to the confident charm of his great father. Unlike their Lord, his younger brother seems almost...well, nice.

The other two hide grins at the young lord while the first rider makes an effort to keep his face straight instead of laughing. The three bow to him with an, "Aye, sire!" as well as the conviction to alert the land forces before riding directly back on rested dragons. It seems fighting with the young hanyou would indeed be an experience they don't want to miss.

As the gorilla-faced riders take to the sky, the ship rocks minutely with the kick-off. Sauske, the captain of their vessel (a boar demon with golden ring through his nose and sharp blue eyes), watches the waves in front of them. He has remained by the hanyou's side on deck throughout the journey; in his eyes, the young one is the picture of his father in youth. The shape of his face and hands, determination set in his jaw-line, and gleam of anticipation in his eyes all reminds Sauske of the late Inu no Taisho. While Sesshomaru has proven himself as a fair and just Lord of the West, he is not as approachable as his sibling; in this way, he and the great general differ. It seems the second son takes after the father in a completely different manner.

Both, as integral parts of the Inu no Taisho, amplify the general's strength two-fold; the two brothers together will make the Western Lands an eventual power house. With these hopeful thoughts, Sauske intends to make sure the younger lord's first time on a war vessel goes without incident.

InuYasha, on the other hand, is oblivious to the future; his mind is focuses in the here and now. His sharp eyes scan the waves and his heightened sense of smell can detect the sweat of many men closing in mixed with the sharp bite of salt. "Signal the other ships. The bastards are close enough that I can smell 'em. "Aye, sire," Sauske glances over at the two soldiers by the flares. The blue one goes up quickly, and the other ships slightly behind them scramble into action.

The kept dragons and riders armed with fire cannons and arrows are brought above deck. In small groups (to keep boats from overturning with the force of ten dragons lifting off all at once), the sky is quickly filled with low-flying soldiers with make-shift explosions in saddle bags and fire breathing beasts.

From below, Sesshomaru follows the dragons to stand beside his younger brother and the captain of their ship. His armor is tightened and complete with the other set of shoulder spikes. The expression on his face is the grim determination that reminds the younger of the battle with Sou'ung; once the infected Takemaru spewed shit about the family, Sesshomaru's icy-ass face changed to something the younger learned to fear and even respect. No disdain or superiority, but
the determination that someone was going to get a severe ass-kicking—and not even to feed an oversized ego or to make a point to an enemy—but for matters of principle and honor alone. It was his first glimpse of his brother's ethical side.

And there, finally amidst the waves, the first sight of their enemy breaches the frigid mid-morning light.

IX

As expected by the allied forces, the Mongols indeed learned from their past failures.

Xin, maintaining their stand on the beach, and his subordinates keep a keen eye on the skies and waves to anticipate anything. From the words of spies, these new weapons (called "guns") could mean anything in the first clash.

Similar as the last time the invaders attempted to reach the shore, Yao Xin waits with outer-calm while the apprehension churns in his gut. One day, the true elementals of his people would make an appearance in one of these skirmishes and change the turn of sea warfare. Of course, the Inu no Taisho knew of the secret kept by the Mongols—Xin had sworn an oath to be true to his new lord—and anticipated a clash of the elements on both sides in each battle. Previously, Nippon's own force of demons had, however, swayed the outcome in their favor. But...

Why attack now of all times?

Answer: a new generation of elementals has matured, come into their powers, and are ready for bloodshed.

The problem: even one of Xin's six children could add to the Mongols' numbers—his children that all have power, intense power like both their sire and carrier. Any of his four male or three female children (all of whom would be well over two hundred now—even his youngest daughter) could be in the midst of entanglement, or on the other end of the mighty Wind Scar. For this, the betrayal of his people, Xin feels the slow creep of fear up his spine as the consequences have a very real opportunity to manifest. As he, his children had shown promise in wielding the forces of nature—each showing an affinity for a specific force overall, just like him. His own daughter and son could be generating the wind power for the ships to sail...

His concern for his newer people takes precedence in the fore of his mind, and the advisor forces himself to focus on the present.

"Sir!"

The call comes from a young raccoon demon perching precariously on the top of a trebuchet, and Xin's gaze follows a pointing finger to a group of small black dots in the north-west skies.

Good thing we've got fire power of our own!

"Load the catapults!" is followed by ordered yet frantic scrambling in all directions; not only are two men assigned to load the Western land's specially made, flaming projectiles, but each general lining the beach makes a similar order while the archers ready themselves to send a barrage flying by notching the first arrow. Around each, a ring of arrows ready for rapid fire. Meanwhile, men and demons strain to lift the heavy bundles of wood soaked in accelerant into the baskets and set the counterweight to make the arm fall and fling the soon-to-be flaming logs through the skies. The catapults in carts (regardless of the sandy terrain) are quickly re-positioned while the dots become clearer and are closing in, fast.
Unaware he is ankle-deep in ocean, Xin allows his inner senses to be open at the ebb and flow of power vibrating through the morning sky. Demonic in nature, supernatural auras... A number of powerful ones come their way. All upper-ranking demons strain themselves to get an accurate count of how many the land forces are up against as well as the nature of the fliers.

"Steady, not yet!" He calls while immersed in the surge of new power.

The animalistic screeching shatters the crashing of the waves as they come within his super-sensitive earshot. Some are riding bird-like animals—well, definitely winged creatures, that much is visible—while others seem to have wing spans, but these are false constructions made of wood, metal, and cloth shaped around each warrior. Mumbling breaks out among the demonic soldiers at this rare phenomenon as the fliers get ever closer. A few must be elementals to keep the wind in their favor, speeding more and more to fill the sky with sheer numbers. The reverberation becomes even more unbearable, making even the humans tighten with the feeling of impending battle and the mixture of chemicals in the brain that creates fear and anticipation. Just waiting for the signal, gunners twitch and pace.

"Warning shot!" Halfway down the beach, Matsu Shikazu watches the fuss while standing with his foot soldiers. His hand tightens on the shaft of a spear, one he can throw long distances. The anticipation of battle is already sharp on his tongue.

One catapult is manned, and the demon pulls the counter weight. His corresponding archer stands with string taunt and another lighting his arrow. The arrow-head follows the flying logs in an arch before his weapon will not lose the flame while sailing to meet its' target.

A small paff is the projectile catching fire, and the band tying the logs together split and the wood breaks off to take down several fliers with one blow and create general chaos in the sky. Three hundred or more keep baring down on the Western shores—no signs of slowing.

"Ready the first barrage!"

The enemy fleet is made up of thirty larger ships (presumably carrying weapon and ammunition) and a hundred smaller, more maneuverable vessels waving out across the horizon—no colors. The first explosion comes from the head Mongol ship; one that also carries newer technology as well as old world magic with a pink-hued dome constructed around the lead ships. Their defenses are powered by the equivalent to youkai: inner chi. From behind the safety of the barrier, their blasts are able to surpass the energy field while giving protection from enemy fire. The ingenious humans teamed up with more than elementals.

Two men perch on the bow bracing a large, metal cannon to fire the first projectile. The small puffs signals action. No attempt at political maneuvering; Sesshomaru raises one hand to signal the ready.

"Oi, Sesshomaru," the hanyou merely says his name before, earning a glance. The hanyou is back twenty feet, sword in hand, and the other instinctively turns. Gold eyes meet with shared determination, and pointedly, the demon lord bends slightly and cups both hands before him. Again, the feeling strikes InuYasha with less time than a breath: Fate. Gods, this is where it's all lead... he thinks inanely while looking at his brother and the first instance of cooperation.

This signals the beginning of the Western offense. He darts forward and trusts him brother to help him. With Sesshomaru's propulsion, the hanyou (deciding to make an example in the first shot) shoots off like a cannon and leaps with his sword braced to meet the projectile's path. He doesn't
shake the feeling this time, but merely accepts that this battle will determine the outcome of his life. Some indications have already given him the needed proof of Sesshomaru's sincerity and the Elder's cruelty...but only time will give him what he needs to make a final decision with regards to his brother (the one whom he is trusting enough to give him a boost into the air).

His foot lands in the cup of the demon lord's hands, and the moment of doubt is replaced with the strength of his kin propelling him into the sky. As always, the feeling of gravity falling away and the on-coming onslaught slows time even though the controlled power of his brother launching him upward is immense; time slows enough for him to see the power of the attack swirling around the blade and the scar to appear in the wind current the ball of lead makes as it cuts through the sky. Cruising into the blue spans separating the armies, he swings with might.

The opposing side had learned of the Wind Scar through stories of survivors from the last great war; their generals expected an intense energy wave shaped like claws that had once cleaved their many ships in twain. Their own demon population on the ships amasses in the bow of each boat as soon as the Nippon are spotted, and the barrier of energy is meant to rebound a wave of powerful youkai.

However, what they did not account for is the Adamant Barrage, and the effect it has on more than just one lead ball.

Flying diamonds obviously make for a change in strategy—shards that have an incredible knack for finding the weaknesses in the Mongol's defenses. Several of the ones creating the shield flinch or fail in the face of the unexpected attack. Their barriers are meant to take a spread out blow of demonic energy, but the oncoming diamonds raise an outcry of fear and warning. The cry jolts the ones making the barriers and concentration is broken. Some ships are taken out completely, and others are filled with holes punched through hulls or sails destroyed.

All in all, it's a good first shot for the hanyou (whom is casually cruising backwards through sky with the momentum from the barrage) and he can't help the smug little grin as the sword still in hand seems to pulse in similar arrogance.

Of course... Some things never change.

The blow strikes the intended mark with better destruction than he had hoped for (let's be honest, getting close enough to use the red barrier breaker in a water battle? He may be impulsive, but not stupid), yet—as in his usual style—he had not thought the move completely through. The landing part is still a bit sketchy but not something to worry about since one of those damn boats should be behind him somewhere... If not, well, he could swim okay (even though he hates getting wet in the first place).

Unbelievably, he expects to land on the deck and ends up bumping into his sibling's chest only ten feet in the air. The lord moved with stunning speed to keep the younger from missing the head ship and landing in the ocean. Below, their own forces are cheering at the destructive power of the new lord—sending quite a message in the first blow.

"Play time is over," Sesshomaru sets InuYasha back on deck and cracks his knuckles before pulling his iiBakusaiga. Even at this distance, the lord knows retaliation will be fire power rather than elemental shifts. His attack can disintegrate their puny weapons so the army can have ample time for the next attack. His ki cloud forms at his feet, zipping him from the boat while the Mongols scramble to plug the holes in their defenses and return fire. Already, more projectiles sail. Under the boats, the water turns choppy and turbulent as the Elementals on both ships try using wind and water to overturn the other.
In a quick withdraw, Bakusaiga's attack (similar to the Wind Scar and the same version of nightmarish demise the Mongols' ancestors suffered) rips through water and air to make the final blow needed to take out the shield and in-coming fire in one swoop. Of course, watching the damage closely, he could not miss the sound of InuYasha nudging Sauske and murmuring, "Keh! Show-off."

...He came very close to smiling—in front of the Western army.

Absurd.

Rather than wait for retaliation, Sesshomaru turns with sword raised above his head and voice carrying clear: "Full weapons, FIRE!"

XI

"FIRE!"

More flaming bundles fly at the in-coming brigands. The trebuchets nearly sound in unison, creaking as the tension is released for another offensive move. The second and third lines are busy now that a vast amount of the black dots have maneuvered through the mine field of catapult fire and flaming arrows to streak across the sky closer to mainland; some have even landed on the shores and face the infantry of humans and demons. Swords, axes, staves (the plural of staff :P), spears, and all matter of weapons fly; the smell of a hundred different blood spills throughout the beach.

Above the skirmish, the skies darken while the span of cloud coverage swirls and blackens out the sun. The shadows of the half-bird, half-beast creatures dips over the fighting armies, dropping small explosives. But they were not the ones changing the sky. The darkness has a master, a creator. Yao Xin, in the midst of ordering the attack, senses the pulsing of power in the sky to his very core.

The elder demon actually pauses; anger, guilt, and anticipation roll through him in a great, sudden wave.

His sword (or axe) arm, still frozen in the command to fire, trembles minutely as his eyes widen. Everything around him slows to a crawl: the soldiers yelling in front of the catapult, calf deep in ocean, raise weapons for the next strike or take glancing blows off their black, lacquer and steel armor. The machines themselves decelerate to inches in releasing the next round of boulders this time in the worm hole slowing time for Xin.

Even the battle cries and keening death knells ring in sluggish decrescendo.

And out of the sky, his worst fears are made reality.

XII

"Fffffffuuuuuuuuccccckkkkkkk—yyyyyeeeeeaaaaaaahhhhhhh!"

The drawn-out call comes from one certain hanyou, swinging through mid-air with one hand gripping a dragon's leg and the other with Tetsuaiga held out in a powerful arch. The Wind Scar around the blade swirls as his vision spirals to the wind's cut between the moving head vessel and line of attack ships flanking it.

Rather than draw back and swing to use momentum to release the attack (which could potentially kill his ride), he tries holding the blade flat in front of him and uses will and youkai alone. It takes
only seconds for his youkai to build around his flying form and transfer to the blade.

"Careful sire!" The young female directing the dragon calls as the blade takes on its' otherworldly glow.

"Wind Scar!"

Mayhem.

The force of the attack rakes through the enemy ships and obliterates or severs each that it strikes. Mongul humans have taken to the water to be pulled up by still functioning ships or drown. The remaining vessels intact are charging at the Western army, full speed and still firing. Half the cannons are pointed at the opposing side while the other half fires at the dragons and riders in the sky. A few are not able to out-maneuver the enemy barrages and fall to the ocean or onto enemy ships to continue the fight.

Scared at the blast, the dragon veers sharply, even with its' handler jerking uselessly at his reins. The hanyou eeps (not like a girl or anything, but a— you know, manly kind of eep) as his hanging body fights the incisive move; his grip tightens on the lower belt of the beast's saddle, pulling himself up one-handed to try getting in the saddle behind the rider. A spot- on arrow, however, sinks deep in his upper thigh and another sinks deep enough in his bicep to come out the other side. The abrupt pain causes his hand to spasm and the hilt of Tetsuaiga to escape.

No!

He lets go of the dragon immediately, free-falling through the sky after the heirloom.

"Sire!" The rider screams just as another barrage of steel (steel, not wood!) wiz close to her mount. The soft 'paffs' must be these new weapons she has heard about; ones with tiny lead balls that could kill a man with one stroke. She pulls up sharply, making the dragon veer up out of the way. Her eyes never leave the young, plummeting lord as she wheels the dragon around.

While falling, InuYasha jerks the arrows out of himself and holds an arm to cover his eyes in case any more arrow would attack while watching his precious Tetsuaiga falls just out of reach.

Meanwhile:

Sesshomaru, eyes narrow, watches the clash on the invader's side from their moving ships. Closing in with guns still firing, the Western army sends long range shots from smaller guns in combination to powerful ki attacks from the first line of ships. Each has both demon offensive and human defensive forces with multiple cannons; on the demonic command, ki blasts in all the colors of the rainbow rain from the Western army.

Their mounted dragon riders and passengers create gale force winds and swirling whirlpools in several spots to trap the more maneuverable ships and drop explosive charges in the midst of the cluster.

Thus far, the battle plan is working beautifully. Few of their forces are lost while the invaders have taken quite a beating. So...what is happening? What is their real motive? By his count, so many more should have been on the water to meet them; so obviously, the Mongolians are focusing their attack elsewhere. Whether it be the shores or one of the four palaces, he is not certain. Sauske already had the psychically talented demons on board send messages to the forces back in the palace to keep them aware. Nothing back from Xin yet, and the demon lord is almost certain a battalion or two snuck around the island to reach the shores from the southern end. They needed to
Turning to the captain, he gives orders to keep the offensive and creates his cloud to journey out to the thick of the fighting.

Tetsuiga hits the frigid water, plunging into the deep. Its' carrier dove straight in after it. Arrows hit the surface of the water right after him. But, the abrupt shock of the dive and the instant cold doesn't give him time to worry about the pain in his calf or back. He has the sight of Tetsuiga gently gliding down to the depths. InuYasha gives a powerful kick to propel him closer, clawing frantically to reach the sword before he loses sight or some fish comes by to snap it up. Hell, as weak as his half-blood is, even the chance of hypothermia is enough to make him keep moving.

As much as his luck ran, the sword would be in the grips of some sea god that he'd have to fight to get it back, yadda, yadda, yadda. Hell, maybe even Kagome could help with her shitty aim but decently powerful arrows...

His numb hand snatches this hilt as that thought tickles across him brain out of nowhere. Kagome? Kagome isn't waiting for him on the surface...She's gone, been gone. No, it's Sesshomaru, right? Sesshomaru is the one waiting for him on the surface.

Something massive shakes the waves around him, creating a heavy vibration, and the hanyou snaps himself back to the deed at hand. He's further from the surface than he originally thought and slightly panics at the shapes flittering around him. The vibrations hit harder around him and an explosion rocks the surface. Quickly, the hanyou tucks the sword back into his belt and starts with long strokes upward before another explosion throws debris everywhere. However, his lungs are burning for air and the pain in his back worsens with each frigidly cold stroke.

Just as he is nearing the top, the water shifts again and something dark falls right above him, a metal cannon from the invaders' ship hits right overtrop the straining hanyou. The force hits his chest and drives him again back down into the deep.

XIII

The two plunge down in twin swishes of blurry humanoid shape. While chaos erupts around him, Xin's eyes are only for the set of twins that literally appear before him.

Dressed in warrior's clothing from his old tribe, the two emit a deadly, powerful, and singular aura. No weapons are necessary for the two staring at him, for they are dangerous without such frivolities. The male is only half a head taller than his sister, with narrow and angry eyes. His own fu Manchu barely reaches the center of his chest. The girl, however, is the ice to his fire. She calmly regards the destruction and death around them, her own eyes a steel gray with blue flecks in contrast to her twin's black gaze. Under her iiilemallar armor, she is thin as a reed, willowy and graceful as the wind: the perfect opposite to her brother's blunt and brutal style.

"He is alive!" The male, his son ivBadzar, roars in the Mongolian language. He throws back his head and streams of flames erupt from his throat to sear the sky.

"The Dragon's Cry... Xin blinks and breathes at them, now ignoring the consistent grind of the catapults firing or the swishes and wet pops of a sword sliding into flesh for the kill. His senses become hyper-alert in order to scent his eldest children: ashes and electric, spring and rain.

"It is you," his very own daughter, vSarangerel, asks with curiosity rather than assumption.

He mentally recalculates his rusty knowledge of the vocabulary while trying to express painful
truths. Since his original name is long forgotten, he simply nods at them, "I am called Yao Xin here."

"You should not be alive! You should have killed yourself when they took you prisoner," his son rails, and the winds start to pick up around them.

"I joined them willingly." He counters, "I found a worthy leader to follow here."

The mirror of shock on both their faces makes his chest ache for their pain. "I thought it better that you never know."

Sarangerel raises a single finger at him, "you left us, all of us, for another leader? Another khan? Are we such a disgrace to you, Father? We who have trained in your honor until we are the elite?"

With the battle churning around them, Yoa Xin still has enough conscious to feel the burn of pain in his chest at her hurt tone. "No. My defection had nothing to do with you or any flaws in any of mine offspring. The old regime surpassed cruelty and gluttony when we first came to these shores for plunder and women. The General we fought, however, was a man of his word, and a man of the people. He did not take my life in exchange for my place as his advisor. I have been such ever since, even now unto his offspring."

This enraged his son even more, as noted by the small plumes of black smoke that puff out of his nostrils with heaving breath. "To his offspring? What about your own?"

"Never have I forgotten my children. But, returning to the clan in disgrace was not an option, and here, the General gave me freedom as well as honor. I have made sacrifices, son of mine. Some from which I have never recovered." He simply states, "your anger is justified, but you must not attack. You may surrender and stay here, for I will use my power here to keep the both of you from a prisoner camp; or, my children, you must go. Leave now and return home without battle but with your lives. For your own sakes, flee and do not attack the Western army!"

"We are no cowards afraid of your lord and master!" Badzu mouth trickles flame.

Saranagerel stays silent and mourns for her father on the inside.

"Do not flee as cowards, but return home as survivors!" But, Xin knows he is begging for a lost cause. The two look at one another and take a step back, dismissing their so-called father, and the attacks begin. A wall of water amasses with speed and accuracy of a true elemental while a bolt of blinding lightening streak down into the battling crowd. The twin's aura shifts and surges to command nature. The wave grows as it speeds toward the shores and sends both armies to forget the fighting and run for safety.

Xin watches and refuses to run.

XIV

Dying this way...suumucks...

On his way to the deep, shadows dance around the hanyou. He is so cold, even the precious oxygen still in his lungs is freezing. He can't maneuver around the cannon weighing him down, and his limbs are non-responsive anyway.

Fuck'n fate, huh?...Never meant to come back outta exile in the first place.

He keeps sinking, further into the blue.
Kagome...miss you. Glad yer not here to see me die like this.

Lights blast above the water, fading...

Too bad, Sesshomaru...all of it—for nothing

Out of nowhere, something firm snatches him by the ear and he wastes precious air to yelp. An arm, then a hand, and then two grasp his arms and pull. The weight boring him down to ocean floor continues its' descent to be forgotten in time while he is sped toward the surface at fantastic speed. His mind, numb as the rest of him, barely registers much but movement.

Breaking the surface is like rebirth in that he finds himself propelled into the air while spewing water from his lungs and belly. He manages to land on the deck of a ship, too disoriented to do much more than roll to land on his side so the arrows in his back and leg aren't driven deeper.

"Motherf—" he starts and glides to his numb feet with rusty Tetsuaiga drawn as he stands.

The shocked Mongolians stare at him while the demon in the bow of their ship merely gapes.

Goddammit! What grabbed-? Wrong ship!

The heartbeat of dumbfounded silence gives him the much-needed moment to hold up his sword and let it transform into the full fang. Good think since the soldiers are on him in an instant, and the hanyou forces himself to move, to keep fighting, ducking and weaving along the deck with fluid finesse honed in five years of unaided fighting as the crew members apparently realize he is not one of them. Fighting is helping the numbness in his limbs, generating heat to make the blood flow and fight off the cold. Taking out one human after another helps keep his mind on the next move; a sword thrusts into his right shoulder and the arrow in his back is shoved deeper in the melee.

The Elemental of the ship stops manipulating the waves and shoves a harsh wind at the hanyou. Some sixth sense makes InuYasha duck in time to see three soldiers thrown over the side by a harsh gust. He grins, jumps back up and takes a leap before the Elemental can draw another burst. But, the bastards draws a magical sword and tries to take a chunk out of the hanyou's hide. The two dance, exchanging blows while the turbulent sea tosses the ship back and forth. Nimble-footed, InuYasha has the upper hand. He backflips to take himself out of sword's way and watches other soldiers pour out from below deck, many holding the new 'gun' weapon-thingies. A line of the bastards kneel and point the barrels directly at him.

Just for fun, the hanyou sticks his tongue out with the sword held in front of him to shield from the metal pellets about to be imbedded in his hide. Luckily enough, a mini-explosion dropped from a certain, female dragon rider hits the side of the ship and send the humans and their weapons off-kilter. The shots go wild and only two or three actually whiz close to him. His grin feral, the hanyou dives back into the frey.

Overhead, more riders are dropping the small, flaming projectiles and the cacophony of zooms with pin-point accuracy fly now that the West is in proximity. The Mongolian vessels are being individually attacked and boarded by smaller eight- man boats, and many behind the front line (the ones not sunk or burning or a battleground) are sounding a retreat.

It seems victory is eminent.

The youth, however, thinks of nothing except the new move, the next step, the next twitch, the next swish, the next jump, the next attacker at his back. He leaps from ship to ship to stop the
retreating vessels and take out as many bastards as he possibly can. While his hands, face, and front
become coated in the blood of his enemies, his mind remains in perpetual motion of a deadly killer
(reminiscent of a certain aristocratic assassin). Anarchy explodes on the seas around them, and still
he leaps over floating debris and bodies. If it wasn't for the invading troops, he probably just would
have Wind Scarred the bastards into oblivion. However, the young prince will not kill him own
men in order to take out the final, main body of the invaders.

One ship's final demon waits for the slaughter of his companions and attacks after bodies fall in
haphazard piles. The demon sees chance to take out the impossibly effective warrior and perhaps
gain bragging rights. The hanyou advances and the demon feins stepping back while his aura
pulses with energy. With the mythic sword raised for a killing blow to his middle, the demon
throws out an arm and makes a pulling gesture as if yanking on an invisible rope.

The ship rocks sharply, impossibly to the right with a created wave; the elemental is already
holding onto the left side to anchor himself and merely waves an arm. As expected, the sure-footed
hanyou eeps a second time (manly eep, mind you) as he tumbles across the deck, without cutting
the hell out of his already beaten body, and manages to catch himself with one hand before going
overboard.

He makes a single leap back up to the righted ship, sword drawn back, when a wet flop makes the
boards under his feet vibrate. The mer-man (similar to little Ai on viMystic Island but with a crazy
iridescently scaled tale) that washed in the boat defies gravity to leap up and slam the elemental
demon with his wide tail and send the enemy tumbling over the side. The mer-man gives him and
wink and vanishes back over the side of the vessel. He leaves the hanyou with a pile of bodies,
slumped form, tilted head, and incredulous expression.

The fuck...? His mouth closes with a soft click. No big, I've seen crazier shit than that.

An explosion beside the boat rock it again, faster then before, and there is no time for footing.
Time for another dip in the ocean, apparently. At least he's more prepared for it. He's holding his
breath, gripping the sword and preparing for breaking the turbulent surface of the water...when a
furry tail wraps around him and hauls him up in the air.

Sesshomaru's little cloud gets longer as the blinking, sputtering hanyou is set behind him so that he
can make a decisive down strike to sink the ship and two getting away.

InuYasha grins behind his brother's back, wounds forgotten, and leaps to his feet to stand back-to-
back with the demon lord to strike from the other side. Rather than use the Mediou, Kongosoha, or
Kaze no Kizu (considering their troop on the water still fighting), he has the space and time to
concentrate on the only attack that would give their men time to get the hell out of the way:
viiRyuurin. With his inner strength, he feels the rough cloth on the hilt and focuses on drawing
alien youkai into the blade...

Swirling energies pull from its' masters at the call of the mighty sword. The Elementals and
demons causing such a ruckus scream in denial as their strength is drawn in this—a highly
unexpected move. From the waters' depths and the ships' recesses, glowing energy leaves its' hosts
unconscious all around. Winged creatures fall out of the sky, and the turbulent waters finally seem
to calm. With five years of solitary fighting under his belit, he can focus on the invaders and leave
their own forces unharmed by the attack. His own youkai can seek out the energy signatures in the
Mongols and set them apart from the soldiers of Nippon.

While Sesshomaru keeps up active offense, InuYasha chooses the more passive attack; he keeps an
eye on the in-coming blows (that always miss thanks to Sesshomaru maneuverability...and the tip
of his tail wrapping around the ankle of the younger when the cloud is about to dodge) while the
sword pulses in his grip.

Whirlwinds of energy rise to light up the sky and flow seamlessly to the sword.

XV

On the shoreline, Yao Xin still opposes his offspring closer to the forest (where he has deliberately driven them) and away from the coast. Saranagerel's water waves and whips are no longer a cause for concern, yet still she proves herself his daughter by wood as well as water. Badzar, pyromaniac he must be, has also proven his prowess in the singed holes in his sire's clothing and wind slashes slowly leaking onto his clothing and in his fu manchu. The advisor purposely allows them some blows and others...well, perhaps he is getting too old to fight with the younger generation. Kami knows how much Sesshomaru gets on his nerves at times, too.

"Oooph!" Again, the wild, whirling winds hurl him down the beach. He retaliates with a mere wave of his hand, and a powerfully controlled gusts whips the twins in the air, spins them around, and whaps them both right back down on their asses like naughty children forced to sit out of a game. 

"Stop playing with us old man!" Badazar shakes a fist as the two stand and brush themselves off. "We will kill you for dishonoring us and our mothers!" He opens his mouth to roar; the ensuing inferno scorches the very tip off his nearly two-foot fu Manchu.

Xin jumps back and comically holds up his poor, singed hair.

As he looks forlornly at the ruined perfection, the earth beneath the twins give way in an instant and without any move from their sire.

The wet but firm sand becomes pliable, pulling the two down in a whirling vortex of quick sand. With the merest flick, Xin hardens the land around them to stone-like density, both children trapped at all limbs. Saranagerel, hands initially reaching down to pull at her feet, becomes encased. Badzar manages to get just his palms out, fingers still stuck in the trap. The two struggle to free themselves, but without the ability to move, are essential powerless. The Dragon's Cry is Badzar's most powerful attack, and Saranagerel uses Kung Fu to manipulate the elements.

Putting his painful injury aside, Yao Xin strides down the beach to watch his struggling children, both bent over with bums in the air. While maintain face, Xin is heart broken at this turn of events. No doubt, the stories of his treason are infamous and used by the newer Khans to scare the people into submission and suicide attacks; he had hoped, however, that his children would be taken far enough into the land that they would not ever have to hear of his abandonment. He had hoped the people would have forgotten him or assumed him dead—not send his own offspring to finish him. Sadly, Xin knew his past mistakes would return to haunt him, and the vision of divine retribution is here in these two, grown hating him, grown without his direction and tutelage. Though they would have to be taken as prisoners of war, he is certain Sesshomaru would give the two asylum if they pledged to serve as his subjects, but the advisor is uncertain whether or not they could ever be trusted. Mongolian spies in the Western Kingdom are not unheard of and are executed upon proper proof. The two might have to sit in the dungeons for a few days to get the point.

He looks down at the younger versions of him: Saranagerel with his nose and ears, his calm strategy, and subtle aura; Badzar with Xin's cheeks, brows, and eye color.

His gaze goes from them to the clashing noises on the beach. As he expected, the groups of Western allies versus the secondary force are tearing into the remaining invaders. Yes, many of the
catapults are lost (swept out to sea) or destroyed; of course, some of the bodies lying in the sand are of the allied forces; certainly, their side has seen catastrophe. Yet, they have come out the victors.

Ah, and look who is running up the beach. Matsu doesn't look the worse for wear, but humans are sometimes difficult to interpret.

"The sky is cleared, and we are going to start rounding up the prisoners."

"Excellent news. Any sign of the ships?"

"Yes. A few dragon spies landed during the fighting and went back to the lords."

"Hm. We will have the beach clean for their return, then." Xin catches Matsu's curious gaze lowering to the struggling twins. "These are two royal but dangerous prisoners...my youngest son and daughter. I will remain here until Lord Sesshomaru determines what to do with them." A clog of fear chokes him briefly as the death sentences looms over the twins' heads.

Matsu's brow shoots up in surprise. Children? He recovers himself and bows at the waist, then returns to begin re-establishing order. Briefly, the human feels a pang of sympathy for the foreigner.

XVI

His hands and arms burn, a weighty pain comes close to bowing him over.

The only problem with using the Ryuurin: Tetsuaiaga, even as fuck-tastically powerful as it is, has a limit. With his half-human blood, InuYasha can make the sword absorb only so much power...if he tries to overshoot it, the backlash is a real bitch. He knows, he's tested this theory before and cursed his half-human blood for again giving him a pointed weakness. As it is, the boundary is on-coming; he can feel it but can't move to make a swing or stop the sword from pulling more youkai. Kind of like a wagon careening out of control, one can watch the disaster, but not stop the momentum. All around the Ki cloud, the whirling, mingling colors of youkai flow in a huge conflagration to surround the blade and its' swordsman—generating more and more energy in a cylinder bigger than him and Sesshomaru combined.

What he can't see beyond the blinding shield of color is the Western navy in his path carrying out Tetsuiaiga Plan #1:


Diving off ships in a general, hurried retreat, Western troops are swimming, flying, and sailing away from the enemy ships in his path, leaving the devastating aftermath of battle in their wake. The invading forces are far from decimated, however, and even as the West pulls back, the Monguls are trying to re-group and re-arm.

"InuYasha!"

Oh yeah, Sesshomaru's back isn't pressing against him anymore. There's a hand on his shoulder... is it going to dig in? To spill more of his blood than it already has?

"Release the attack!"

Can't...
"InuYasha, now!"

_Fuck me, this is going to hurt when it explodes._ The heat from the sword makes sweat trickle down his face, down his back under the haori, makes him legs and arms tingle like before...

He realizes, then, that the bastard will be caught in the blast with him. His arms straining to hold on, the hanyou finds the moment to speak,

"Gonna blow up...get the fuck back." Smoke starts curling from his clenched hands.

"Dammit, InuYasha! I will not leave you!"

_What? Sesshomaru, Lord of the Icicles, swearing?_

But, Sesshomaru's arms are just suddenly around him, crossing his chest under his arms. The feel of his brother's youkai makes an inner sense in the half-demon rise to the fore. With his only remaining kin standing with him, the hanyou's youkai strengthens. Like a dam, his own youkai give a sick and sudden surge forward through his chest under Sesshomaru's arms, expanding in a way that has nothing to do with Tetsuaiga and everything to do with _him._

The pulse, one he fears will send him over the abyss of madness, reverberates in a non-lethal manner. He can't, won't, breathe for the surge of electric burning his veins, tinging his golden eyes with splashes of red. His power, curls around his spine, straightening his stance with the sword suddenly lighter in his burning palms. _I choose when to kick ass and when to stand by!_ And his youkai swells through all extremeties to complete his will. His power, his _true_ power, floods down his straining arms and meets the Tetsuaiga's.

In the clash, the hanyou has a brief epiphany, a new and awesome way he and the sword can function as one with their mutual powers feeding one another; a second later, the spinning cylinder is triggered: akin to Bakuryuuha, the swirling vortex of youkai, gold and red, explodes in a twister more intense than the Wind Scar and Kongushuho combined. The raw force's vaccume demolishes everything in and above the surface of the water. Debris and water rain down as all ships in its' path are destroyed. The final threat of the invaders is squashed beneath their own power.

The few retreating vessels are reaching the horizon, but the rest of the initial forces are either dead or being taken prisoner. Huffing like he's run for days without respite, the hanyou stays frozen in his position for less than a second before his weak knees give out, and Sesshomaru is the only thing keeping him standing. The blood pounds in his ears, blocking out the sounds of the army cheering around them. He is barely aware that Sesshomaru gently lowers him to kneel on the surprisingly sturdy cloud, one that allows the smoking Tetsuaiga to sink in but not to fall through. It's a good thing, his hand is still stuck to the hilt, and he's using it to keep himself propped up anyhow.

Even with the youkai released, the heat is not going away. It is welling up in the center of his chest and spreading throughout his limbs in an uncomfortably heavy sensation.

"Hold on," Sesshomaru's hand is on his shoulder again, but the half-demon cannot muster up the energy to raise his head and look at the bastard. The fluffy tail curls around his ankle, and strangely enough, InuYasha is somewhat comforted by the contact. "I am taking us back to shore."

"Good" _huff, huff, _"idea. I think—I could use—a bite—to eat._

_XVII_

Sesshomaru sets his cloud down high up on the shore and lets InuYasha off close to the forest. The
younger moves gingerly off the fluffy substance and promptly props his ass down on the first big rock, regaining his strength. The heat is gnawing worse, and the shadow of his brother suddenly over him does nothing to make it better. The hanyou waves him tiredly away, "looks like we've won the day. Go on and do lord stuff. I'll be right here."

Gracefully, even with dark smudges on his aristocratic face, the demon lord kneels (actually kneels) to look at his brother's face.

"InuYasha." The deep voice doesn't need a questioning tilt to expect an answer.

"It's fine."

"Take the other half of the potion. I must check with Yao Xin and Matsu to find out our losses. I will leave them to gather our troops, then I shall return for you."

"Fine, Fine. Go do what you do. I'm not going far."

"Very well, little brother." His aura fades away, and the hanyou finally looks up to make sure he's really gone. When he's certain no one is looking, he cradles his burnt hand together, bending over for a few long seconds to become accustomed to the pain. The Ryuurin didn't seriously hurt him this time, just his palms. Even his claws suffer from the attack, crackling from the intense heat. Not broken off, but now more brittle. Since his claws grew quickly anyway, he should be essentially all right, but no Iron Reaver or Blades of Blood for a while. The arrow holes and little balls of lead still in his bicept and leg haven't healed yet either, so it looks like he's a shit outta luck for a few hours. Keh, the blood will eventually clot.

After private pain-time is over, he reaches a hand into his haori to root around for the silver flask. Battle done, good guys won, he can now feel the effects of his impending heat returning. Being around all that youkai might have thrown him back into his maturity trial, but he would need a bit more time to scout around for a safe and fortified den...

His hand freezes in mid-search. Nothing. It's not there.

"Holy shit," the hanyou roots around again, still coming up with nothing. He's lost the potion, maybe some time during flight or in his dip in the ocean, the flask must have gotten carried out somehow.

Jumping to his feet, the panicing hanyou relives his impulsive day and, without alerting his brother, takes off into the forest like a flash.

To be continued

Chapter End Notes

I don't write very good fight scenes...my bad but I really needed this lead-up. Besides, I can totally picture InuYasha hanging from a dragon screaming FUCK YEAH! Can't you?
Chapter Notes

WARNING: Slight Non-Consensual elements

I

The forests along the shores far to the south of the Western Palace are in chaos; nature knows of the clash happening in the waters. To make matters worse, the gods of the weather decide to let the temperature drop and a light snow starts to fall. The wildlife is scurrying as far as possible from the rumbling vibrations, and lower level demons without bi-ped forms are likewise keeping away from the explosions and war cries. The scents of blood lingering in their air is enough to make miscellaneous groups slink away and vagrant demons duck further into the foliage to find hollows in which to hide out.

However, miles away, some of the moving shapes are in invader clothing; carrying their weapons, the foot soldiers cut through the growth closer and closer toward the West having landed outside the main battle grounds. Of course, the invaders knew of Nippon's spies and gathered forces in one area to show numbers while the surprise forces sailed out in advance to launch a four point attack that is actually the real assault. Other battalions of soldiers sail around the great island to get in place for phase two. Each palace will be struck while the ally forces are traveling back and too late to be of aid.

For the time being, the invaders—unfamiliar with the enemy lands—move slowly, yet steadily away from the fighting. Not knowing the dangers that lie in wait, the overconfident Mongols sweep through the deadly landscape and hope spies do not catch sight or scent of them. As it is, the allies have too many distractions with the remains of the sea and land battles. Not to mention that an alluring scent quickly permeates the normal scent of rain and life in the forests, scrambling away from the multitude of soldiers. It draws attention away from the foreigners.

The scent is sweet and soft, the natural scent of pine and winter tinged with a spicy cinnamon and a hint of sweet blood—an enticing, lustful combination for any demon. In mid-flight, the blur of red is darting and dodging in another part of the forest, heading away from the stalking invaders. His fire rat robe is the opposite of camouflage; even as a blur, he still stands out against the white blanket of ground and canopy. With every frosty breath, every pump of the heart, every bead of sweat, and every drop of blood, the hanyou is unintentionally leaving his Heat scent spread throughout his path. Until the trees become thicker, enough to use as his walkway, he is stuck on ground-level.

For the first time, his hand stays steadily on the hilt of Tetsuaiga, ready to draw in a heartbeat since fear and paranoia briefly remind him of his younger years surviving on his own after his mother's death. Every moment filled with fear for his life, every second making him a hardened and angry youth, bitter about the outcome. At one time, before hearing of the magic jewel and havin' to put up with that Priestess, the hanyou InuYasha had been as sadistic and evil as many of the demons he encountered on a day to day—as evil as his insane self when the demonic blood rises and takes over. He terrorized humans that shunned him, and laughed at their pain to cover up the scars on his own soul. Yeah, not a time he likes to look back on with fond recollection. Kikyo and Kagome
changed that—but, just like his mother, both of them had to leave.

In the here and now, his heart hammers like a fist inside his breastbone, and the hanyou is having difficulty finding familiar landmarks to indicate his surroundings. Being fucking paranoid most of his life made sure his memory was pretty clear about most the places on the island he's traveled—especially ones that have some kind of significant difference from every other blah de blah blad forest around. In all the time he's been left to wander the lands, there have been too many forests without a specific tinge or difference to its' scent to it for him to get an exact location; this might be close to the site where he fought Hosenki for the Adamant Barrage? Is this near the hut where everyone was almost burned alive? Is that one village where Mirko conned the head man into letting them stay (when there was an actual fricking infestation of ghosts) around here somewhere?

He doesn't know, and that makes him move even faster. If he can't depend on his senses, then he isn't safe.

As his strides take him further from the site of the battle, the Heat comes on stronger with his muscles working overtime, and sweat runs down his back under the robe of the fire rat. Hands begin to tingle while his instincts try taking over to make him weaker with the need to mate but his body forces itself to keep moving. Even his legs ache with strain and start to waver, but he refuses to stop.

Fuck, why now? Goddammed Sesshomaru told me I had more time than this... His instincts are going insane, buffering the smells around his from the usual sharp clarity. He gets a damp smell but can't tell if it's a puddle or river. He gets hints of lizards, cats, birds, bugs, and more, but it is merely an assault to his senses rather than location, size, shape, and direction. The world is metaphorically wrapped in cotton.

II

Not often is the demon lord rendered speechless. Apparently this is the day for it.

"Your children, then?" He replies to the revelation with dispassionate neutralism. For long moments, the demon lord regards the two bound prisoners with something akin to a disgusting interest— like scientific observation of a bug in a jar or a new breed of rat found in his castle. However, with the grim expression on Yao Xin's face, the demon lord has no desire to pull their wings off or eradicate them from his sight. Rather, he grasps the gravity of this situation.

The young man is glaring with rage-filled eyes and squirming in his bonds; his armor is dented and obviously handed-down. The female reminds the demon lord too much of his mother with her cold, calm indifference and eyes narrowed while her head is held high in royal dignity. She merely waits for his judgment without fear while her twin seems ready to fight for their lives. Both resemble their sire in subtle, physical ways, and both also did some damage to the Western forces in the water. The twins would prove to be uncompromising prisoners of war or perhaps of use in future negotiations.

Beside him, Xin appears none the worse for wear. He has several shallow wounds that are already healing and singed facial hair to remind his of his carelessness with his own offspring. Now he may consider the lord's previous offers to have Japanese armor made for him since his own ancient covering did not stand up well to the test. Of course, Xin's armor is older than the demon lord himself, so it really is no wonder. Still, seeing the obvious slashes to his father's friend makes the lord's frown deepen. Did the twins know they fought and injured their sire? Or were they aware and willing to take his life?  

Later, after InuYasha is seen to, Sesshomaru will sate his curiosity on the details of this particular
skirmish. For now, the advisor merely waits for the lord's word on the fate for his children, looking at Sesshomaru without his usual jovial or positive demeanor. His solemn silence makes it easy to read between the lines. Xin is, of course, loyal to the son of Inu no Taisho, and should Sesshomaru decree death, Yao Xin would respect it and perhaps even carry out the sentence himself. Yet, the inu has had centuries to understand more about his advisor than the tendency for the foreigner to be a large pain in the ass. Through Sesshomaru's re-integration into the Western Palace, his training at his father's side, his ascension to the throne, and even his unwilling hunt of InuYasha, Yao Xin has stood in support of the royal family. He has always put the needs of the royal family and the Western lands above himself, and there is no time in the lord's memory that Xin has not supported him or advised him in the best way possible. No better demon could have ruled while Sesshomaru was away in his self-imposed banishment after InuYasha, and no other demon could have earned his father's undying respect and friendship. There is no other being in the land he would show such mercy as to Xin.

"The battlefield has seen much death and destruction this day," Sesshomaru begins slowly, "for these two Elementals, imprisonment shall be a merciful punishment since their army knows nothing of the bounty that is compassion and leniency." The decree makes the gagged twins sneer in disgust at the lord's weakness of allowing his enemies to live—yet, Yao Xin breathes out in an inaudible sigh of relief. He covers it by stroking his slightly singed fu manchu with head lowered. Certainly, the demon lord's sense of smell picks up tinges of salt from the wetness in the advisor's eyes, but the lord wisely ignores it. "In time, we may have use for these two prisoners of war. Bring one of our mages to make a talisman for their imprisonment."

Blinking, Xin glances up to meet his lord's gaze and realizes the orders are directed at him. He gives a proper, low bow and does not see the raised brow he receives in return. The advisor does not now nor ever put much emphasis in the ediquette of courtly life. Why bow to him in front of his children when such instances are not customary for the advisor?

Nn. The lord's eyes pass to the twins as comprehension dawns, and he merely nods at Xin's display of respect. The advisor turns and walks off through the throng of soldiers.

Around them, the ally army is doing basic clean-up in the aftermath of a massive battle. Wounded are treated, prisoners rounded up, weapons retrieved, stories swapped, and rations doled out. It had been a full day of fighting without respite (as deemed by the creeping darkness) and even the demon soldiers are wiped out. They would rest tonight and start back for home on the morrow while soldiers from the other lands would stock up on supplies at the Western Palace before returning home.

Sesshomaru need not take part; his generals and sergeants are in charge of the clean-up. He is content to stand closer to the two younger demons, staring down with his perfected mask of cold disdain. Unbeknownst to the two, he is fluent in Mongolian (from his lessons early on after his exile was completed) and takes a moment to search his memory for the specific words he desires them to hear. While his cold, golden gaze bares into their souls, his vocabulary returns with sharp clarity. Ah, yes. Momentary flashes of Xin drilling him escape through hundreds of years in his layers of memory, and for some reason, his concern for InuYasha takes a back seat to his need to repay his advisor's many years of service.

"This Sesshomaru is the Lord of the Western Lands and is the monarch your sire has chosen to follow, for this lord is an honorable one. In the past, battles between your people and those of this land have happened on more than one occasion, and not yet has Nippon lost the day." He states to the duo (of whom exchange a glance of surprise and return to watch him with scrutinizing eyes). "Never has this lord's army gone to your shores and attacked with surprize; never has this lord's..."
"army used your sire's knowledge of your people against you for a victory, and never has this lord
gone with the intent to slaughter your people—women, children, men, or elders—in order to
eliminate your threat to his lands."

For the first time (in possibly ever), he kneels gracefully in the dirt to look the two invaders
directly, "and never, never, has this Sesshomaru or his sire attacked your people or his own for
such trifling reasons as plunder—mere wealth—or to take innocent peasants as slaves. To shed
blood for a meager reason such as gold or flesh is beyond reprehensible to this Sesshomaru and his
lord father. Never has he slaughtered the weak for his own gain or for his reputation. This is not
the way of an honorable ruler because even the weakest of his people have always strength in some
form or another, and this Sesshomaru respects those that fight for what is right and not for what is
gained. The way of the sword is that to gain the strength to protect what is his lord's and his own.
To harm other for any other reason is detestable."

The two merely stare at him, and under his gaze, the young male looks away.

"This Sesshomaru cares not about your people and what trivial feats of strength they seem to value. Their idea of strength is boasting and pillaging—cowardly and dishonorable actions to attack the weak by surprise. Ridiculous. Your sire came to this realization many years ago and has stayed to use his might to uphold the honor of the strong. You two, however, have not learned this lesson and will grace this Sesshomaru's dungeon for a time; perhaps you shall receive the privilege of observing the true meaning of might. Then again, your nation may petition this Sesshomaru for your release and offer a hefty reward for your return to their shores... Or, you might be found wanting, left to wither and die since you are without plunder or a kill of which to boast. Either way, you are prisoners of the Western Lands, and for the sake of your sire and his service, this lord will allow you to keep your lives—for now."

He rises to his full height and gives the two the weight of his contempt. "Do not make this a
decision the Lord of the West will regret."

As a final insult, he turns his back to them in a signal that they are no threat. It is a similar move to
ending his skirmishes with InuYasha.

The lord's golden eyes narrow as one of his mages, marked with a special symbol (the emblem of the House of the Moon in blue with the kanji for conjuror underneath) on the sleeve of his haori, comes weaving—correction, galloping—through the organized chaos of soldiers. The male is some sort of half-horse, half-man creature origionally from across the content that left the lands of The Holy Roman Empire for the island of Nippon, land of demons and other demi-gods. The mage is also one of Sesshomaru's strays: one that he found a century ago during one of his hiatuses through the land. It was a good find; the centaur knew spell weaving and enchantments from across the seas but with time to study under the conjurers in the royal palace, he is now the master of all demonic magic in the four nations. Perfect choice to distract the advisor so they could check on their losses and then for him to leave the rest to the commanders to finally return to InuYasha...

Sesshomaru accepts the centaur's bow with a regal nod and moves aside. "Make certain they cannot use the elements against the West."

"Aye, sire."

As the demon lord turns, he assess Xin's expression and distraction as the centaur reads the twins' auras in order to prepare a potent talisman. "Do as you wish, Yao Xin. This Sesshomaru will check with others to find out our numbers and ready the army to return home."

Yao's eyes reflect storm cloud gray with brighter blue flecks than usual, and he quickly bows low
again before speaking. "I will accompany milord and return before the prisoners are moved." With
one last glance at the magic weaving (a kotomodo-type spell created especially for each elemental),
Xin turns with Sesshomaru and trails him by a step as the men shouting orders pause and begin to
gather around for final instructions and to provide their losses.

III

The Burakumin, a demonic gang of notorious murderers and thieves, are on a much-needed break
from the usual scouting of a ripe-for-the-pickin' villages. The last haul provided plenty of food,
wine, and entertainment for a few days of camping in the deep woods. It also gave them plenty of
cover to avoid any Western soldiers that may come nosing around as a result of their fun. Made up
of outcasts, the Burakumin have little mercy for the weak but respect ruthlessness, cunning, and
brute strength overall. If they would have known a war is happening less than ten miles from their
location—they might have taken the opportunity to raid the dead.

For the time being, Seiryu, a half-red dragon, half-biped, is the leader of the ragtag group
consisting of over a dozen demons. He is sitting around the banked fire gnawing on a rib bone with
a satisfied smirk. A few had crawled off in the early morning to sleep off the wine, dead to the
world. The fools are lucky Seiryu is awake and listening to the far-off sounds of battle as well as
making sure their 'entertainments' don't take off into the woods. He's aware and on the look out for
soldiers and having himself some leftovers from the feast the night before.

But, with a discreet lift of his head, he sniffs out an alluring scent permeating the woods. It's one
the creeps into his lungs and goes straight to his cock without a stop to the brain.

A single blink and the rib bone is discarded as the dragon stands and licks his wicked teeth. The
scent wraps around him in a hazy cloud of lust, wanton desire for the bitch that emits such a need
to be taken.

The others in the gang are either eating remainders of yesterday's plunder, still sleeping, or off to
find water for drink or bathing. The few that are awake pay no mind as he confidently saunters
away from the campsite—probably assuming he needed to use the bushes. Normally, the dragon
wouldn't mind sharing a good looking bitch with the others, but this one smells so utterly sweet and
fresh that he decides he'll bring her back after he has his fill. Using his superior senses, Seiryu
sheds the bi-ped form, like throwing off a coat, and takes to the air.

IV

Gone. The rock his little brother was occupying not long ago is now empty. All that is left is the
scent of hanyou beginning his Heat...and, that scent is utterly delicious. Even more distressing,
night is upon them and would make tracking the hanyou a bit more difficult; even worse, if his
senses were already suffering from the effects, then he would be blinding stumbling around and
much easier for other predators to catch.

Sesshomaru, upon finding his brother missing, makes a conscious effort not to let frustration and
anger (long held reactions to his brother's apparent idocy) take over while Xin is standing next to
him. The demon lord lets out an annoyed sigh, fighting harder than usual to keep his face neutral.
However...even still disturbed by his offspring's sudden appearance, Xin is able to smirk at the
lord's surprise and irritation.

This is not how it is supposed to go... "How...pointless of him," half-hiss, half-growl, Sesshomaru
rubs the bridge of his nose. His exasperation is replaced by something else more...primal...once the
full scent of InuYasha's lingering Heat hits his nose.
"Perhaps, not after all." Xin breathes, covering his mouth and nose with a hand. "He's going to attract every demon from the four lands if he keeps running like a panicked virgin—"

The abrupt surge of youkai preceding a low growl next to him interrupts that thought. Xin warily glances over at his lord and immediately notes his eyes warring between gold and crimson as well as his lengthened fangs biting into his lower lip.

"My lord," the advisor snaps. "Now is not the time for that!"

"No one will find him," the garbled growl makes the hair on the back of Xin's neck rise. He's seen this same look before, right when Lord Touga heard of Lady Izayoi's capture before Prince InuYasha was born... This is a demon skirting the edge of sanity. "This Sesshomaru will reach him first."

No...has he changed his mind in such short time? Misunderstanding his lord's intent, Xin (as his advisor) is one of the few that can questions Sesshomaru without earning a poison whip to the face: "You are... certain you wish to kill him, milord?"

Those eyes, still flashing, turn to the advisor. "No one will have him or harm him—except for me."
In a flash, the demon lord is off and Xin can only stand slack-jawed while there's a whole messy war to clean-up.

V

InuYasha's painful gasping does not cease with his jumping; pushing his hanyou body to the limits is nothing new. Before and after the Shikon no Tama incident, he was a young one used to pushing himself to his physical limits just to survive. He keeps this in mind as he shoves his body through the air with leaps from tree to tree, taking his scent to higher ground, story of my life. No body of water yet and no places he can reinforce for safety, especially not when he isn't sure if he can depend on Tetsuiaiga's barrier to protect him or not. Heat cycles and mating are an integral part of demon maturation, not exactly life-threatening, so he can't be sure if the magic of the sword would keep him safe from an attack.

All he knows is that he ain't bettin' on it.

Besides, now that he's above ground, he can make out the landscape that much easier. He's nearing a mountain-side, the sound of water cascading faces him about five or six miles further. Perfect. He couldn't have hoped for better. Not frozen, so maybe with an internal hot spring if the Gods are with him.

Taking barely a second to catch his breath, fogging out in front of his face, the hanyou's eyes are set toward his goal. His senses are still weakening, but behind the waterfall, there must be a connection of tunnels and holes in the rock that could mean salvation. He has to get there. Just as he is about to leap again, a strange feeling making goose bumps break out all over. The feel of powerful youkai around him makes the heat under his skin start burning again, regardless of the cold around him. Not just one is after him; he feels a handful of different energy beating against his aura. Gods, a trail of them are following his scent. Fuck.

He starts moving again, picking up pieces of branches to rub on himself and throw as an evasion technique. Rather than have his strongest scent heading one way, he ducks down and picks up items from the forest floor and in the trees to rub sweat and his overpowering scent to scatter around. Lesser demons would veer off his course.

Forcing his tired body forward, even faster than before, InuYasha keeps his mind on the waterfall
and refuses to think about what will happen if a few really powerful fuckers catch up to him.

VI Meanwhile, tromping around another part of the cold forest...

"Dammit! I probably missed the whole thing by now."

The wolf merely rolls his eyes in annoyance at the squeaky voice, impassioned with the desire to see his first real war.

The wolf ducks under a low-hanging, snow-covered branch as the scrawny kitsune follows in his footsteps. "Look, kid, I told you we should have left a day early. Not my fault you didn't want to listen."

The gangly foxling gives the wolf a mean glance, "You don't have to remind me, Kouga. Geeze."

"You're the one that begged me to take ya to the shoreline, squirt, so buck up. When I tell you something, it's always for a good reason." The wolf continues through the growth, leading the fox closer to the shoreline. His inner senses are on sharp alert and waiting for the wind to change direction. "Besides," he says to the pouting youth, "it might be a good thing if we missed the fighting. I mean, damn Shippo, yer still just a kid, and that demon slayer will roast me alive if anything happens to you. She kinda seems like the vengeful type."

The fox huffs, "I'm not a little kid anymore, Kouga. Miroku and Sango need to realize that sooner or later. And I'm a demon, so I can't live their ways forever." The sad tone coming from the young one makes Kouga pause and look back. The kid, grown a great deal in five years, follows with dejection mingling in his scent.

Nearly reaching Kouga's chin, Shippo is not as naïve as the last time he'd seen InuYasha, shortly after Naraku's death when the decisions of his life were just made for him by everyone else. He realized not long after he left for the Kitsune training school that Sango and Miroku would die in a few scant decades while he could live for hundreds of years. The realization, on the heels of Kagome's departure from the Warring States Era, turned the childish kitsune a little older.

He stayed for two years and learned a great deal more about the complexities of fox magic—well, enough to take care of himself without a certain hanyou to keep saving his tail all the time. But, as soon as he started winning more fights against other students than he lost, he asked for an extended leave. It was important to him to stay with Sango and Miroku, to train with them, to laugh with them, and to have enough memories of his remaining family to sustain him for his long life. Now, after hearing that InuYasha has finally (for some weird reason) joined Sesshomaru's army in the war against invading out-landers, Shippo had a driving need to see him as well.

Kouga had, luckily, been passing by the newly reconstructed demon slayer's village on his way out to join his loaned troops in battle. A little bit of begging and the soft-hearted wolf prince allowed the fox to accompany him for as long as the kid could keep up.

"So," the wolf says gently, "you realize InuYasha is the only one that'll live as long as you. That's pretty much why demons don't mate with humans, y'know. It's really hard to watch people you love with so fast and die."

"...Yeah," the fox breathes as he, too, pauses. "I mean, I knew, before and stuff. Well, I mean, I guess I knew but I didn't know, know. InuYasha could have kept her alive if she could have stayed. But, with Kagome gone, it...I mean, it could have—!"

"C'mon, kid." The wolf's tone is still rough, but gentler with their shared pain. "Don't start with that
'what if Kagome stayed' crap. You should know better by now... She and InuYasha made a good team, they took down Naraku, and they did a buncha good for the land, but—Kagome's human and always will be, no matter what...so, it never would have worked out, kid. I'm sorry. I doubt the mutt would've used the jewel for something lame like becoming fully human or living with her in her village. He may not be the smartest dog out there, but he ain't that stupid. This is where he belongs.'

The fox nods, still crestfallen.

"More than that, I mean—I wouldn't want to curse anyone with that, not even the mutt." Kouga continues walking while Shippo glances at him.

"Curse him with what?"

"A mate that will leave him centuries before he can die. He wouldn't even be at full maturity by the time her life is lived and she dies of old age." The wolf moves like flowing water through the snowy underbrush, "knowing my mate could die any minute and I'll have to live the rest of my life alone? No, thanks. It might be better them both this way. Kagome can marry a human, and maybe InuYasha can find a mate here."

'That's...well, painful but true. "...Yeah," the fox replies again as he carefully follows in the wolf's footsteps, "she wasn't from this time, either. If the well would have trapped her here, she never would have been able to see her mother again. That would've made her so sad..."

"Yup, it would've. Good thing she's back where she belongs." Kouga pulls back a low-swinging branch. "And, InuYasha has plenty of time to find someone, so it's okay."

"I guess so...but, Kouga, InuYasha is a half demon. In all the years I traveled with him, no one ever gave him so much as a warm 'hello' but Kagome. He won't be able to find anyone. I mean—you know how stupid he can be."

The wolf hikes a surprised eyebrow at the kid, "are you serious! The mutt is one of the last shiro inu-youkai, Shippo. One of the last, and their clan is beautiful to all demon kind. Besides, he's also royalty. I mean, damn, mutt's got it pretty good when he's ready to choose a mate. Not that I would give him a second glance, my luck he'd give me fleas or something."

"What? No way. Sesshomaru hates him and doesn't recognize him as a prince or anything, so the royalty is out. But, everyone, and I mean everyone, always hated him for being half-blood—"

"Nah. They hated him 'cause of his smell." The wolf shrugs, "just takes someone with a really good nose to pick it out, but it's a strange scent, like a warning or something."

Shippo's eyes grew to the size of dinner plates, "what are you saying?"

The wolf shrugs again, ducking below a low-hanging branch, "I've just heard rumors is all." He glances back at the fox with his usual shit-eatin' grin and hikes a thumb at himself, "don't forget! I'm the Prince of the Northern Wolf Tribe. Technically, I'm royalty, too. Or did you think the fur skirt is just a fashion thing?"

The wolf gets him laughing and forgetting about InuYasha. Hell, if they pick up the mutt's scent, then they'll ask him in person what the hell's been going on lately.

The kid comes through the bushes, still chuckling, but pauses yet again. This time, he takes a deep breath, nose twitching.
Kouga lifts his head to scent the air, "what do you smell?"

"Something not right," the fox takes a deeper breath, "there's a buncha demons that smell weird, not far." The kid points to their right, "they're downwind of us. Their scents are moving this way."

"Hm. Might be some of the army coming back from the shore; they might be able to tell us where InuYasha is. Let's go check it out."

With a nod to one another, the two change direction.

VII

Ker-SPLASH.

The hanyou gracefully vaults in a smooth line head-long into the frigid depths of the river, sinking deep to erase his scent and cool his rapidly over-heating body. It's killing him, torturous burning and tingling. His scent disperses from the above the water and will give his pursuers a moment to question how he vanished. Anything to get away from the powerful youkai tracking him and getting ever closer. Seven or eight are coming for him in all directions. Even weakened like a fucking girl, he knows the power signatures are closing in.

Son of a mangy bitch...

Staying completely submerged, InuYasha forces himself to move against the river's slow current and swim upstream. The light is long gone, and he has nothing but his reaching hands and kicking legs to feel for obstacles and pieces of ice. Swimming while pulling himself, his heavy fire rat (along with sundry other items herein), and a fang that grows three times his size and spits the hardest rock on Earth, makes the muscles in his arms and shoulders strain more than usual. Training with Totosai made him used to hauling the heavy bastard above water, but swimming upstream is still about a bitch, half-demon or not. But, to give those powerful demons after him the slip is the most important flight of his life. Time has no meaning, and the long trek passes. His healing wounds are forgotten and his scent dissipates in the water.

Climbing is more fun; finally getting to the gap between the falls and the rock, he pulls himself up with brittle but regenerating claws and squeezes into the narrowest opening he can find. Just as long as water covers the entrance and he has enough room to get the sword out. That's all he needs. His luck runs well and the narrow slip leads to a larger inner cavern further inside. This proves to be a good move after all.

"Fucking hell," panting, finally giving it a rest for a few, the hanyou pretty much collapses against the dark, slick sides of a niche in the wall separating other caverns inside the rock. He even gives himself a mental pat on the back for cleverness. The only one that might come close to scenting him would be Sesshomaru. Not as if he expects the demon lord to even have noticed he was gone anyhow—not with a hundred thousand men to manage—and is prepared to either defend himself here and now or rest and start moving closer toward Miroku's and Sango's village. Just staying his ass where it was on the outskirts of the battlefield would have ended in catastrophe, especially for the first guy that scented him and started hitting on him or something.

Naw, he did the right thing by taking off.

"It's fine," the hanyou steels himself, "Heat or not, it's gonna be kick ass n' take names later or bare my ass and never live down the shame. I don't do good with shame." The auras are moving again, as if sensing he had stopped. The hanyou gulps, slides back into the water, and lays his head back to breathes for long seconds.
"Rat-infested swine!"

Breaking his cardinal rule—"Kill first, banter later"—Sesshomaru finds some satisfaction in destroying the un-godly ugly porcupine demon waddling on the path of InuYasha's scent. Two of shooting quills almost hit the mark and cut holes in the demon lord's spider silk haori—just the perfect ending to the tiresome day. One that promises to be the longest of his life considering he has slaughtered seven demons on his younger brother's path, and many more are certain to follow.

On the brink of control, the demon lord ruthlessly steps forward and slaughters a moderately powerful oni with vicious speed. Not fast enough. He gives a sneer to the ashes and continues to race on, sensing the other sources of powerful youkai that are gaining steadily closer have not already reached him. The scents are still separate. Eyes that stay a strange combination of crimson/gold narrow dangerously. In the small chance he is wrong, the demon lord dodges snow-covered obstacles with more speed and accuracy than he's ever used before. If any have even touched him, this Sesshomaru will hunt them, kill them slowly, revive them, and kill them a more torturous second time.

"Found you, little bitch," the dragon pulls out the perfect weapon. "Just what I need to scare you out to me."

"Holy-!

He's taken a few minutes to let his heart go back to normal, pull himself out of the water into the niche in the wall and is in the middle of plotting the next move. But, the water in front of him suddenly gurgles and churns to take on a life of its own. The pool rises and re-shapes into texture; it scares the hell out of the already-on-edge hanyou, whose reaction is to leap backward as far as he can in the small niche of the cavern and screech in the manliest way possible. With profanity.

"Thrice damned, Naraku-fucking, piss-eating, holy-mother of shit!"

The perfect outline of a tall, muscular male fills out with flesh to combine with moving water. Before he knows it, InuYasha is looking up at the perfect face of a blue-skinned, male water nymph forming less than ten feet from where he is sitting. The water texturizes, fills out smooth flesh and muscles that looks pretty damn threatening for the Heat stricken hanyou. Even worse, the blue guy is only wearing a skimpy little loin cloth and remains bare with a perfectly sculpted body. He is more intimidating than the half demon in height and sheer volume, and his stunningly handsome face is not native to Japan with its broad lines and full lips. He is like a carving of
perfection.

Fuck. Did I get in someone else's hide out? Is he gonna wanna fight? The hanyou's hand is on Tetsuiga's hilt and his back is pressed as hard against the rock wall in the niche as possible. There's no way out or around from his position, so the ass-kicking might have to start in the next handful of seconds.

The male's eyes open, brilliant blue, and slowly lower to the shorter, guarded hanyou. The nymph tilts his head to the side and... smiles? Flashing his pearly white teeth, he moves with animal-like grace through the water to the hole InuYasha is huddling against. The blue hips and muscles sway in a hypnotic roll while his eyes never blink, never look away from the luscious treat within his grasp. The scent of InuYasha's heat has driven the nymph through the river and to this little hidey-cave, and while the nymph has no desire to mate per say, he could not walk away from the intoxicating pull of a powerful hanyou.

After the initial shock wears off, the InuYasha forces himself into action. He mentally fights his physical body preparing itself for mating: his muscles feel like limp noodles and things low in his belly warm suspiciously while the rest of his body is cold from the water but hot from his Heat. His instincts scream to lie back and let this pleasing male take his virginity. How about not. The hiss of Tetsuiga leaving its sheath is the first warning of a cornered animal ready to attack. He is even able to hold onto the fang with a steady hand and mentally congratulates himself on the achievement.

"That's far enough, asshole." His voice has the consistency of gravel and a dangerous growl is already rolling up through his chest.

The nymph pauses at the large fang pointing directly at his heart, confusion and shock plain on his face. Thinking the hanyou is playing hard to get, he merely moves to hold out a hand on the other side of the blade.

At the 'come-hither' look, InuYasha's mind blurs out GROSS! while his instincts take a tighter control of his body, forcing him to weaken further. The muscles in his legs abruptly give out, putting him in a compromising situation on his knees up in the niche. Panic flares, and the hanyou struggles to stand; however, now that the nymph has shown himself, he flares his immensely powerful aura as the water slices off his body. The half-demon can't get to his feet. Powerful strides bring the blue guy to the hidey-niche, less than a few feet from the hanyou, and his different flavor of energy washes through the cavern. The pressure is more acute and threatens to overwhelm the half-demon's instincts to find a worthy, powerful partner. He actually gasps in a sharp breath and puts effort into staying still with the sword at the ready.

"No, no, no. Fuuuuck no. Thanks, you know, for the thought and all, but no. No! I ain't trying to find a mate. I just want to be left the hell alone." He follows this little speech with a hand gesture and facial expressions to match.

The eyes blink at him in confusion, as if not understanding the language, and the nymph becomes water again so quick the hanyou jumps and almost drops Tetsuiga. His head tilts to the side in surprise, but the current flows around the fang's blade and up on the ledge to pour into the InuYasha's lap.

"Wh-What the hell?"

Even trying to scramble backwards into the wall does nothing to disperse the free flowing fluid making circles around his lap, down his legs, and up his chest, finding the gaps in his clothing to surge against bare skin. Water doesn't normally feel like the brush hands, but this is more
purposeful than water normally is, pressing and teasing his most sensitive spots. Unfamiliar with intimate touches, InuYasha hollers in hoarse outrage. The fire under his skin burns with the energy pressing tighter against his own combined with the water all over him. The constant touching is enough, but the water is freezing ass cold to boot.

Thus, freak—out.

"Gods dammit, that's enough!"

Jerking every which way, his body is consumed with heat and sensation. No one ever touched him; one of the banes to being unclean. Only Kagome and Kikyo had ever touched him without the intent of harm. The last five years had borne similar results; no one would lay a gentle hand on a half-breed. Thus, the cool trickling is magnified ten-fold. Cool fingers circle his bare thighs, up his abdomen to his tight nipples, and right at his male sex, teasing the tip—all of it is too much too fast. His breath locks in his throat, hips jerk upward in reaction.

Lust consumes part of him while the other part is horrified at being violated without his permission by some fucker he's never met. Some blue guy to boot, not even another inu or hanyou. Well, not happening today, jerk wad!

His backbone straightens in stubborn determination; InuYasha flips himself onto all fours and shakes like he's never shaken off a bath before! He wrenches his body to either side to throw off as much of the nymph as possible. Incredibly, water flies in all directions and hopefully gives the bastard some nasty bruises if nothing else.

Scooping up his sword, InuYasha half-stands in the lower niche in the cavern and moves along the little shelf—not trusting the water. Before his eyes, the nymph re-forms into the same blue person sitting his ass down and shaking his head.

Ha. Lookin' a lil' woozy there, ass head. Need to sit down? Keh, that'll teach ya to fuck with me when I say 'no'! The warning rumble low in his chest is deeper than normal, not that he notices while waiting for other demons to just show the hell up, too. His luck, there would be a clusterfuck on the way since the water didn't do enough to dampen his scent. Shit, his brother might eventually wander along if he's so fucking concerned about the honor of the bloodline to make sure no one but royalty wants to fuck the youngest son of the Inu no Taisho.

The wide-eyed nymph looks over at him as the sound of the waterfall reverberates off the cavern walls, louder than before now that the blood isn't pounding in the hanyou's ears. He forces himself to mentally calm and ease his achy muscles with pure determination to keep that sword pointed. The nymph guy must see something in the hanyou change, and does not ignore the sword pointing at him this time but merely stays where he is. Blue eyes widen as both hands rise slowly in an 'I come in peace' move. Apparently, the nymph gets the point: no touchie.

"Long as we're clear. You stay the hell over there. Every damn drop." The shaken hanyou slides down to sit, sword fading back to its rusty form. While watching the confused male, InuYasha takes a second to force his heated body to calm the fuck down. His nipples still send uncomfortable tinges down to his erect dick when his web robes rub against him.

The male nymph, with one brow cocked up, scents the air audibly and returns his gaze to the hanyou. He gives a small shrug and releases the side of the loin cloth. The flowing material floats peacefully away from his impressive form and stiff member. His blue skin shimmers against the light reflecting off the water as he kneels down to crouch on all fours and bends over, ready for mounting.
His carved muscles, the dips and hollows of his hips, and the plump blue cheeks undulate as alluring as any female while he turns to give the hanyou access. A forked, pink tongue flicks out to moisten his blue lips and wave at the hanyou's direction as those blue eyes look over his shoulder. The soft noises and low moans are doing their job—enticing the hanyou's instincts.

InuYasha, against his will and better judgement, stares at the indent of the nymph's hips and plump little ass. His eyes move indecently up along his chest to the blue nipples adorning each pectoral, his erection hardening more than he's comfortable with; the hanyou swallows audibly. He doesn't want to be turned on by this male, but for the love of the gods, he's not made of stone.

The nymph's next smile is less, "ha-ha! Found you!" and more, "Have no fear, I shall be gentle." Slowly, giving the hanyou enough time to jump away, the male crawls along the ledge; his whole body rolls with uncharacteristic grace and muscles that humans simply don't have. The sight makes InuYasha's eyes widen by degrees, sweat trickling down his face, and his erection gave a painful throb. Painful. Again, the male's reptilian tongue swipes out to do some impressive moves while those eyes swept down to InuYasha's lap as if he already knew what's happening under his hakama.

The hanyou's mind flashes to the lap wave and his cheeks pink, that fucking pervert felt me up! He grips Tetsuaiga again, panting this time.

But the male stops abruptly, head turned in the direction of the waterfall. His face twists in displeasure.

InuYasha feels the disturbance...just before a massive blast rocks his side of the cavern housing his little niche. Nothing like an attack to kick his ass into gear—raging hormones or not. He's on his feet, sword slid in the sheath, and already looking for another crack or hole in the cavern wall; he might have to dive under the water to find another avenue for escape.

A splish, a blink, and the male is up in his space, pressing their chests together with those strange blue lips a breath away from his own. No time for words or knee-jerk reactions, the male's mouth is on his, hands cup his cheeks to keep him still. The tongue slithers through his lips when he gasps. The nymph's tongue wraps around his own deftly, and the other male's mouth tastes clean and fresh. The rubbing and heat makes an unwilling moan slip into the other male's mouth.

Another explosion and the nymph pulls away as InuYasha's arms come up to push him away. But, the nymph turns and falls into waves that disperse without continuing their dance.

Gasping and a little shaky, InuYasha tries to forget about the taste in his mouth and moves.

XI

Carelessly throwing another black powder bomb into the niche he's created, Seiryu uses his fiery breath to light the fuse of the next slender explosive. It's a bright, white light in the darkness, but the arrogant vagrant is certain he has the power to deal with any other that come along in search of his bitch. Besides, once he mounted her (or him, not that gender mattered, a warm hole is a warm hole), his own scent would warn others off. Not that he would care much after mating season; hell, he would probably give the bitch to the other Burakumin. If she could withstand all those demons taking her, she may be worthy to travel with them.

As it is, he's just making a pathway to get to her. Clever, hiding in a mountain backing a waterfall. Not clever enough.

The next explosion does real damage, and out of the fractured rock, an errant wave shoots out...right at his face with the power of a battle axe.
Spitting an instant mouthful of blood, the dragon goes down in surprise. *What in the seven hells was that?*

Above him, the water swirls and forms another male. One that bares his teeth in a sadistic grin.

**XII**

Surfacing, InuYasha pants for breath. He hasn't found the way out, or even the way the nymph went. He lets out a frustrated groan. His cock is rock hard and his body ready to give out. But, true to his character, the hanyou refuses to give up even as his body cools off painfully in the frigid depths.

*I've gotta get out before they get here.*

He ducks under again and searches around in the dark niches of the cavern. The gentle suction is almost lost to him underwater, but he swims closer and finds a hole underwater big enough for him to squeeze through. He comes up for one more lung-full of air, hoping he isn't just getting himself stuck to eventually drown. Even demons have to breathe after all. The slightly bitter trace of fear tinges his scent lingers as he ducks again.

Clawing through the water, he half-way pulls himself through the opening into what could be another chamber or a flow-way out of the rock.

He brings his legs up to give a strong kick...when something slimy and solid wraps around his ankle and pulls him backwards. *Motherfu—!* His brittle claws sink into the rock as he gives a startled yelp underwater. Precious air is lost as something more hand-like snags his sleeve and then wrist in the other side of the rock. Both pull him in opposite directions, so the hanyou doesn't know which way to fight. Like this, he can't draw Tetsuaiga. He gives a frustrated scream underwater as one hand becomes two on his wrist and another slimy tentacle worms up inside his hakama leg closer to his weak spots. *What I wouldn't give for Sesshomaru's poison claws right now.*

He tries pulling his body away from both in an arch, but the hands on his wrists with claws sink into his wrist with the refusal to let go. Blood scents the water. The slimy tentacle at his leg squeezes painfully tight and pulls harder—making the claws rip and tear. The pain, the fear, and his will to survive all combine with the lack of air and fear of death and his body's aching triggers the force brewing deep inside, past blood, sinews, and vicera.

As he cries out, the heat in the center of his chest (that has been suppressed for too long) expands; it simply implodes through the use of demon ki magic, an ability the hanyou never realized he had without the fang to direct his youkai. Golden light blinds him underwater, and his body jerks violently from releasing a sharp volt of pure power. Both sides get an equal dose of hanyou surprise attack and release him (or, maybe, the limbs holding him melted away in the blast—he can't be sure). Either way, he is suddenly free of trying to be pulled apart and knows of the impending attack on both sides of the rock.

Vibrations in the water could be a cry of pain. *Wh-? What did I-*

He hurt someone, two someones. Good, first strike. Anymore left? On which side? Some blood scenting the water. He knows he's ready for them. No one is going to take him down without a fight. Even underwater, his fingertips burn and tingle from the release of power. Making a split-second decision, he kicks through the hole and enters the next chamber with trepidation, feeling for anything obstructing his way. So far, so good. Maybe whatever grabbed him learned a valuable lesson...
He's apparently wrong. From above, a clawed hand steals through the water and wraps around his throat.

XII

Sesshomaru stands, staring down at the dead male without expression. Judging by the remaining half of the corpse, he can surmise the other half was burned away. Half the chest and lower body are burned away, only the face is truly left unharmed...

The demon lord's nose wrinkles at the smell of charred death, but he manages to catch a hint of InuYasha's heat scent...right on the male's lips. His control, so meticulously cultivated over his own trials, hangs on by a hairsbreadth. Another dares?

A wind triggered by his swirling youkai gives an ethereal look to his visible rage; the demon within is no longer concerned with saving its hanyou sibling but of taking the hanyou from another. His eyes crimson search for the opening. Another male, the winner, is already after the demon lord's prize.

XIII

Seiryu drags the silver-haired bitch out of the water by a hold on his throat. Any desire to be nice about the whole thing went all to hell the moment the attack burned his left hand completely off. Standing on a shelf of rock, the dragon took less than a few seconds to cradle the stump of his wrist in the other hand, mourning the loss and how long it would take for the damn thing to regenerate. Months, possibly even years.

The dragon, in a snap decision, reaches for the bitch again with new determination—the desire to make him or her pay for the injury. His cock hadn't lost its hardness, so the bitch is going to get the fucking of her life. The prospect of making her scream in pain similar to his own makes the dragon lick his chops as his hand closes around a throat.

But, to make the mood even worse, the second the bitch breaks the surface of the water, he starts up a hell of a struggle. Water splishes as the red-clad demon flails and pulls against the hand strangling him. Grinning like insane, Seiryu swings the obvious male around to put them back-to-chest and pins the other male painfully against a rock shelf, holding the hanyou's back tight against his front with his injured arm moving up to keep the bitch in a choke hold.

"Half-demon, eh? An inu at that! The ears are cute but definitely not a full demon feature. The dragon licks his lips as his now free hand goes to his crotch so his erection is exposed.

"Let me the fuck GO you son of a pox-faced whore!" The voice grates on Seiryu, so his arm tightens to grip the throat tighter and shut the little bitch up before he seriously considered ripping the throat completely out.

The hanyou gurgles and chokes without air, an improvement. A few movements of his free hand and the hakama is loose enough to slide down over the hanyou's ass. The bare skin is burning to the touch, heating the water around them. Seiryu rubs his body against the hanyou's back and ass, ignoring the half-assed struggles.

"Stop fighting it, sweet little bitch. I'm going to give you what you need, don't worry. If you're good, I'll be good to you," the hissing voice is heard even with all the water in InuYasha's ears. His vision is graying at the edges with the crushing grip on his throat. The body behind him presses too close for him to draw Tetsuaiga, which is pinned hard against his hip by the rock wall at his side. Abruptly, the hanyou that never stops fighting is suddenly facing unconsciousness. His strength
has all but given out and without air or his sword, he is going to be literally fucked. When his ass is bared and the distinct impression of a cock poking his cheeks, InuYasha panics. His struggles are only met with opposition.

A reptilian tongue swirls around his ear, and the hanyou cringes before he begins to see red...

*Not like this. This bastard will not-*!

The tip of an engorged erection presses against InuYasha's entrance...the only sound is his strangled cry before crimson takes over his vision—even though Tetsuaiga begins pulsing at his side.

**XIV**

Not only should the growling have tipped Seiryu off that he is no longer in charge of the encounter, but the intense surge of youkai making the hanyou's hair float about his head is a strong indicator the dragon completely misses while positioning himself for penetration. Instead, his grin is sadistic as he shoves his hips forward to dominate the sweet-smelling hanyou. He seats himself fully inside the unprepared body he has pinned against the wall and ignores everything else around him. Even the frigid water does nothing to soften his excitement.

The scream is animalistic when the hanyou is forcefully violated. It makes the dragon's cock even harder, and he growls against the back of the hanyou's neck—looking forward to what would be one of the best fucks of his long life.

He should not have assumed the young one under him would be passive once "claimed." His fatal mistake. In a move too fast for the dragon to see, drugged by the tight warmth around his member, the hanyou's clawed hand whips up and sinks deep into the dragon's skull. Before Seiryu can cry out, react, or crush the young one's windpipe, the hanyou shoves them backward with renewed strength and mashes his rapist against the opposite rock wall with bone-crushing force.

Unfortunately, it also shoves the phallus in his rear deeper, and the scent of blood hits the hanyou's nose. The full demon screams in anger at his blood in the air and pain of his violation. His first time mating should have been gentle and easy with one that would properly prepare him with kindness and consideration. He's had pain all his damned life, and the mad part of him would not tolerate this act to be done out of force. It drives his anger three-fold.

He whips around, removing the object from his body, and his elongated claws go straight for the object that penetrated him. The dragon's blood overpowers the scent of his own.

Seiryu is the one that utters the next scream as razor-sharp claws sink into his genitals. Warm blood contrasts with the cold water as the demonic InuYasha puts himself nose-to-nose with the dragon, fangs showing and growl emanating from deep in his chest. The dragon actually eeps at the crimson eyes glaring insanely into his.

The inu's smile is now the sadistic one as he pulls his hand back and rips flesh along with it.

**XV**

Even if Sesshomaru had trouble finding his baby brother, the screaming would have tipped him off.

A green energy whip comes from virtually no where and wraps securely around the injured dragon's neck. The demon lord gives one sharp pull and severs the head in an instant, before the
dragon can fully feel the agony of his mutilated genitalia.

In a second instant, Sesshomaru is less than a few feet from his younger brother in the chest-deep water and throws the corpse away with an enraged snarl. His blood pounds in his demon ears with the myriad of scents that assault his sensitive nose. To further irritate the already on-the-edge-of-control lord, upon throwing the dragon, he sees that InuYasha's hakama are not covering his body.

The demon is so angry, so UNGODLY PISSED OFF, he is literally shaking with rage. It has been centuries since this surge of emotions had made him literally tremble with the effort not to move or face the whirlwind of violence that only the killing perfection could bring. No words will come, not even to inquire on InuYasha's health or to notice the demonic turn his brother has taken (even though he can clearly smell the change in blood). Only his heavy breathing and the soft, muted waterfall echo. His gold/ red eyes close quickly, pure willpower needed to bring him away from the brink of animalistic insanity. The only thing that truly brings him back is the low pulsing that vibrates through the air and water. One that is a strange combination of InuYasha's youkai and the song of Tetsuaiga...?

Control partially restored, Sesshomaru opens his eyes and finally realizes what he is facing: a likewise insane animal glaring back at him from the corner of the cavern. Even with the Tetsuaiga throbbing at his hip, InuYasha has been overcome by his demon blood; his lavender marking and blood red eyes are the first physical indications. The intense youkai emanating from the young one beats against the demon lord's own aura, a challenge or a warning to stay away. The demon InuYasha does not recognize him or still does not trust him as a part of the hanyou's inner survival instincts. The demon lord tries to breathe through his mouth to tone down the affect of the Heat scent, but as a celebate inu himself, he cannot help his body's reaction to the scent and sight of a beautiful and strong inu youkai ripe for the taking.

"InuYasha..." the demon lord hisses low while his own youkai strengthens in a rise to the challenge. His eyes blink from red to gold, his body tightening with arousal. Without being conscious of his own movements, he is stalking through the water—a rumbling growl rising through his chest.

Then, something happens that snaps him out of his rising lust...

"S-Sessho—Ru..." the voice, garbled and throaty, is still InuYasha, shrinking in on himself as if expecting the more powerful demon to attack. "Ru."

The attempt at speech shocks the demon lord right out of his rightful anger. Never before when he has witnessed this transformation has the hanyou spoken or shown any sign of intelligence other than blatant survival and murderous instincts. However, the demon lord looks even more closely at the crimson eyes, and there he sees awareness—not an endless pit of murderous desire.

The demon lord's mind works quickly: with maturity, most demons discover the true power in their blood; InuYasha transformed even with Tetsuaiga in his possession; the demonic side seems more controlled. Obviously, his little brother has some kind of control over the murderous power in his blood with his awakening Heat. It is up to the demon lord to calm his brother before his perilous control slips and the demon in him goes to find another mate—whether InuYasha agrees or not.

"Yes, little brother. You are safe now." He has already caught the scent of blood and, for the first time since his own trial, feels a strange emotion. Something akin to worry. Perhaps he arrived too late to save the younger from violation and mayhap that is why his demon took control. "This Sesshomaru will protect you as he promised."

The deep, rumbling growl doesn't let up, but changes in pitch and intensity to a soft purr. The
A hunched figure slowly straightens, muscles slowly unclenching from ready-to-spring tight. While Sesshomaru watches with seemingly calm intent—he knows how to face off with a maddened carnivore and is already calculating how to subdue the beast in his brother without fatally injuring him. But, the lord loses some of his tenseness as his brother seems to draw in a deep, cold breath and look at him, really look at him.

"Ru..."

"I am here, InuYasha. To keep you safe as I vowed to do." He holds out a hand, "your sense of smell does not lie."

Teeth snap together with a loud crack of powerful jaws, but the half-transformed inu hanyou does lift his head and inhale. In the twisted part of his mind that is still in inu-hanyou, he knows that scent, and the demonic blood recedes. The crimson slowly bleeds out of golden eyes, and the body returns to its normal state—claws shrinking, fangs fitting back in his jaw, and lavender marks fading.

The transformation back into hanyou leaves InuYasha panting, leaning against the shelf behind him in intense weakness. Too much has happened—fighting, wounds, Heat, flight, and fighting all over again. He is understandably disturbed and re-orienting to the present.

Shaken, InuYasha slumps backward in stupid weakness. He's fragmented and curls in on himself on the ledge. His hand scrambles to bring his hakama back up out of the water and cover himself. The awe-inspiring press of intense youkai around him scalds him through the fire rat. There is no thought now; his body is a bundle of nerves, flesh, and sinew working on primal instinct.

Too close...too fucking close... But, the slight pain in his back makes the hanyou's heart thud harder in his chest. Oh, gods...

Finally, the hanyou straightens and dares to look behind him, eyes comically wide.

A deep breath tells Sesshomaru everything he needs to know about the hanyou's state of mental and physical breakdown. With this knowledge, the bitter tang of fear and blood to the air, his eyes clear of demon blood, even if the pulsing power of his youkai still lurks just under meat and viscera rather than return to dormancy. Every instinct screams to protect his blooded kin at any and all cost; thus the urge to mate the hanyou himself (purely to keep others from taking him, of course) returns with a vengeance.

"Are-you-un-harmed?" Breathe. That dragon spilled his blood in some way. He forces himself to calm just enough to still seem in control.

The hanyou blinks hard and his frantic panting starts to ease. "H-Holy fuck on a stick...S-Sesshomaru?" His trembling muscles unclench.

Only a momentary pause while the expression changes to severely displeased; it's the look the hanyou is used to seeing across locked swords. "You little fool!" Anger and leftover fear make his tone sharp and reminiscent of the old, hateful half-brother. "Why did you not take the potion as you should have but rather take your chances smelling like a scared virgin? Why not find me? I swore to protect you, and this Sesshomaru keeps his word!"

"Hey there, lord frosty-ass. I-uh...' see the flask musta got washed out when I was in the ocean, er, I dunno, maybe when that weird ass fish kinda sproinged outta nowhere, or, well, fuck, it mighta been when the attack kinda went wrong, it coulda just crumpled like paper er some shit, I mean damn, who knows-"
In the blink of an eye, the lord has moved close to his shaken sibling and is leaning down, putting their faces closer to shut up the babbling youth. "now." Irritated sigh, "Are you unharmed? Did that demon force you?" Oh, the pain that will await that dragon when he returns to the land of the living...

"N—what?" The hanyou's head bows as his shaky hands are re-tying the knot of his obi to keep his clothing on. Luckily, Tetsuaiga's sheath had tangled in his hakama cords. Tie it and give the bastard your strong face—keh! Nothing doin'. That dragon fucker is lucky he's dead. "It's fine. I ain't hurt."

"The scent of your blood tells a different story," Sesshomaru denies, eyes intently on his brother's forehead. "I will revive that dragon and allow you to kill him again if that is your wish."

InuYasha's head comes up, ear perk as he raises a brow at the demon lord, "wow. Seriously? You'll use Tensaiga so I can carve him up a little?"

From a few feet away, the elder gives a grave nod.

"That might be the nicest thing you've ever said to me," the joke falls flat because his eyes dart away to keep Sesshomaru from seeing how shaken he really is. "Naw, the fact he's dead is good enough for now. I don't wanna stay here and waste more time."

He turns from Sesshomaru's concentrated gaze and boosts himself onto a rock shelf to get the hell out of the freezing cold water. "If yer offering for later, I might take you up on it, then."

"Do as you like," is the lord's automated reply. He flicks his wet hair over his shoulder, ripples spreading out before him.

Ducking his hands in his sleeves, InuYasha take a deep, cold breath while his rump throbs slightly and his skin tingles. He's already healing from whatever that dragon bastard did...maybe he just got clawed or something...? Keh, not with this kind of pain, but at least his claws were reeking of dragon's blood; bastard didn't get away with that shit unscathed. The hanyou fervently hopes he was in mid-kill before Sesshomaru showed up—oddly enough, he partially remembers his hand crushing the dragon's skull...The hanyou shudders with implications about his formerly murderous blackouts.

"InuYasha!"

Apparently Sesshomaru had been trying to get his attention. As the hanyou looks up, his half-brother is closer once again, standing chest deep in the freezing water. They are both eye level, and Sesshomaru actually looks—kinda put out that the hanyou ignored him. Huh. Who knew?

"Why did you leave camp?" Tamping down on irritation, Sesshomaru asks for the second time.

The hanyou draws himself up, slightly unsure how to take this new concern or having to justify his actions. "Look, Sesshomaru, I had t' get outta there. That's all there is to it... don't get me wrong. I appreciate the sentiment, y'know, you trying to protect me now and all, but I don't need it. Besides, there's no way I can go back to the Western Lands smelling like this—I'll never get to or out of the castle alive."

InuYasha leans back, away from his brother's intense gaze, to get his breath back and shudder for a few good seconds. "I've gotta get through this on my own, and it's fine, like I said." Sure, his legs are so weak he probably can't even stand, but the hanyou has his pride as well as his courage. No one has ever had to look out for him, even the pack he once had, and he didn't need a babysitter—
not even now. That dragon fucker isn't going to shake him.

An elegant and infuriatingly perfect brow arches upward.

"I-I'm on the way to one of my hiding spots from when I was a kid. It's secure. I just kinda got sidetracked here." InuYasha moves to slide back in the water to his brother's right. The immediate cold seeps into his heated body again. *How can anyone be so fucking hot and freezing cold at the same time?* He wonders as he sloshes away from his elder brother, but has to pause. It's the honorable thing to do. "And, well, thanks...y' know, for coming to save me and stuff. I—well, damn—no one's ever come to my rescue or some shit, so, thanks." There, that would pacify his mother's spirit, probably lamenting his lack of manners.

"If I was a few seconds late, you would have been rutted against your will. It will not happen again." Even the water around InuYasha is warming with his body heat, and his words to Yao Xin interjects: *No one will have him—except me.*

Miffed, the hanyou throws his brother a glare over his shoulder, "Wh-? I was waiting for the right time to fight him off!" The demon lord is suddenly beside him, tilting his chin up to look at the bruising around InuYasha's throat.

"Hn. You ripped his genitals off." Sesshomaru tips the younger's chin up to get a good look at the marks, deep black bruising already spreading. The dragon nearly crushed his brother's windpipe.

*Heh. Showed him.* His brother's hand feels cool against his hot skin. "I had him right where I wanted him!" For a moment, vulnerability shows throw the gruff exterior as InuYasha contemplates what might have happened had the demon not taken over.

Sesshomaru, however, uses examination as an excuse to gauge temperature, *his skin burns my finger tips. The potion is as potent as that woman warned. Combined with his virginity...his Heat will strike four-fold. It could actually kill him if left for much longer. So, there is not time to return him to the palace and find a suitable candidate.* "And what of the—blue creature?" Distaste obvious in the tone, Sesshomaru can help but notice how...soft...the skin under his fingers happens to be. Sweet smelling and soft.

The abrupt change in topic makes the shell-shock wear off slightly more. When the adrenaline of his flight and near (how close was it?) rape finally wears off, the Heat symptoms return. The burning in his veins makes his skin crawl and tingle. He feels physically nauseous along with the consistent thump of power around him—linked to the beating of his heart. The fingers touching his bruises don't help matters; whether Sesshomaru's touch and powerful aura are feeding his Heat or if his Heat is feeding Sesshomaru's aura makes the hanyou feel a pressing need to leave. This is worse than the blue guy.

"Th-the blue guy wouldn't have hurt me. He...he was okay." The hanyou turns his throat out of Sesshomaru's hold.

Instant jealousy flares, and Sesshomaru blinks with the flush of emotion he is unfamiliar with: "He is dead. The dragon killed him."

"Are you s...oh, fuck." That news immediately makes him feel like shit. The only person that ever died for him was his own father and mother. No one else...

"Yes... I am—sorry for the loss. He seemed to be a powerful nymph, and not many of his kind are left in this land."
The younger just shrugs, still feeling guilt for the strange but kinda nice nymph. If nothing, the hanyou is honorable and softly replies, "I feel bad for him, but I've gotta get going. Would you have the time to give him a proper burial? Or, at least put him somewhere until my Heat is over and I can?"

Anger flares in the demon lord all over again. "'Go'? You are not safe." The hanyou's arm is caught, stopping his escape. Nor will you last long enough to run.

"I'm not gonna depend on you to watch my ass. I got this. That last fucker jumped me by surprise, but it won't happen again—"

Through this rigmarole, Sesshomaru's eyes narrow; he struggles against his rising instincts. InuYasha actually seems to believe the crap he's spewing—that he can just well take care of himself. However, his eyes are the true keys to his emotions, as the demon lord learned during their fights long ago, and the younger's bright eyes are wide and dull with fear regardless of his arrogant banter. Apparently, his babbling excuses are not good enough for the demon lord. The pressure of his youkai increases, reminding the younger what the power of a daiyoukai can do... Just like the dragon fucker, the overwhelming youkai makes his knees knock together.

InuYasha sputters out mid-sentence at the pressure suddenly increasing around him. His knees lose strength immediately, and his head falls back to unwillingly bare his throat to the stronger male. Horrified at his own actions, InuYasha's eyes widen.

"This is what will happen to you, over and over," the demon side hisses, "you will weaken in the wake of power, and another will take you—willing or not." The bestial side rises in a wave of power, and the Lord of the West, renown for his icy control, reverts to his animalistic nature. His sense of smell heightens, and the scent beacons him ever closer.

"Sess—" is all the hanyou can hiss out.

"You shall not leave."

XVI

InuYasha sucks in a breath, but it is already too late to run. Sesshomaru will overtake him before he sloshes a step and there is not room overhead to jump or maneuver. The demon lord throws out his power in a pulsing wave and the hanyou's body loses all ability to function. He starts to fall forward in the water, and Sesshomaru only needs one arm to catch him around the waist and haul him back up on the rock ledge. *Fight!* His mind forces his body past the natural instinct to remain passive, and the hanyou shoves Sesshomaru off with a surprising amount of strength.

"Get the hell OFF!"

The lord moves fast enough to keep from going into the water and simultaneously pulls a single thread from his haori. In the blink of an eyes, Sesshomaru rebounds from the opposite wall and is back on top, pulling the *hadagi and suikan* down InuYasha's back and off with speed and efficency. With the single thread of demon spider silk, he ties InuYasha's wrists together behind his back while the younger bucks his hips and fights tooth and nail with insults spewing like profane rain.

Determined, the red-eyed lord bares his brother's skin. Heat radiates from every square inch of hanyou...

Not his ideal situation, but the animal side would take what it could get. The elder brother,
however, will do this deed since he is finally able to protect his younger brother. The demon lord purrs, one hand holding the younger down while he runs his nose along the hanyou's spine. Curling around his nose, the scent draws the animal even closer—brings his tongue out to roll along the bumps of vertebra.

At the touch of his brother's tongue, InuYasha's tirade ends on,"—ball-licking, cat-fucking,-geee yaaa!"and whole body jerks with the feel of a tongue on his back. Without his permission, his cock starts to harden painfully against his will once again—this time with his half-brother.

I know I said I would rather have had Sesshomaru or Kouga, but dammit this is not—Fucking FATES!

"God dammit, you asshole! Lemme go!" He wrenches hard to the side but doesn't even come close to dislodging the demon lord. Rather, Sesshomaru pulls up on the bound arms, causing the shoulders to wrench painfully and starts a warning growl to keep the sweet-smelling bitch under him passive to his attention. Once the hanyou stops his struggle, the overcome lord returns to the bumps along the spine.

"Don't do this," and the words, the softly gruff tone, bring back the lord's sanity—somewhat.

Sesshomaru regains enough of himself to lift the hanyou out of the water. His tail lifts off his shoulder (shakes out excess water) and helps in lifting the armor over his head. Only in his clothing, Sesshomaru spreads his tail on the rock below them. Turning the red-faced InuYasha to meet him, the demon lays him back against the softness of fur and finds the cords to his hakama. With one hand, he deftly unties the complex knot while his head descends to press their lips together.

Eyes warring between crimson and gold, the demon lord has enough of his own thinking to be disgusted at himself for this obvious breach of protocol—it was not supposed to happen this way. It will not help in making InuYasha believe he can trust this demon. However, Sou'ung was never supposed to return to this world, either. Each as it comes...

The hanyou clamps his jaw together, but the lord's tongue just sweeps across his lips in a parody of the time he asked for forgiveness. After a taste, Sesshomaru moves down to the neck and chest, using lips and tongue, to find sensitive spots and tasty little niches in the hanyou's anatomy. If this must happen to keep the younger safe from further attack, then the demon lord will attempt to make it as good for him as possible. Of course, he will coax and cultivate his little brother's arousal until their hideaway reeks of it, effectively relieving the hanyou's reluctance.

Already, the male nipples are standing at attention on the flat of the younger's pecks—either from the frigid water or arousal. The demon's tongue, longer than a human's, wraps around the first little bud; InuYasha rears up with a surprised cry.

It is the most intense pleasurable feeling he has ever known. Given he's a hanyou and a fucking outcast, the only touch he's ever had is violent touch (not to mention trying to get yourself off while in a tree ain't the most comfortable place...geeze, he can't even remember the last time he's given himself—ahhh, Gods!). Part of his is sickened at Sesshomaru touching him so intimately and the other part comes alive at the sensations of fingers and mouth skimming his flesh for the first time in his life. InuYasha chest heaves with breath, body twitching when the tongue becomes lips and suction. His erection gives a throb, pressure in his belly beginning to build.

The sensation compounds when the demon's fingers play with the other nipple on his chest. Uncontrollably, the hanyou bucks sharply at the stimulation, "Gods! Stop it Stop!" spills out of his mouth before he can bite it back. No, it's not necessarily begging but demanding—still, it's a
weakness in him that can't take such intense feelings, and that pisses the hanyou off.

_Screaming? Through all the injuries I have given him, never have I heard him cry out so vehemently._

Sesshomaru rears up. His eyes snap back to gold.

He wants to stop if only for the younger's peace of mind. However, the intense color of the flesh and pulsing power of the hanyou's youkai are painfully strong. The heart beat is so fast in the youth's chest that it could explode. The Heat is raging out of control.

"You will not hold out for much longer," abruptly, bare skin skims against his heated, aching flesh, and Sesshomaru's face fills his vision. Golden eyes meet, lock; InuYasha can't look away. The elder has a peculiar expression rather than the normal coldness, and InuYasha feels his lower region harden more—_this, this is lust_...

"Your temperature has already skyrocketed. There is not _time_ to get you anywhere. The potion has sped up your Heat and metabolism. It must happen, now."

Eyes widen at this, ears perked. _What...?_He told me it would speed up..._

"Holy fuck," the hanyou whispers in his brother's face, "b-but—"

"Full demons do not need to mate once they are three hundred. You are a hanyou, so you will apparently need to mate. _Now, InuYasha._" The demon lord refuses to lose control again, not when the younger might have been violated mere moments before his arrival.

"B-but, I can't. Sesshomaru, we can't!" The hoarseness in his voice, the fear of impending death, slightly tinges his scent, and the animal still close to the surface of Sesshomaru purrs again, trying to ease the younger's panic. _"We're brothers, and—and I'm a fucking hanyou and—"

"I know this is not your ideal situation," the elder breathes in this sensitive little ear, "but you must be taken care of or the Heat will not stop. It will _kill_ you."

_**Kill? Fuck, kill me?**_ "I'll survive. I always survive. I can't—do this." The younger grits out with a clenching jaw, pulling at his bound arms with meager strength, a human's strength. "Let me go..._please_, Sesshomaru, let me go."

For the first time in his life, his little brother is asking, nay _begging_. Sesshomaru wishes he could yield to the plea, but to do so would be disastrous.

"I cannot... I will not leave you to certain death, nor will I allow another to force you with no care to your pleasure." And the demon lord will give his little brother as much pleasure, as much heat and ecstasy, as he can take. The curious half-droop of the lord's eyes insinuate hours of touching and teasing, deep and sensual kissing, how good this will all feel if the hanyou just accepts.

Forearms braced by the hanyou's head, Sesshomaru dips down to press his mouth erotically against the younger again to silence his laments. It is, unlike his usual self, gentle and sweet, slowly and thorough. He doesn't necessarily want to have sex with his little brother, either, but the Lord of the West will do what he must. The time for words (explanations and apologies) would be later. The time for action, for pleasure and heat, is now.

**XVII**

The hanyou is out of his mind with the sensation, twisting against the spider silk and fluffy tale of
his brother while being held down on the hips by careful but deadly claws. He doesn't want to enjoy this, but his body perspires, twitches, and heaves against his mental commands. The bolts of pleasure course through him in a way that is too new and frightening. He would rather suffer pain than this. Rent his flesh, spill his blood in hot spurts, crush the bones in his hands and feet (pain is a permanent part of his life, the one thing he can always depend on staying the same and never changing) anything but this intimacy with the half-brother he hasn't yet forgiven. Not while he is too raw from this stupid Great Trial crap.

The demon lord's tongue slithers up his flesh into nooks and crevices to end up in his brother's mouth and tangles, sweeps, tastes, finally captures the unwilling moans and whimpers; sweet sounds from the virginal sacrifice beneath him. His hands skim all over his brother's heated flesh with relish, his own inner beast purring with gratification.

We can touch him, this precious piece of our father—too long we have been denied him...

Without stopping this momentum, the demon lord ruthlessly shoves his animalistic side back down while their mouths continue working and again a hand starts to play and rubs at the tender little nubbins to make InuYasha's velvet erection strain harder against Sesshomaru's while the other hand yet fondles the soft, pink folds of the triangular ears.

The stimulation causes InuYasha to arch his back and suck the air out of Sesshomaru's mouth; his hips start a sensual slide to rub their cocks together while rubbing his sensitive skin again the elder's fluffy tail. While his tongue delves deeper in the youth's mouth, the rustle of Sesshomaru's clothing falling off is lost in sweetness of the kiss. Once the lord's upper body and hakama are out from between them, the elder draws away to let the younger breathe before his smile turns the slightest bit feral, and the sound of InuYasha's heartbeat speeds up.

Sesshomaru moves in for the kill; leaning up, he begins the exploration of the right ear—from base to tip. The muted sounds of surprise and pleasure make the demon lord hum with satisfaction. He would do this correctly, not hurry, and not focus on the what if's afterward. For the first time in InuYasha's painful life, his brother is able to do something right. If nothing, the demon lord (a perfectionist in any technique he deems worthy enough to learn) will make this the most worthwhile moment of the hanyou's life. Both ears are licked and suckeled, nibbled and tongued deep. The soft inner pink turning red with the younger's growing arousal.

Their little cavern begins to reek with the intoxicating scent of unwilling sexual awakening.

"Stop," the younger groans in one final attempt at freedom. He would have more luck stopping the moon from rising.

I cannot, Inuyasha.

However, stopping is not an option—regardless at how much both may not want to continue. For the pragmatic demon lord, there is no choice.

"...I am sorry, little brother," is breathed in the flap of one ear and causes a shudder down the younger's spine. I will not lose you. Not now.

And the elder returns to his ministrations with renewed vigor. His mouth licks and suckles sensitive places on both ears, move down to the neck and chest. He pays attention to both little nubs to hear the sweet sounds of reluctant pleasure. Yet, the intense heat of the young one's skin is reaching dangerous levels, so their first round must happen sooner than Sesshomaru would have liked. He gets an idea of how to make this more tolerable for InuYasha...but, his own pride rails against him.
To be taken like a common bitch? We are a Lord!

But then, his eyes dart back to the same golden ones looking back at him with apprehension and anxiety. He knows what he must do to make it right for the both of them. The demon lord slithers down the younger's body to come face to pelvis with the straining, leaking erection. He bites back his own noises of pleasure and tamps down his pride to use his mouth to moisten the hard length.

InuYasha screams at the wet heat engulfing him. He strains, tosses his head back and forth, jerks and spasms as his elder brother works him gently, wetly. The pressure and friction drives him insane with sensations previously unknown. His arms, his hands, his abdomen unwillingly clench and tremble.

Strange, but the demon lord had expected this encounter to be uncomfortable and awkward, never having lie with a male before himself, but he finds the situation more tolerable than he would have imagined. In fact, his own impressive erection is straining and purple with blood.

Too soon, the sweet, wet cavern releases his erection with one last suck, and elder is looming over him, legs straddling his hips, golden eyes burning down at his brother. Something isn't quite right with this position, but InuYasha is too drugged to fathom it. The heat...burns him alive.

"Only for you..." Sesshomaru breathes, placing the tip of his little brother against his own entrance and slowly lowers his weight. His inner demon quiets its anger while InuYasha isn't sure what his brother means...until the lowering starts.

"Why is he doing this? "Fuckin'! Don't have to...Ah, ahhhh, Gods, Sesshomaru!"

"Even now, all you can do is curse, InuYasha."

The tip breaches the tight ring of Sesshomaru's muscles and InuYasha's whole body tenses. His eyes roll back at the warmth slowly taking him in as Sesshomaru glides gracefully, slowly down with eyes closed and face tense in concentration. It is his first submission ever and an uncomfortable one at that. The pain of penetration is a sharp one sliding up his spine like fingers while he lowers himself down, fully onto InuYasha. His body sheathing the throbbing length smooth and warm, making the younger spasm and gasp hoarsely.

To keep the pain at bay, Sesshomaru leans down over the writhing body and places gentle kisses on the straining tendon in the hanyou's neck. Automatically, long-forgotten instinct kicks in; the rolling growl in his chest vibrates against the overwhelmed demon while the younger's temperature sky-rockets out of control.

"Be calm, InuYasha," is this his voice? Perhaps his younger brother is bringing out some kind of gentle, family instinct in even his animal side...

"G-gods," is the reply, so soft around his panting, "it's-!"

"There is more..." the elder leans down to press his lips to the breastbone above the younger's heart.

"M-more?" His voice is hoarse with strain.

"Much more."

Slowly, the demon lord lifts his hips, using his knees and thighs, to ride back up. The discomfort is next to nothing when considering the pain of having one's arm lopped off, and he merely breathes through the initial and somewhat awkward positioning to find a beginning rhythm. Leaning back
up, he braces himself to roll his hips and engulfs InuYasha's length again. He moves while the younger's wide eyes watch and the body under his thighs twitch.

The cavern echoes the sounds of their bodies gliding together; keening moans erupt from the hanyou's lips. He mutters sweet sounds, gasping out to his elder brother. Even when the demon lord throws his head back, hair whirling around his nude, pale form, his eyes do not leave InuYasha's. His discomfort is fading with every movement, his body healing enough to allow deeper penetration.

Not long and the he jars himself when he finds the right spot. His own body spasms with surprising pleasure at the hard thrust against the bundle of nerves deep within his body and answers the demon lord's only reservation about essentially playing the uke. Another deep hip drop and a rolling purr resounds through the cavern. *This is how males can tolerate and even mate one another.*

For the first time through the ordeal, InuYasha opens his eyes at that sound. His ears fall back in his hair at the vision above him: his elder brother, flushed face, glassy-eyed with utter bliss, and straining erection, shudders with every down thrust. It's more erotic than he ever could have imagined.

*This is the length my brother will go to...*

The hanyou's eyes water unexpectedly at this revelation. Well, of Sesshomaru doing something so unselfish such as giving himself to his younger brother rather than force penetration. He pulls unconsciously at the spider silk around his wrists but the damn thing holds tight. When the tight, hot cavern encasing him clenches around his member, InuYasha promptly forgets about trying to free himself.

"Oh, oooohhh, my God. Fuck, Sessho..." Hisses between his teeth as his eyes roll back and toes curl against the fluff of Sesshomaru's tail.

Under him, the hanyou throws his head back and arches in ecstasy. The smooth, clear lines of throat and chest, arms and abdomen, all strain for more of what only the demon lord can give him; watching the younger hanyou panting in pleasure, new sensations makes the demon lord's own erection bob. The spot inside his body burns with every thrust, and his purring unconsciously grows into a moan. The noise is not one he can ever recall making before, even with lovers he has had in the past. It gives him only a momentary pause, but the hanyou's lust drives his hips up to help with the down stroke.

Sesshomaru's eyes narrow a little, sweat glistening off him even in the chill of the cavern. "You desire it faster, then, little brother?"

Just the soft but steady tone slightly shaky and breathless with pleasure makes the hanyou shudder. "Yessss, more."

It is then (in a surprising move) that the staunch, coldly calm demon lord actually smiles.

**XVIII**

"Well, he ain't back yet."

The badger—a tall sort with more scars than an elder god tree—hefts his massive axe over one shoulder and glares at the skunk questioning him. He had wandered away to find a stream to wash himself of the last few days dirt and grime. Even with the dark ripening past midnight, he wanted to
be somewhat clean before the boozing and wenching and feasting began again.

After fastening his armor back on, he happened to catch the sounds of the skunk approaching (not that he could smell the fucker since a healer removed his stink gland to make it easier to hide from the Lord’s patrol). The badger's first instinct when dealing with any of the Burakumin is to heft his weapon to defend his share of the loot. But apparently, the lower level thief just followed him to make the point their fearless leader had been gone since sunset. Not that Nao or even the skunk really gave a damn if their "leader" was in dead or dying, but if he was, his share of the takings were up for grabs.

"The fucked if I care. I'm not his keeper," Nao (the badger), third-best fighter of the Burakumin gang simply sniffs at the aroma-deficient skunk. His upper lip, scarred through his dark fur from his days as a mercenary for the former Southern ruler, automatically rises in an ugly sneer. The magic and metal axe is thrice the size of a human's, intimidating in sheer volume, and sharper than any sword—a misbegotten gain.

"It's been hours." Youshi (the skunk) crosses his arms over his armored chest and follows the badger as he starts through the forest. No one in the gang actually liked or cared for one another; rather, fate threw them together for survival purposes only. Sheer numbers of demon fared well ransacking human villages; demons with magical skill on their side, however, managed to pillage and survive under the nose of the Western demon lord. Youshi in particular only stayed with the group due to the hefty price on his head.

"He's a big dragon, can take care of hisself. Fucker's out getting more ass," Nao waves the skunk's fears off. "You know how dragons are, can't stop fuckin' long enough to fight."

Youshi snickers, "heh. Betcha don't have the balls to say that to his face."

"Pf, he's only in charge because he's a ruthless fuck, not because he can actually lead anything. Dumb bastard probably couldn't lead a thirsty mongrel to water. The barest scent of some bitch in her needing an' he's off."

The skunk gave a shrug for the fact he couldn't really disagree. "Meh, Kazu said the scent was pretty hot, but Seiryu is missing out on the feast."

"Plenty of us to take up the slack," Nao snickers.

The two make their way back through the forest, exchanging banter and generally talking about the last raid ("Did you fuck the dark-haired wench? She stopped her blubbering after Mizu cut her husband's head off." "Nope, I got second turn at the pale-haired one, damn she was a tight piece!"
"Ah, shit. They already gutted her by the time I wanted some."). Ducking through the underbrush, the two sniffed their way to the campsite. The smell is a combination of rotted meat, stale rape, and unclean demon of all flavor; luckily, the Burakumin had a witch in their midst that set up barriers to mask the scents and sounds from outsiders. Only those that wore her magic talismans would be able to find the gang. Ingenious for murderers and thieves.

"If he doesn't get back by the time the food's gone and the wenches are all dead, then we claim him dead and pick someone else."

"Sounds fair. Hells, if he doesn't get back by the time the wine's gone, then fuck 'em."

Nao nods solemnly as they come into the firelight and glance at the debauchery already in full swing, "fuck 'em."
The cavern is no longer cold, but hot and steamy with movement, rhythm, and heat coming off the hanyou's skin in waves. The tinkling sounds of flowing water only provide soft background noise to the moans, whimpers, and whispers echoing off the rock.

His body blazes. The agony replaces the pleasure with unbearable force, "...too much...I'm dying."

Sound of bodies sliding wetly, "Nn...almost, InuYasha. Soon...soon."

The pace increases by increments and the haze of lust and pleasure turns up the waves pouring from their connected bodies. The elder leans over the younger's chest and puts them face-to-face; mouths meet, trapping noises and cries. When his lips touch his younger brothers—sparks seemingly explode. The hanyou's eyes flicker from gold to red, agony and pleasure warring for control of his synapses. The hanyou's temprature has spiked again, and the demon lord can wait no longer.

Golden eyes stare and the long, silver hair surrounds them in a cocoon where only they exist.

Bending over, Sesshomaru moves without losing their connection and crouches flat-footed. He prepares himself and then his hips begin a faster, harder rhythm. He utilizes some of his demonic speed to work InuYasha's length, no longer concerned with making the hanyou's first time bearable but to save his body from the Heat. Now!

The speed is too intense for the inexperienced InuYasha, and he cries out uninhibited.

"InuYasha..." the half-demonic, half-controlled voice above him growls in a rolling vibration that makes his dick even harder. "Now, InuYasha. Come now!"

He tenses at that breathless baritone and finally reaches his peak. His swollen member gives a final throb of pleasure before exploding deep inside his brother's warm cavity... His first true orgasm with a partner is glorious, flooding his burning body with wave after wave of intolerable pleasure.

Time slows and vanishes altogether while Sesshomaru braces himself above his brother with slightly trembling arms (hn, the hanyou is trembling, not this Sesshomaru!). He waits for the panting to slow and the muscles beneath him to unclench. It takes him a heartbeat to realize the soft panting for breath that echoes off the walls is not only InuYasha's... He makes a noticeable effort to slow his breathing and heart beat as well as the throbbing of his own rock-hard and unfulfilled cock. His tremendous control visibly returns when he does not reach down and finish himself off, rather wills his painful erection to soften. However, the phallus still deep in his ass slowly softens and slides out of him gently, wetly disconnecting them.

His own inner pride rails at the feel of seed trickling out of him, but Sesshomaru merely moves to sit on his own tail and recuperate. His hand falls to the sweaty, red-faced hanyou's forehead, and the demon lord keeps himself from sighing in relief. The temperature goes down with each moment of post-orgasmic bliss. Excellent, he shall survive the night. He rustles around for a moment and finds his hadagi, slipping his arms into the sleeves to cover himself. He will wait for the hanyou to cool down more before covering him as well. For the moment, he is content to wait for the onslaught once InuYasha's instincts retreat and he realizes what has occurred. On a second thought, he slides a claw under the hanyou's back and pulls the spider thread from his brother's wrists.

As the demon lord lifts his hand off his forehead, InuYasha opens his eyes a crack and watches his brother sit, partially covered, at his side. His hands are released and tingle as the blood rushes back into his numb palms and fingers. He only brings them from behind his back, his muscles as weak
as Kagome's ramen noodles. He probably couldn't hold a sword if his life depended on it. So, he lies back with the muted sounds of the water echoing where once moans and the slap of flesh were prominent.

After long moments for his body to calm, he realizes the intense heat and sensitivity is fading somewhat. His heart slows to normal, and Sesshomaru, bastard he may be, took a dick in the ass for his half-breed brother.

It must be the day of fucking miracles or some shit.

Blinking away his thoughts and suspicions, the small part of InuYasha—the one that always wanted to believe in his brother—gains a little more ground in the forefront of his mind.

"Stay calm," the same baritone makes his nipples tighten and tingles race down his spine. "The euphoria will ease soon." Luckily, the Heat will also calm and return in a few hours instead of immediately.

"...Howz about—you use some words—that any regular guy—can understand." The pauses are punctuated with sharp breath. "C'mon—cut me—some slack—here..."

A corner of Sesshomaru's mouth lifts in a smirk, "this Sesshomaru shall endeavor to do as you request."

The hanyou's head turns; their eyes meet. He has enough energy to raise a pointed finger in his brother's direction.

"Uh-hu, fucker. We just—we, well, y' know." His cheeks redden slightly with embarrassment. "You were here and know what went on. Ya can't just go back to the third person crap after all this..." he doesn't know how to finish, but the bastard will know what he's trying to say anyway.

"Hn. There is nothing wrong with using the royal person, but... as you wish."

*Keh, a concession. It's a start. "Well, this half-breed thanks your lordly ass."

Sesshomaru throws the fire-rat over his brother's body and effectively covers his face. The "erhm!" might be childish but satisfying.

"Once you have sufficiently recovered, we shall dress and vacate this place. It has proven to be unsafe."

The struggling hanyou finally pulls his suikan off his face, "yeah, but yer here and most demons'll run like scared bitches once they get a whiff of your aura, right?"

The demon lord gives an elegant shrug, "apparently not. More that have obviously followed your scent are gathering outside the waterfall even now."

He blinks, head tilting and ears twitching to gather sounds. Hm, well, getting laid apparently cleared out the cotton around his head since, now that Sesshomaru pointed it out, he could feel the several spots of sorta, kinda powerful demons wandering around them from above and below. More are coming, and the hanyou is surprised at his ability to feel them from so far away. His keen sense of smell usually told him what he needed to know about approaching demons, and the more powerful the aura, the easier to feel from a distance. But, he knows exactly how far the demons are, what direction their coming, what kind of powers they have...

*Well, hell yeah! Anything to help be a better ass-kicker can't be a bad thing, but...is this power...*
from my father? Will I get more powers similar to him and Sesshomaru? Surprisingly enough, the feel of a bigger, better force pulsing under his skin didn't go away either. He takes a second or two to reel a bit, digest this new and staying pressure. Maybe it's got nothin' to do with the old man at all. It might be more like when Tetsuiaiga gains a new attack—I did make those two fuckers hurt with my own ki. Just more to get used to.

He'd heard of other demons discovering new abilities or attacks after maturation (fuck, Kouga's kick attack came after his Heat, or so the wolf had once claimed). Did this mean he has more to look forward to? Keh, anything to rub in the faces of those snotty pure bloods.

He pulls himself to sit up while the demon lord watches. "I can count seven. I think we got 'em between the two of us." He reaches a hand back to pick up his own suikan and hakama. "I mean, we rocked out against a couple armies before."

Completely unexpected, Sesshomaru snorts (his attempt at covering up a small and insignificant laugh). "I would agree as we are the sons of the most powerful demon in the history of demonic kind." He pulls on his suikan, head turned in case his features aren't neutral, or even perhaps showing his humor. "Even so, now is not the time to fight. It is not wise until the change in your youkai is revealed." He stands, bent in the small niche, and secures his hakama around his waist and moves to tie the ankles. His tail shifts, moves from around InuYasha and lifts his armor. His signature yellow obi is next.

Water sloshes when the demon lord slides off the rock shelf to give InuYasha room to hurriedly dress; his bi-ped form does not even flinch at the frigid water. Now that the Heat is momentarily sated, the high temperature has dropped drastically.

The hanyou could actually understand his brother's point, but... "Keh, you just don't wanna get blood under yer claws, pansy." Pointedly ignoring the tension, he also pulls on his clothing.

Feigning his bored,"hn," he refuse to rise to the bait and likewise ignores the undercurrent of things unsaid. At least the hanyou is fine for the moment and the move to go is more pressing than anything. Joining him in the cold water, InuYasha doesn't need Sesshomaru to spell it out: he did this crazy shit to save me from dying, and that's all there is to it. Not another word about it is fine for me.

Before InuYasha can even turn to face the not-so-frigid asshole, his body comes alive with the feel of Sesshomaru's youkai spreading up his arm and through his body. He must be more sensitive to touch and to youkai. He feels the transformation more acutely; even his own power pulses under skin and muscle to help complete the conversion. His cells condense into the yellow sphere more easily than before.

XX

Below, the land flies by in blurs of shadow and sparse light. The aura of other demons pulse against the small sphere, and the hanyou is amazed that he can tell so much about each demon even though they pass over. It isn't long before they've left the other erm, suitors, behind.

However, there is more lying in wait in the woods; the hanyou can feel it. Sure, it's winter time and the animals are hiding, scavenging, or sleeping—but, there is something very wrong that he can't quite put his finger on. The demon in his blood, sluggish from their first orgasm, wakes with all senses and instincts on edge. In this form of travel, however, he can't get a good enough reading to follow. If Sesshomaru drops him off, he could get a better sense of where and what the fuck is scaring the shit outta the forest. Besides, the Western soldiers might miss it all together.
Hey. You can drop me off anywhere—

I am not leaving you. I also have several safe locations no one can access. We will be there soon.

Wha-? He already saved me. *Seriously? Gah,* (at this point, he would normally be scratching his ear and looking away with gruff embarrassment—but still, having someone give a fuck whether he lived or died is kinda nice, weird but nice.) *Look, you've already done—*

I have waited your whole life to aid you, little brother. This is something inu-demon siblings desire to do for one another. *The matter-of-fact tone takes away none of the concern.*

That's what Myoga-jiji always said, but Sesshomaru, this is different. I know you don't wanna fight off every asshole in a few miles—

The noise is more of a guffaw than a sniff, *hn. Quit this meaningless barking, InuYasha.*

And that is apparently the end of that since InuYasha doesn't know what to say in reply other than to indignantly sputter yet again.

XXI

Ironically enough, Sesshomaru has been to this particular hide-out not very long ago. He had come to the battle site a few weeks earlier to scope out the land before returning to the Western Palace. Thus, he knows supplies will still be in his secret location.

Even in the dark, the lord's sharp eyes find familiar landmarks. Like InuYasha, he spent much of his earliest years in exile merely wandering the lands and surviving. In that time, he made many secret hide-outs to allow for a night's rest without worrying about predators or others that would hunt him. This one he especially favored. The surrounding woods are dense, covering the area from the sky, yet treacherous at ground-level with rocky terrain. From what the older inu can guess, it is the ruins of some long-ago village that has been forgotten. The bits of stone (parts that could have been walls? Not humans, then, they built out of wood) stick out of the ground with foliage acting like flowers in bloom. That and a well hidden cavern are all that remains.

Landing, Sesshomaru breathes and the small ball of golden light turns into the two inu youkai. The younger glances around while his eyes, ears, and sniffer take in information about their surroundings. The pressing feeling of wrong has faded to nearly nothing, and the hanyou can let himself relax an iota. Well, okay, so it's semi-safe looking. Maybe the frigid asshole (*wow, not going to go there*) knew what he was talking about—however, the hanyou still has a hard time picturing his immensely strong (if not arrogant) older sibling having to scrounge for a safe hiding place ever in his life.

"Come," the demon lord merely turns and leads the way through the underbrush. Relying on scent over sight, Sesshomaru catches the faint whiff of his own blood, a mere drop to signal the entrance. It is almost one hundred feet through the ruins...

"Ow Dammit!" InuYasha mistakenly kicks one of the stones and hops on one foot while Sesshomaru precedes him.

"Watch your step," completely deadpan. Inside, however, the demon lord is almost...laughing. *Hn. Perhaps this Sesshomaru will have to teach the hanyou to walk and speak before he can teach him to fight or to rule?*

Again, a noise comes from his throat that almost sounds like...laughter? Once upon a time, he had laughed just as he had cried...
Focus. After a few more feet, Sesshomaru takes a deep breath. His left hand rises and the ancient language spills from his lips in a lyrical chant.

InuYasha picks his stumbling ass up with an embarrassing heat suffusing his face; to trip up like an idiot just after that fucker saved him and took his virginity (okay, once again, not going there). But years, years of keeping the demon lord on his toes with new attacks or—gee—cutting an arm off, and this is what he's reduced to: a bungling bitch. It would be too much to ask the fates to give him just one good chance at kicking some random demon's ass just for the satisfaction of showing off an attack. Too fucking much to ask...

The younger demon sighs but glances up at the sudden appearance of light. Ears pricking up, he stretches to the side to see around Sesshomaru with a curious expression; his hands fall out of his sleeves at the glowing mark that covers the ground before his half-brother. What the-?

He glances at the intense concentration on his brother's face, listens to the string of some whatzawhozit gibberish, before looking at the circular radiance. It takes a second for the chanting to cause the circle to extend out and for another, smaller one to appear in the center. The smaller circle takes the shape of a half-moon, just like the one on Sesshomaru's forehead. I'll be damned...he's got more tricks up his sleeve than I ever imagined.

Finally, the marking flares intense silver and blows out like a candle. As it does, the earth and small mound of rock rumbles, the vibrations trigger the nerves in the bottom of InuYasha's feet. The rumbling is as far as twenty feet down...

He jumps back as the earth splits open in front of Sesshomaru, and a set of fricken stairs just appears at his feet—Gods forbid the lord would go down into the earth without stairs. Helplessly, InuYasha looks on in amazement as his brother turns and catches the slack-jawed, 'how-the-hell-did-you-do-that' look.

So amusing... He gestures to the stairs with one striped hand, "This is an excellent hiding place" is the only assurance he gives and starts down the stairs.

"Actually, this is pretty cool—especially for you."

"I shall take your approval into account."

XXIII

"Well, that's pretty fucking bad," with no consideration to the kit, Kouga peeks over the transformed kid at the camp of strange-smelling fuckers around their small fires.

"They don't smell right," the younger replies, green eyes wide and incognito among a bunch of half-covered leaves. His thin tree routine (heh, wait until the real fighting begins. I can morph into a buncha neat things, now) has allowed the two of them to inch closer without being seen. Now that they've seen the source of that smell, both consider that the fighting might not be over...
I:

Two hundred and two years ago, the shores of Nippon

A massive explosion rocks the land. Fire bathes the remains of a once-great palace, cleansing it of evil by utter destruction. Out of countless servants and soldiers, there are only two survivors, and it is unlikely they will live to see morning. The young woman, a much respected princess from the most prominent human family in the Western Lands, runs for her life and that of the precious bundle held tightly to her breast for warmth against the bitter cold. The child whimpers, but the air too cold for him to draw in a proper breath to truly cry. Even close to his mother's heart, the male child is shivering in his first few moments in the world.

Lady Izayoi, once renown for her beauty and kindness but sadly disgraced for mating outside her species, is barefoot with only a yukata and the fire rat robe over her hair to protect her from the harsh elements. She should be weeping and lamenting the death of her mate while she staggers through the dark, but until they are safe, she cannot dishonor his memory by breaking down now. With snow up to her calves and a mountain side behind her from the smoldering rubble, her body is already overtaxed from the recent birth, death, and resurrection. Any other human would have collapsed, worn out from the physical and emotional trauma; any other would have simply lie down to die.

She, however, refuses to give up—unlike many noblewomen, she is strong of heart and will. With her infant depending on her and her husband sacrificing his life to assure they both live, she will not stop, she will keep running until her body gives out completely. Her tenacity is a trait her infant son will someday inherit.

The full moon shines down to light her path, as if the Gods are with her, and even in grief, the lady thanks whatever forces help her and her son to survive.

From behind, the tiny ball of light makes her tense and duck behind a tall tree, whispering to the child in her arms to try shushing him. Her heart pounding in anticipation, she frees a hand to latch onto a branch sticking out of the snow. One not too heavy or cumbersome. The ball stops out of her sight, and light flashes brightly.

While she is human, she is spiritually gifted enough to feel the raw power exuding from around that tree. She has a moment of indecision, should she put her son down and prepare to defend them both? Would that powerful demon scent her as human and merely leave them?

"My Lady,"

Her breath catches and her eyes automatically burn with moisture. She peeks around the tree, and for a moment has a glimmer of hope. But, no... Only one tail and flowing silver hair not pulled up
in a top knot...

"My first-son! Sesshomaru..." Her voice breaks, caught on the edge of relief and out right sobbing.

The young inu turns immediately at the sound of her voice. His face is an unreadable mask, only his golden eyes show how relieved he is to see her alive.

"My Lady," he strides quickly through the snow, his tail moving to wrap around her and the child, his new sibling, in her arms. Her feet are freezing and he feels a mild irritation that it has taken so long to sniff her out once he realized there were indeed survivors from his sire's final battle. He is not comfortable with feeling guilt and does not handle the emotion well, but regardless, Lady Izayoi is an honorable and strong human in her own right. He would not sully her by allowing her and his new sibling to die simply by the elements alone.

Looking up into his face, her tears can finally fall, "Sesshomaru... My lord, Touga..."

"Yes," with effort for her, his voice gentles and he bends down slightly from his greater height to pick her up gently as he can manage, taking care not to scratch her with his claws. His tail wraps more snugly around her for warmth, and he holds her high against his chest to try keeping the cold plates from her skin. "This Sesshomaru's father is no longer of this world."

Silently, another round of tears fall. "Tensaiga?" She whispers in bleak hope.

Sadly, he was not able find any of the damn swords in the bleak wreckage, but his father had once told him the Sword of Heaven would not work for its' maker. "...Your son is sorry," he replies in that same soft tone. "Tensaiga is forged from the Inu no Taisho's own fang. His power cannot save him from the next world—it can only save others." Neither would his first mate of whom possessed the Mediou stone, for her heart is as cold as the field in the dead of winter. He doesn't mention the possibility for fear of giving her false hope.

The distant demon, now a lord, holds his pseudo-mother closer and allows himself this moment of weakness to lay his cheek against her hair and mourn his father's passing...of which is technically his fault.

Father and son stand on the beach with eminent battle nipping the air.

"This Sesshomaru fears not the humans. He will go in your stead and return the Lady to you."

"And you would dishonor you father this way, pup? You would dare raise your sword against his will. No. You will stay and finish what I am not able to. You will honor me as my son and my heir."

"Foolish father, your blood is already one with the sand." Only few times has Sesshomaru ever seen his father bleed, but if the wound is still not closed, then the possibility of the Inu no Taisho falling in battle becomes more and more real. In some part of his mind, Sesshomaru guffaws at the possibility of his great father dying.

"The moon is right, and the time is now." The great general knows he is doing the appropriate thing. "This is your father's battle, my first-born. You will stay out of it."

"Many times in the past has this inu followed you in the path of the honorable ruler! In victory, never has your son sullied your honor. Why now do you deny me?"

There is no answer for a quite a while, for the great inu does not owe his offspring an answer to his will. He expects obedience, and has mindfully laid a well played scheme to make certain his child holds to the unspoken promise.
And here, the wind coming off the sea brings with it a scent that hits the younger inu's nose, a tangy perfume. Is it Izayoi's time and a low growl begins from the center of his chest? "...Are you going, Father?"

"Are you going to stop me, Sesshomaru?"

Angry, the younger inu's stoic face changes only slightly. His brilliant sire had effectively trapped him, honor bound, to stay his hand against the humans that had Izayoi. His face remained impassive, but the young inu is desperately thinking of any way he could stop this turn of events.

"...I will not stop you," since doing so would be a grave dishonor, but as a last chance, the inu tries one final tactic; "however, I would like the fangs, Tetsuaiga and Sou'ung handed over to me."

Of course, the Inu no Taisho calls his bluff, "if I say I will not give them to you...Would you kill your own father?"

The young inu's fists tighten, and he refuses to reply to such an idiotic question. This is the man that had assured him life, one that made him strong, one that needed to stay around and teach him how to be an honorable ruler. His father knew what lie behind his son's icy mask—or so Sesshomaru believes.

"Do you desire power that much?"

The young inu's eyes narrow dangerously. This line of questioning is ludicrous—unworthy of an answer. Of course he desired power, needed more to be as strong as his father, if he hoped to bring honor to his bloodline and those of the West. He would need strength, but not like this. Not at the price of his sire or his lady. This line of questions is all wrong, insinuating his sire may not trust him after all...

"Why do you seek power?"

Caught off-guard, the inu answers with a calm he does not truly feel, "This Sesshomaru must travel the path of conquest. Power is necessary to walk that path." It is an answer he knows his sire will surely understand. After all, the Inu no Taisho turned the turbulent West into a unified kingdom by victory and, at times, invasion... This Sesshomaru has been in more than one battle at his father's side for such a purpose, to gain the respect and obedience of vicious opposition with strength and mercy. Instead of slaughtering every enemy, the path of conquest assures an example for the kingdom. It was his sire's first real lesson, and one Sesshomaru has learned well.

"Conquest, eh? Sesshomaru, is there something you wish to protect?"

Aloud, he repeats this innocent question. As of yet, he has no mate to speak of, no children, and few friends. He is not the Lord of the West, nor possesses something or someone that needs his intervention. The Western Lands belong to the Inu no Taisho as well as Izayoi and the household he rules—claiming these things would be usurping his father's claim, and Sesshomaru has no right to do so. In his heart of hearts, he truly does not believe any force in Heaven or Hell could bring low the General. He has no need to protect, nor does he own anything worth protecting—other than himself.

In years to come, he bares the shame of the words that surely turned his sire against him:

"...I have no need... to pursue such an endeavor."

This, his last conversation with his great father, will be the young inu's lifelong regret. Holding his father's widow, the only true mother he has ever known, he already knows his choices have been
for the sake of honor and not for the sake of his father's life.

It is a mistake he will never forgive himself for making.

He can only hope that one day the small child would grow to understand why this Sesshomaru merely stood aside rather than defy his father's wishes and stand with him in battle one last time. It would not be clear to the demon lord until years later how his father must have doubted him in those final minutes in the world of the living...

**Present day**

"*Kindling lies in the corner. I shall return with a kill soon.*"

Finally, the hanyou has a few, non-chaotic moments to himself in this nifty hide-out. Leave it to Sesshomaru to have a place he could keep his kid and kappa away from hungry youkai wandering around the forest (*speaking of which, where was the kid and the creeper toad? Sure, Sesshomaru probably wouldn't have thrown the kid into a fight like that, but I haven't seen either of them yet...*). Shit, the spell probably made sure he didn't even get his white robes dirty or something.

He is still uncomfortably warm and a fire is not necessary, but he gathers the kindling to start one anyway, just to have something to do with his hands. The normalcy of the action is somewhat soothing to his already jangled nerves (*how does the smoke get out of here? Keh, bastard probably thinks of everything*), and he adjusts Tetsuaiga's sheath so the thing doesn't dig into his ass.

Now that he isn't moving, fighting, or apparently fucking, he can take stock of the wounds that have already healed and make a guess as to when the next jump in the Heat will start. The holes in his back and leg have already closed but remain tender to the touch, his *um* lower injury is also healed over without any residual pain, so that's a good thing. He isn't going to pansy out anymore thinking about what that mother-fucking dragon did to him while he was batshit crazy with demon blood. Naw, not worth the time since he'd ripped the ass-clowns dick off in retaliation. The deed was done and over with, his body is mended, and whatever in him that triggered that pulse of power sans Tetsuaiga would be something he'd just have to explore. Just like when he figured out the Bakuryuuha, he'd have to test himself all over again. Well, whatever. New power is new power and a way to keep his enemies off-kilter. Just as soon as this Heat was over, he'd go back to the village and test out what he could do now...

*When this Heat is over...how long, though? The next wave probably won't hit until tomorrow, maybe? For fuck's sake I hope it'll be longer than that. I dunno how I could take another—gah. Not thinking about it. Sooo not thinking about it right now.*

Believe it or not, he hopes the next bout doesn't happen until he can get away from his not-such-a-fuckwad brother. What they did in the caverns makes the hanyou feel strangely...pissed off. Pissed off *and* a little, well, guilty. Never in his entire life had he used someone like that (*well, that's not necessarily how it happened, I didn't ask him to do it!...uh, well, me.*). He didn't use anyone in his childhood for food or safety; he didn't use Kikyo to get the jewel (*that was Naraku*); he kinda used Kagome in the beginning when the damn jewel shattered, but it wasn't like that later on in the journey. How he used Sesshomaru was completely different, one-sided, and it didn't set well with him. The hanyou prided himself on his honor and independence, but it seemed all that was moot now that he knew about the Great Trial. Worse, his honor is compromised by taking from Sesshomaru without giving back...

*Watching Sesshomaru's carved abdomen flex as he rode them to their completion...*

*The upturn corners of his brother's mouth, a smile just for him...*
Golden eyes dilate as he lowers himself for the first time...

So warm and tight...

"Come now..."

In this little cavern, InuYasha makes a hoarse bark of surprise as his body twitches in reaction to those erotic images of his naked and strangely pleasing elder brother. Well, hell yeah, some stupid part of him wanted the bastard's approval or affection since he was a kid (_didn't all brothers want to be accepted_?), but he hadn't let himself see how attractive the demon lord really is—well, he didn't think to trust his younger sibling. Then, it all got screwed to six ways to Hell when he saw Sesshomaru completely exposed. No crazy half-ton of metal and bone or silk in the way of the feel of marble skin sliding against his own. Tasting the mouth that should have been hard as marble but was really soft and sweet...

InuYasha sucks in a breath, eyes wide in a momentary epiphany. _Heat is only suppose to make my body ready to become an adult. The things I felt when-w-when he touched me...that wasn't just the Heat._ No, the intense, twisting pressure in his guts when that mouth suckled on his collar bone and down his chest, the warmth pooling in his belly when Sesshomaru, _fucking Sesshomaru_, took his member all the way down to the root, and _crimany_ the hot spill in his abdomen while his carved older brother rode him to their completion...none of it was just the Heat. Couldn't have been.

_Gods, I actually want him._ _Fuck me sideways and back, I want him again...I want to grab his hips, touch him with my hands this time, lick him right there..._

His body gives a hard throb, jerking him out of his fantasy so fast he groans at the pain of a hard dick in his hakama. It would be humiliating if Sesshomaru would come back and smell his so aroused he could come with just a look—_I mean, damn, he's already seen the whole package, and I owe him since he saved me three damn times. I mean, I could-well, let him use me like that to-to f-finish. That would make us even. But what if...what if he won't do it with me again...? For fuck's sake, I don't need him! Gah, this Heat is turning my brain to noodles! I might be fucking scarred for life!_

He sucks in a deep breath and lets it out slowly; he black out his mental image with some of the most un-stimulating shit he can think of: Kouga...wearing Kagome's skewl uneiform; Naraku...kissing that little toady bastard, Jaken...; Mirko in Sango's PINK KIMONO!

_Yup, that did it._

His body heat lowers enough to make him less crazy, but the scent of him is strong and musky. A little panicky, the hanyou grabs more kindling in hopes of smoking the scent away. He shouldn't see Sesshomaru as something to desire—not the cold fucker that let those Elders keep him in exile for the larger part of his life. But putting faith in his brother was like putting faith in Miroku's wind tunnel—sure both might do what you expect, but both are still dangerous to fuck around with. Same thing. Sesshomaru took him to keep him from dying and did this trial thing to keep the honor of their bloodlines, but is all the rest true? Can it be that his brother really wants to be a sibling?

Just like Fujikunna said, only time will tell, and as it is, there ain't been enough time for him to put a hundred percent faith just yet. He appreciated the swift kick in the pride his brother must have taken, but it still didn't make the hanyou any less happy that he had to depend on Sesshomaru of all people. But dammit, he owed his brother, and InuYasha didn't back out on what is honorable,
regardless of what he suspects Sesshomaru is really capable of.

Well, since the last few days have moved seamlessly into the realm of utter ‘what-the-fuck-is-going-on,’ he supposed he’s gets to feel a little off-kilter off at the very least. Same thing happened when he woke up pinned to Goshinoku, discovered Kikyo was dead, and fifty years had passed. His world has made a complete 360, and most of the truths he believed in (hanyous suck to the rest of the world, Sesshomaru's a grade-A asshat, and he would never even see the lands of his father) turn out to be a bunch of shit. Now, he's left out of place all over again—this time he doesn't have Kagome willing to stand beside him, to help him plot his way through this muddled sham of an existance. The only thing he can trust, one-hundred percent, is in his own claws and his sword—just like the last few years of fighting every bad thing that crossed his path.

Sure, fighting for the hell of it he might, in some tiny way, have done in memory of Kagome, but it was more to just keep him from being bored as hell and getting into more trouble. It's not like he cared about stupid humans or, shit, missed being on the road with a purpose in mind. But, at least that all had been real. His little pack had been real. Kikyo had been real. Being sealed to the fucking tree had been shitty, but real. Naraku's shit had been real. The Jewel being shattered by the half-assed aim of Kagome's had been real. Sesshomaru's hate of him...hadn't been. Everyone's hate of him hadn't been. Being weak just 'cause he was a half breed hadn't been, either. So much of his life was just a bunch of crap, he had to separate it all into what he knew for fact (he excelled in the art of beat-down) and what was never right in the first place.

Yeah, so why did Sesshomaru have ta shoved a hand through his gut? Did those Elder assholes make him do it?... Well, he started lowering his stance with Tetsuaiga enough that he could guard his middle after that one... What about the fucking pearl in his eye? Geeze, he wouldn't have gotten Tetsuaiga without it... And Sou'ung! That rat fucker left him in the middle of the un-dead army...which proved he could take on enemies from all sides.

The hanyou sighs heavily; he hates to admit it, but without Sesshomaru tearing him up on more than on occasion, he wouldn't be the awesome king of ass-kicking he is today. If all those barbs hadn't been spewing from his own brother...then, he wouldn't have had the drive to keep getting stronger to prove that frosty ball-licker wrong.

I'm strong as I am because of Sesshomaru. They were right; he did train me to be a great fighter.

This second little epiphany makes him rock back on his heels, golden eyes wide. Well, damn. Just, damn. He wouldn't have discovered Blade of Blood or the Iron Reaver Soul Stealer. He wouldn't have been able to keep Kagome alive or beat all those demons, like Ryuukotsusei or the Band of Buttfuckers or any of the others, without Sesshomaru riding his ass about everything. All his accomplishments were because of his brother... the one that actually wanted him to stand as a son of Inu no Taisho.

And that, for the first time since Kagome left him, gave him another reason not to hate his brother—because Sesshomaru is still trying to make him a great warrior by including him in the war against invaders. But, that jerk made him get up off his sorry ass and move forward again. To live again.

The fighting itself was not a big deal. His whole life has been nothing but fighting since childhood—even before Mother died—but fighting in last few years had been too empty. Giving and taking a beating, well, nothing new; it just hadn't been the same without a pack, there was no purpose to his endless rounds. But this, on the other hand, a coordinated fight, you know, with shit-tons of people on his side waiting for him to do something, was kinda nice to do again, and he wouldn't have had the chance without Sesshomaru's interference. That night in his room in the West, he'd asked the
same question InuYasha had been asking himself for the last couple of years:

What would make you desire to take up your sword again?

He hadn't realized how much he missed having someone (or a bunch of people) at his back, cheering for him to win, or how important it was to keep him moving. It made nostalgia rise up in his chest, remembering all those times when that young girl in the funny clothes notched an arrow in her bow and cheered for him—had unshakeable faith that he would always win. Fighting with West touched a part of him that he threw away once the others moved on with their lives—a part that had been rejected for five years of wandering. He'd had to return to the old way of life, before Kikyo and the Jewel, the one where he was alone and had no one to depend on but himself.

Until the first priestess looked at him with a smile, his way of life had just been another thing set in stone, like the laws of nature, a universal truth. Half-breeds lived and died alone.

But gods-damned, he just had to get tangled up in Kikyo's business. Of course, she could have killed him outright and probably saved herself a lot of trouble, but her constant refusal just started that change in him from a wild, blood-thirsty animal to someone that could protect. Her actions and Sesshomaru's lead him here. Protecting her, protecting Kagome, protecting Shippo and Miroku, Sango and Kilala, protecting innocent humans that hadn't asked to be terrorized. Protecting the West from fuckers with a loser complex.

It was the one thing he'd managed to right in his whole useless life, to make sure that bad guys got their due, and his half-brother was actually the head in all of it. It was, well, kinda nice to have a purpose again, and hell he could probably get used to leading an army someday.

Shaking that thought right the hell out of his head, the younger of the Inu no Taisho's sons reminds himself very sternly that he's not making any long terms plans with the West. Nope, all this shit with the trial, the elders, the people, with Sesshomaru in that cave, it all happened way to fast for him to properly gauge. Sesshomaru might not be such an incredible bastard and he might be trying like hell to earn his trust, but that might not be enough to convince him to be a Prince of the West or take on the responsibilities he's apparently shirked while in exile. They just up and expect him to jump right into being a noble son or some stupid crap—no problems, right? Like I'd know half that shit that's going on in the West right now. But really, all that made him nervous, real nervous, like fighting a fuck-ton of big bastards bare-handed as a human or kissing Kagome kinda nervous. Just thinking of all those advisors waiting for his opinion just to tell him how wrong he was, or to watch the West fall into chaos because he made the wrong call... Besides, his life as a fuck-around vagrant had no pressure or responsibilities; he didn't have to answer to anyone, and that's how he liked it.

But, well...Sesshomaru had done that same kinda thing, right? He had to survive in exile then step into their old man's boots, so InuYasha was probably expected to do the same thing. Maybe? If his brother could be a pretty good politician, then so could he, right? Couldn't be that hard if Sesshomaru made it work and the whole land hadn't fallen to Hell in a handbasket.

Without realizing, the hanyou already contradicted himself into thinking things from here on out would work out just fine.

II:

The Western army, weary from a fast and intense battle, moves in torch-wielding droves through the land. Leaving a few groups and ships to patrol the shoreline, the generals and lieutenants as veterans of war do not trust the Mongol forces to be finished so quickly. While they have numerous soldiers guarding the prisoners, their eyes in the sky scout for other forces that have infiltrated the
land. However, even though the softly falling snow should be a factor in the West’s favor, it acts as a hindrance to the already weary fliers. The dragons are getting colder and ice forming on their wings while the birds huff painful breaths in the ever-increasing cold. Rather than camp at the battle site, those in charge made the executive decision to move their forces away from the saturated ground to avoid any problems with scavengers. Large, hungry scavengers. Matsu, aware that the other human foot soldiers would probably be exhausted and thus useless on watch for invading demons, agreed with the other demonic generals. His men would guard the prisoners of war and carry supplies to free up the demon soldiers in case of attack. The other generals, while demonic, still listened to him as an equal and allowed the human in charge of their ground troops to have a say in their next move.

Among the small group of invading survivors, Badzar and Sanagerel are tethered to the other prisoners and shoved into movement. They are the only elementals taken as prisoners; others with power over nature were killed on sight. Given the power of the kotomodo, the power of the elements is not an issue, but that does not mean the two are completely without resources. Yao Xin knows this; he especially knows that his children are fortunate not to have been executed, and he had even suggested as much to the previous lord as well as Sesshomaru. Elementals are not to be trusted; luckily, however, Sesshomaru has employed many types of creatures during his rein as lord, and perhaps Xin’s two children might see reason...

Walking beside the staggering prisoners, the advisor glances at his youngest twins with his heart in his throat. So long has he been in Nippon that time has blunted the ache of missing his homeland and family. However, as he felt for Touga in his worries for Sesshomaru and (later) InuYasha, he as a father has never forgotten his children. Returning to his homeland after being integrated into Touga’s household was not an option—the Mongols would have killed him on sight as a traitor and defector. He has no choice but to stay and not heap more dishonor on his wives and offspring. It was better…it was better for them that they never knew he gave up his name for a place with the enemy.

The battle is brutal and bloody as all battles tend to be. The Mongolian people, however, are accustomed to being on the winning end, but against the demon warriors of the West, they are sorely wanting. In this war, they have reached the shores of Nippon to find the West waiting on them, headed by a huge white inu with red, glowing eyes and black markings on either cheek. This is Toshiro, the General of the army and one of the most powerful demons in the land.

Boladjin, an older soldier even back then, kept his reservations of this battle to himself. It would be a weakness to his people if he refused to leave his family for honor in battle, or even if he told others of how idiotic this fight was since they were going away from their own shores with less than half their forces. This battle is suicide, but the Mongolian way of life would not allow his to stay behind and have his children suffer exile for his cowardice.

Jumping from his boat as the other Mongolians, he leapt into battle with his heart determined to kill as many of these demons as possible before they struck him down.

The clash lasted the whole day and into the night, for the Mongolians had many, many Elementals on their side to war with the demons and their youkai. The earth, wind, seas, and fire dealt the Nippon soldiers a mighty blow, but as a source of trouble, these weavers of nature were targeted and killed first, driving the rest of the Mongolians back toward the ocean. But their kind did not allow for defeat, nor would they be taken prisoner. Any worth their weight would willing drive a sword into his heart and bring the honor of his death to his kin and in his afterlife. There is simply no other way.

So, when the situation looked bleak, the soldiers without power were taking their own lives on the
beach as the soldiers rushed further. Boladjin made one last move, making the sand like water to suck as many advancing soldiers as he could. With methodic movements, he raised his own sword to his throat.

"And this is your strength?"

He jerks, moving gracefully to point his sword around at the voice that had spoken in his native language. The being that stood before him was a man that was no man. Long silver hair and the blue markings...the general himself stood beside Boladjin, blood splattered over every inch of his armor.

"You kind does not understand strength if this is how they end a battle," one clawed hand sweeps over the beach littered with bodies of suicide. "They did not even fight with full strength and will— unlike you."

Boladjin, teeth gritted, makes his move, darting forward to shove his blade through the gut of his enemy while driving the water around them to provide a distraction.

Regardless of the wave, the Inu no Taisho steps out of the path of death and uses a fast claw to pluck the sword from the Elemental’s grasp. Boladjin fell on his arse in the water, staring up at the demon above him. Death would release him from the bonds of life, and death at the hands of such an enemy would assure him peace in the afterlife. Prepared to die, the Mongolian breathes and thinks of his children one last time.

"There is no honor in this," the dog tosses the sword without so much as testing the blade. "If you truly seek to walk the path of conquest, it is here you will find it." And with that, the lord of the nation offered him a hand.

It had never occurred to the advisor, after Toshiro eventually died in battle, or when Touga became old enough to rule in his own right, that he, Xin, should reclaim his own name and return home after so many years had passed. The family needed him, and Nippon agreed with his own sense of morals and ethics. He felt more at ease here than all his time growing up in the plains of his homeland.

Again, Xin the foreigner looks at his youngest offspring to find his daughter looking back at him with her mother's eyes. But, in them, he could see thoughts turning and calculating. Whatever his lord said to them back on the beach might have made an impact, but it also might have convinced them even more that their father was nothing but a traitor for staying with the enemy. Either way, Xin felt a dark foreboding settle deep in his bones along with the bitter cold.

"This will not end well," his instincts seem to say, "I will see them meet their deaths before this ends...

"Yao Xin!" Matsu, astride his warhorse, slows his mount next to the foreigner with a powerful pull.

"Fates...the universe's way of manipulating an outcome... "What is it?" The advisor turns from his child and is now alert for possible danger stalking them.

"Trouble. Some of the demons have picked up a scent... We think the bastards have gotten around our forces and are on shore!"

III

I have no need...to pursue such an endeavor...

His expression is back to an empty mask that could be boredom or disdain. Under him is the corpse...
of the nymph InuYasha defended earlier, and even though the task offends his sensibilities as a warrior who walks the path of conquest (those who seek death will indeed find it), he obeys Tensaiga's rattling and pulls it from the sheath at his hip. Brandishing the Sword of Heaven is still new, but his eyes narrow at the minion of the Underworld suddenly clear to his gaze.

_That hanyou will be my eventual downfall... here this Sess—_I have come through the cold and ice. _For what purpose? For "something to protect...?"_ I have done so for InuYasha already. _His entire life has been the center of my protection, and yet, here it is that I am doing so yet again with this being that very well could have destroyed him. Still, Tensaiga cries out. For this being that ingratiated itself into my brother's good graces? Hn, not an easy feat but not one that is worthy of this Sess—_of my notice. Nevertheless... InuYasha will not mourn this creature if this Sesshomaru has the power to keep it from being so._

He makes a decisive strike to banish them back to Hell.

Before his narrow gaze, the magic of Tensaiga swirls to redeem the corpse by using the ground water to restore the half of the body that was burned away. Muscles, viscera, blood, and skin fill out before his eyes as the fatal wound causing death is amazingly healed, and the water nymph's eyes open wide as his newly restored form jerks and spasms with life. Satisfied, Sesshomaru re-sheaths Tensaiga and instead pulls Bakusaiga for just in case the demon decides to attack in its' half-aware state of mind. After all, death must be disconcerting...combined with the fact that the demon lord might possibly be just a bit angry at the nymph, considering how pleasing to the eye he was and the expression of grief on the hanyou's face when he believed this nymph to be in the afterlife. If the dragon hadn't interrupted, would InuYasha have mated with this male? The thought makes the demon lord's fist tighten.

_Blood sprays from the nymph's mouth in a long line of gore from lungs and stomach filled with former death, and it seems even water demons breathe. The handsome nymph rolls to one side, hacking and breathing before he notices the coldly calm demon lord behind him and jerks around. Wide-blue eyes blink several times in woozy question._

_"This demon before you is Lord Sesshomaru of the Western Lands." Giving the nymph a once-over, a curious emotion flickers in the lord's chest. He notices the nymph is long and firm of limb, but his aura is quite powerful in its' own right. He may have been, well, a tiny bit jealous. "Nod if you understand these words."_

_After long moments of blinking and looking at his hands and body incredulously, the nymph finally meets his eyes with wonder and gives a small nod of his head._

_"By the Sword of Heaven, you have been granted you life in exchange for not harming this lord's younger sibling, the inu formerly in this mountain." The nymph's eyes widen as memory apparently comes rushing back and his blue eyes dart around the demon lord as if looking for the younger inu once again. Sesshomaru's eyes harden. "He is no longer within your reach."_

_With that, Sesshomaru is satisfied he has acted honorably and turns on his heel. In mid-step, Bakusaiga is back in its' sheath and he is moving into the forest. As he once swore to his father's lady, he would do what he must to assure InuYasha's future in the West as well as attempt to see to his happiness. Saving this nymph would ease the hanyou's conscience—seeing him bury one corpse was enough to last the demon lord for a thousand lifetimes. He could return to his younger brother with good news, perhaps it will make InuYasha more at ease in his presence after...their activities to relieve his Heat._

_The demon lord's mind is so full of his younger brother than he is automatically moving more quickly. However, a surge of youkai at his back and the nymph is on his knees grasping at the_
sleeve of Sesshomaru's haori. Cool golden eyes look back, and he can read the question there.

"The dragon is no more, and this lord's younger brother is safe. Go."

Pulling his sleeve away, Sesshomaru vanishes in a tiny ball of light.

IV:

Shippo takes a soft breath and forces himself to tamp down on his fear. It's going to be just fine! He's a tall tree and these guys in armor and stuff aren't demons with a really good sense of smell. Besides, he just has to stay quiet and follow them at a distance while Kouga is off trying to alert the Western army. No big deal. He can do this! He's not just a kid anymore, and this will prove it to Miroku and Sango and InuYasha and the other foxes and everyone!

...But his arms are getting tired from staying up in the form of tree branches sprouting bare limbs covered in ice and snow. His muscles ache pretty bad now, and even though he is standing far back from the small campfires, he can't be sure one of the look outs won't see him just shrink and disappear. That would rouse the whole lot of them to start moving again, and Kouga might not get back in time.

The young kitsune just breathes slowly and quietly, trying to think of other things than the burning pain in his shoulders in biceps. He takes himself back to the good times when Kagome's lap was so warm or when he got to ride on InuYasha's shoulder under the protective cloud of silver hair. Oh, oh! And the candy she used to bring him, so sweet it would make his tongue dance...

He unconsciously makes a small, mmmh, of appreciation to the memory, and startles one of the guards standing close to him in the forest, keeping watch for any enemies or spies. The foreigner caught the noise, part moan, part sigh, and calls out the other guards on watch. He moves closer to Shippo, a long weapon in hand.

Oh shit! Standing stiff with his eyes close, Shippo stops breathing as several more weave their way closer to him, holding these new weapons up to aim. He swallows silently and waits.

V:

Demonic magic is indeed a tricky thing as demonic kind is in itself a magical creation. Humans, however, could weave magic more effectively without having to take their own power into account when creating a spell. Thus, Sesshomaru must counteract his own youkai in order to reset his safeguards to assure no one will find his hideout when he is gone or when he is inside with Rin and Ah-Uhn (Jaken was not allowed inside this sanctuary for a perfectly rational—and somewhat embarrassing—explanation). The spell must also be able to null any scent or smoke that may arise from the hideout in case another daiyoukai with an exceptional sense of smell happens to wander in the area. And so, in his early years as an exile, the young demon Sesshomaru had hidden and watched human mages study and work the realm of magic. He learned much from observing sorceresses and sorcerers as well as priests and priestesses—enough to be able to bespell his own clothing and hiding places to keep him safe from predators.

It is the only reason he allowed InuYasha to stay in the underground den—even if some demons could track his concealed scent and youkai, none would be able to penetrate the safeguards.

Even so, he did not know what to expect once he entered the sanctuary once again, this time with four little rabbits dangling from his claws by their ears. InuYasha may have been half-mad with Heat, sleeping, taking a piss, or staring into the fire for all the demon lord knew.
What he does not expect, however, is the scent that lightly perfumes the air. One so delicious that he is forced to pause a moment and draw it deep in his lungs to wrap around himself and the knots of power slightly rising to the fore. The combination of Heat and arousal, so purely InuYasha that the demon lord is purring low and soft before he realizes it emanates from his person and ceases immediately. He ignores the scent, listening closely to ascertain whether or not his hanyou brother might be trying to release some of his own tension—which would be quite awkward should Sesshomaru stride in and catch him touching himself intimately.

With no sounds of flesh on flesh, Sesshomaru believes all is right for the moment. On the morrow, however, he may have to force InuYasha's acquiesce a second time. As he comes to the den, watching the fire dance over the hanyou's features, he cannot find any distaste in himself for this very real possibility.

InuYasha looks up as the sounds of footsteps echo down the dirt hall; his nose twitches to gather the scent of metal and blood, the crazy edge of electricity (like lightening just before it strikes) and that coppery tinge that signals Sesshomaru has come back. The scent of his older brother makes his heart gives a little thud against his chest and makes his overheated body tingle, but the hanyou just glances up at the soft fall of boot steps coming in the ring of light, glancing up at his older brother's eyes.

Once again, the hanyou's heart gives a meaty thump against his chest at the sight of Sesshomaru's normally closed expression...but the shade of something almost warm in his eyes. It's a crazy sight the hanyou will still have to become accustomed to seeing, but as his mind was earlier flipping out over being googly-eyed for the bastard, he still can't quite look away from the same yet very different gaze...waiting for it to change back into cold disdain? He's not sure...

"You are still alive, miracle of miracles," not even a crack in Sesshomaru's completely blasé face.

"Keh. Not like I'm going to burn myself to death with twigs n' shit. Those rabbits give you a run for it?"

Two are promptly dropped in his lap and the hanyou's stomach rolls, loudly. His cheeks pink when his body reminds him he hasn't eaten in a day, and it desperately needs food.

A soft noise might have been his brother stifling a chuckle at his expense, but the hanyou merely grumbles good-naturedly while Sesshomaru eases to sit down beside him rather than on the other side of the fire.

"I was scouting the area to assure there were no other demons close," the demon lord replies once he is certain he has schooled his features to the usual unreadable look. The puppy eyes that were peering up at him were almost too much to ignore. Better to feed the hanyou than risk patting him on the head between his ears as Sesshomaru would do to Rin. At this moment, he is uncertain whether or not touch would be welcome.

At that, InuYasha's mouth stops watering at the scent of meat in his lap and his gaze cuts over, "anything?"

"No. The wards will hide your scent from any that may come. I will also be alerted if intruders are upon us." The demon lord glances at him again with those eyes, glittering in the firelight, and gestures to the dead hares. "We shall deal with it when the time comes. For now, you must replenish the energy your Heat has wrung from you. Without food, your body will not be able to complete its' transformation."
"Transformation?" Ears perk straight up with alarm. He transformed once a month at least. Shit, more often when his life was in danger. What the fuck else was going to happen to him?

"Hn. The fire rat robe grows with you, so it may be unnoticeable how much you will grow during this time. Your youkai will also reach full maturity soon. Perhaps in less than a few days." With one deadly claw, Sesshomaru (almost daintily) carves a piece of flesh from his kill.

InuYasha, mulling over this, merely raises the morsel and sinks his fangs in deep to soft meat below fur and rips back. Blood quickly stains his hands and mouth, but the mouthful is pure heaven. He dives back for more, suddenly so hungry he could die. Well, not that he hadn't known that kind of hunger a bunch in his life, but eating has never eased the intense heat and tingling in his body before.

Sesshomaru covertly watches out of the corner of his eye, taking note of the fluctuating waves of youkai within the hanyou's smaller form. Eating is taking the brunt out of his growing youkai. The spikes would be the most powerful, ones that determined when he would need to mate or when his youkai needed to be released, until his power finally evened out and the Heat would be over.

The demon lord would have to carefully watch the hanyou closely to assure his spikes would not draw out more demons as well as to know when InuYasha's body would need his guidance to continue its growth. Once his youkai expanded, any chaos could occur. His power might be controllable, such as he had observed in the cave with the demon- InuYasha as a somewhat lucid creature, or his brother may simply not know what to do when the excess power built to incredible proportions...as the moment before the Tetsuaiga nearly exploded in the fool's hands.

Either way, any demon's Heat is the final plateau to his power, and left to his own devices, InuYasha would end up dead or dying if he is caught unaware. Combined with the drug his mother had provided, there are too many unknown factors for Sesshomaru to assume when and where the next spikes would strike or when the Heat would finally be over.

As such, his younger brother's previous claim to be left in the wilds only seems even more preposterous than before.

The loud suckling draws Sesshomaru's attention back to the now, and he raises one eyebrow at the picture before him: InuYasha slurping the marrow out of a leg bone with obvious, blood-stained relish. His little pink tongue darting out to lick the remnants still clinging to the clean skeleton; he had apparently been ravenous as both rabbits are indeed picked clean of meat. It is discerning that he must stifle the noise rising in his throat (a laugh, perhaps or a moan?) a second time at the, dare he think it, the cuteness of InuYasha's shenanigans. Not that he would ever utter such a word as 'cute,' no daiyoukai would even have such a notion in his vocabulary. However, the hanyou is simply that, a confusing mixture of innocence, brash courage, coarse cursing, and loyalty all rolled into one conflicting being. It would prove a challenge to get to know the young demon his brother had become, but if nothing, Sesshomaru was always ready for a challenge.

The demon lord merely holds up two of the carefully cut slices from his first rabbit close to the hanyou's face.

Golden eyes comically wide, InuYasha sniffs the offered meat with adorable (adorable?) intent before looking at him, "y' sure? I mean, really sure?"

"Of course"

"Hot damn!" Greedily, he fills his belly with the strips Sesshomaru kept handing him until the third rabbit is also picked clean.
Starting on the final one, the demon lord stops as InuYasha waves a hand, "you finish that one. I'm full and y' gotta eat too, demon or not."

For a second, the corners of Sesshomaru's mouth twitch strangely, but he sinks his own fangs into the soft and tender fare while InuYasha lies back with a full belly and fire radiating warmth to keep away the damp of the earthen cave. His body isn't being a pain in the ass and bothering him with fire under his skin or tinglies. Actually, he feels as close to normal as possible.

"Man, that was good. I only eat cooked meat when I was with humans 'cause they're so damn squeamish about eating shit raw." He gives a glance over and blinks that his older brother is already done and delicately licking his bloodied fingers clean. That pink tongue sweeps out from between his lips, and a flash of memory shoots through the hanyou like a bolt of lightening down his spine.

\textit{That tongue swirling around the tip of him just before Sesshomaru opens his maw and takes it in…}

His face flames, and he looks away so fast, he wrenches something in his neck.

Sesshomaru doesn't miss much in general; the abrupt movement is just one of those little things. It doesn't take a genius to figure out what the problem is—he licks his last finger with narrowed eyes. As admitted by the hanyou himself, he had no intimacy either from males or females, and certainly his first time with his elder brother must be wreaking havoc on the younger inu. His trust has not been earned as of yet, but the scent of arousal assures the demon lord InuYasha was thinking about something...stimulating. Perhaps he could make this easier on them both with simple, surreptitious seduction—so furtive, innocent InuYasha wouldn't even realize what was happening. Hn... slowly licking the blood from his mouth, he calculates. \textit{Not at the moment, he deserves a time of peace. Soon, however.}

"It seems you have been thinking a great deal while I have been gone." That's all he needs for a lead-in.

"...Well, yeah, I guess. War's kinda over so there's time."

\textit{There will be ample time.}

"Indeed." Clean, Sesshomaru makes himself as comfortable in the dirt as possible and turns to look at his sibling in one smooth move, his eyes hooded. "Now that the fighting has ceased, you may ask what questions have come to you."

\textit{Didn't expect that, I guess.} "Aw, well shit...we survived so I guess I do have questions. There's a lot I wanna know about." He sits up, lit by the dancing flames, and throws more small kindling from the pile beside his leg.

"As you should. Where would you like to start, little brother?"

"\textit{Why did you let me fuck you instead of the other way around?} Damn it! So NOT asking him that!" But, his face still starts flaming again, mortifying the hanyou so much that he leans closer to the fire to give the impression his face is hot from the heat rather than his own thoughts. "There's so much," he murmurs mostly to himself.

"Then I shall begin," Sesshomaru turns himself so he is facing the hanyou, back rigidly straight. "The Elders have told you the history behind the trial and why you were chosen. Therefore, I will tell you how your mother met our father and how the two of you were banished to her family home."
That got his attention. InuYasha turns as well, putting the two dog demons face to face.

"The Lady Izayoi was of the prestigious Minimoto clan, as you well know, and she was once groomed to marry one of the sons of the enemy clans to alleviate the warring in the human world. It was said to be an excellent match for her family's enemies since it was known Lady Izayoi was not only beautiful and compassionate, but also wise and spiritually powerful for a human."

As Sesshomaru's deep voice wove the threads of the past, InuYasha unconsciously leans closer to hear every word.

"She was quite young when our father first came upon her in the forests outside her family's compound. She once told this Sesshomaru that one of her servants and best of friends snuck her out to the serenity of the forest to escape from her duties as the prized daughter of the Shogun. It was there, on one of her many excursions that she happened to meet an injured warrior, bleeding heaving from several severe wounds."

Ears perk immediately, "the old man, right?"

"Correct. He had fought a thousand invading demons for a hundred days to secure the Western Lands from the forces of the East, and had finally won the day. He, however, was gravely injured and needed to rest and heal before he would have been able to make it back to the palace. Unknown to your elder brother, he was lying in a tree far from the palace, much like the way you perch, waiting for his great blood to stop flowing. Your mother happened to notice it dripping down the tree and since she possessed a great compassion for injured animals, she stayed to see if the bleeding animal would fall and she might be able to catch it... Eventually, it was our father that fell from the tree once he lost consciousness and landed on the ground right in front of her."

InuYasha's eyes widened. *He fell out of a damn tree? Like, the greatest, ass-kicker of all time? "No way!"*

"I do not lie. Luckily for him, your mother's compassion overrode her fear. She used bushes and leaves to cover him, then left to find water. She tore her kimono to make bandages for his wounds, and ground herbs for a poultice that would stave off infection before she was forced to return to the fortress. To keep him warm, she told your brother once that she made sure he was not awake and took off her under-kimono to lie upon him before leaving him for the night."

"Days passed, and each day, your mother stole from the compound to bring water, food, and more healing herbs to our injured sire. He regained his wits when she was bandaging his sword arm and thought her to be a ghost or a hallucination, so he spoke to her thinking he may as well have been dying and she an angel sent to see him to the afterlife."

"He-he thought Mother was an angel?" InuYasha's voice is soft, quieter than Sesshomaru has ever heard. This story, it seems, was a good place to start after all, giving Sesshomaru the benefit of his sibling's rapt attention.

"Yes. It was not until two days after he awoke that he realized she was no apparition, but in fact, a mortal princess. Of course, he had few dealings in the human world, and many of those few were bloody and vicious, so he was uncertain how to proceed, or so he told your brother much later. However, as the lady was renown, he could not help but be entranced by her beauty and gentleness." Here, Sesshomaru pauses and the hanyou tenses, "yet, it was unfortunate that not long after our father was able to stand and his wound nearly healed, that Lady Izayoi's jealous sister noticed her absences, and found out through the servant of forest where the lady vanished each afternoon."
"My aunt, the one we had to live with," InuYasha's eyes rounded in foreboding, remembering the days when he was beaten almost to death by the evil bitch his mother called elder sister. She hurled the name bastard and outcast, tainted and mongrel at him like stones...

"Indeed," but Sesshomaru's tone brought him out of those beatings and back to the present. "She followed your mother through the forest and came upon her tending our father's wounds. When Lady Izayoi left to sneak back into the castle, her father was waiting with a whip...and a sword. He intended to beat the demonic influence from his daughter before forcing her to commit ritual suicide for the dishonor she brought to their house by cavorting with a demon. Your mother argued that she, as any spiritual healer would have healed the sick and downtrodden, demon or human alike, but it did nothing to sway her father. The servants tied to a post in the courtyard and she suffered through fifty lashes from his whip."

InuYasha's face is horrified, fists clenching and unclenching at the evil in anger.

"No human could have survived that!"

"Your mother did. She was strong in body and mind, InuYasha. When her father found her to be still alive, he raised his sword to finish her...and our father's blade is what he met."

"The old man saved her?" Well, no shit. How else would she have lived to have me?

"Our father was mad with rage that any father could do such horrific damage to his own child. He cursed her family for fools, and took her back to the West for all his best healers to aid him in saving her life. It took many days, but your mother healed and eventually mated our father in the way of demon kind."

His heart bleeding for all she suffered, InuYasha blinks rapidly and turns to watch the fire. "So, our father loved her? I mean, he really loved her?"

"He did, more than he could have ever loved my bearer. He truly worshipped Lady Izayoi as his one and only mate. Takemaru kidnapped her during our second skirmish with the Mongolians, and that is how she came to be in his fortress the night she brought you into the world."

"...That's—that's the night he died, isn't it?"

"Yes." Sesshomaru's voice has softened with his own inner turmoil. "The dragon, Ryukotsusei, caught him before he made it to Takemaru's compound and stuck at him by surprise. If not for that, he would not have been so gravely injured that he may have survived the assault...however, your brother was also there that night, and I did not aid him as I should have. Perhaps it is also my fault he did not live to see you grown."

"What? What do you mean your fault? A-Wh-Why didn't you go with him?"

"I attempted to. Our father denied me the right to stand at his side."

His mind blown, InuYasha just stares until he registers the bitterness in Sesshomaru's tone. But, there's something else to it, something so unlike Sesshomaru that InuYasha doesn't get it for a few long moments. Guilt. He feels really shitty about how that went down.

"Well, it-it wasn't your fucking fault!" He yells with well-meant vehemence, startling his elder brother out of his wallowing in dishonor. "He didn't let you go." Why the hell he felt the need to defend Sesshomaru to himself of all people was beyond his ken, but well, fuck it.

Sesshomaru's expression hardens and his golden eyes flash dangerously, reminding InuYasha of
the beat-down he used to get at this demon's hands. "I should have gone to save her in his stead," Sesshomaru snarls, baring the fangs on one side of his mouth. His youkai rises to the fore, pressing against the hanyou's chest like a wall. "He denied me! Our father used my honor against me. I should have defied him, fought beside him, died beside him. That would have been the honorable way."

"...But, but if you did," InuYasha forces his tone to be calmer, steady, "what would have happened...to me?"

At that, Sesshomaru blinks. He faces the same golden eyes as his father's, not condemning or calculating or judging, but his only kin left in this world. If he had died that night with their father, InuYasha would not have survived the night either.

Regaining control, Sesshomaru breathes, "You, little brother, are the only reason I have not joined him in the afterlife."

*Holy hells...he ain't lying.*

Clearing his throat, InuYasha swallows thickly. "Hey, Sesshomaru. You know why I wanted that fucking Shikon no Tama in the first damn place?" Yeah, his pride is going to hurt after this one, but after hearing his brother's confession, it's the only way InuYasha can express what he needs to say. Besides, Sesshomaru gave a lot there, and it's only right he give back some too. Tit for tat.

"I had thought to become human, so you would be able to live with your priestess." The demon lord replies softly, wondering why InuYasha asks such a thing now.

"Keh!" The bravado is back, "that ain't why, you simple bastard. Never was. I wanted the damn thing to be a full demon, just like you, y' know? I'm not trying to have a girl moment where I wanna talk about my feelings and shit, but—well fuck it—I wanted to be your brother, and I thought if I became a full demon, you wouldn't hate me anymore." *There, I said it without being a complete lame-ass.*

"It doesn't mean I don't think you're kind of a shit-head still or anything, but—that's why I went through all that crap to find the Jewel. Only reason I didn't wish on it in the end is because I saw how it royally screws every wish, no matter what. But, at the end, the only way to make sure the Jewel would be gone for good was to let Kagome make the last wish." He scratches his head, looking down at his other hand, "when she left, I thought...well, it don't matter what I thought. But, that's the truth of it. You didn't die because of me, and I didn't die because I thought I still might have a chance at this," he waffles both hand between them to mean, well, he wasn't sure what but thought Sesshomaru would get the picture.

Sesshomaru straightens, his face cryptic as usual. He doesn't care to be called a shit-head, but he supposed it was InuYasha's twisted way of showing affection. From across the fire, the two stare down one another in moments of understanding in which the bonds grew ever stronger.

"So, our old man did what he thought was right, for both of us. Let's just say that's the way it went. So, what happened after that?" InuYasha stretches out on his side, propping his face up in one palm.

"I retrieved you and Lady Izayoi from the forest after Takemaru's compound collapsed and brought you both home to the palace. You were not there even a full two moons when messengers came from the Elders and brought father's last wishes to be read. In keeping with the trial, I was not even permitted to see you in your infancy." Something raw twists in Sesshomaru's eyes, "I was only able to hold you a few times before my bearer came to take you. No other would come to the palace."
"Why?"

"...the messengers were unfortunate casualties."

InuYasha is the one blinking this time, "you killed Elder demons? Really? But, Sesshomaru had just become Lord of the West, right? Wouldn't that have fucked his rule from the start? Why didn't they come back and whoop his ass?"

"...It was a moment of, as you might say, 'highly pissed off bitch slap.' Our family had suffered enough, and for you and Lady Izayoi to be taken away so soon after Father's death was a travesty in this Sesshomaru's estimation. Regardless, the two of you had to leave immediately, and we decided it would be best if she went to her family's home once again. Her father had died after father's attack, and her mother was a timid woman. Your aunt had since taken control of the household. She allowed your mother to return."

"Whoa, whoooa, whoa. We'll get to that." Both hands up in a halt motion, the hanyou unabashedly interrupts, but his curiosity gets the better of him. "Why didn't the Elders get highly pissed off and come in a big group to bitch slap you for killing their own? I mean, shouldn't you have at least gotten punished or something?"

"Hn. They did punish me in a way," and at this, Sesshomaru actually looks away and his eyes turn colder than snow.

Oh shit. InuYasha perks, "what did they do?"

The demon lord's eyes slide back to his younger brother and the fire dances dangerously off his features. "...they decreed that I would be the one to hunt you."

"Guess you gotta point. I mean, if I could cut your arm off, I might have royally fucked up one of your cousins or something." The hanyou gives half a grin and shrugs.

The demon lord's brow lifts, "I am certain you would have if your delusions in some way resemble reality, InuYasha. If I had not threatened the life of your scantily-clad priestess, you never would have been able to see you until the end of the trial." Their eyes met a moment at this admission and that same warmth is there again.

"Didn't you almost eat her whole with doggie breath of death? What was I suppose to do? I needed that wench."

"One lucky strike and I will never hear the end of it," the demon lord heaves a fake sigh.

"Aw, c'mon. You got your arm back and a sweet-ass sword to boot. I mean, what more do you want? A reach-around?"

The moment he said it, InuYasha wished the words back. It reminded him of the cave all over again.

Bastard didn't make it any easier when his face changes into a knowing look and one striped hand comes up to pillow his cheek. "That may have been welcome earlier, but was not necessary when
my arm regenerated," comes out in that smooth voice.

If InuYasha didn't know better, he would think his elder brother lost the stick permanently lodged somewhere and was trying to make fun of him.

To hide his utter mortification, the hanyou rolls his eyes, "woulda helped if you said it then instead of now, don't cha think?"

Sesshomaru's only response is to shock InuYasha even more... a smile curves the harsh edge of his mouth. The same small smile he had on his face while he loomed over the hanyou with their bodies joined.

*Gods, it's hot in here again...Shit! Say something not stupid to blow it off.*

"I'm fucking flabbergasted. You have enough muscles in your face to smile! I mean, who knew?"

A rough sound comes from the demon lord's mouth and his hand moves seemingly to cover it. InuYasha leans up, closer. "Holy shit! Did you just laugh? For real? Damn, I think I might pass out here. You can smile and laugh. That's too much shock in one sitting."

Here, Sesshomaru's shoulders are slightly trembling and he holds up a hand. "E-Enough of—this foolishness, InuYasha."

So, he shuts his hole and leans back to just watch the phenomena. Lord Ice-Hole could laugh.

VI

A booted foot tears the soft skin of his cheek; blood splatters in the snow. The foreigner draws back for another cheap shot aimed for his rib cage this time.

It had been hours of pain. He'd been tied, dragged, beaten, and now the whole camp has their opportunity to question him. In a few hours, dark would melt away to dawn.

Shippo gasps in an agonized breath of pain, his face shadowed in firelight. Some gibberish is directed at him, but he still has no idea what the hell these guys are trying to tell him. He lost consciousness one already, but they only threw water on him to keep him awake during the beatings.

*Kouga, InuYasha, someone! Help me...*

VII

InuYasha is *dying*. Tears are streaming down his face and his middle creaks from the rolls of laughter still bubbling up from his belly. The minute he thinks he's calmed down enough to breathe, one look at Sesshomaru's scowly face sends him off into another gale. His face is red as his fire rat.

"T-That f-fucking toad" heh, ha, ha, "singed your eyebrows clean off ?" He covers his eyes and still can't stop. "Gods *damn!* Yer killin' me here!" Just the image flashes in his mind again, and InuYasha has a real concern he might piss himself soon if he can't stop.

"Hn. It was the first time he used the Staff of Two Heads." Sesshomaru pretends to looks bored and examine his claws for any chips. "Regardless, I believe the sound kick I delivered sent him flying to Edo...from the shoreline." Completely dead pan, and the hanyou roars with about bout, rolling on his back in the dirt, clutching his sore abdomen, spewing the same curses in merriment that he
spews in anger.

"Shit! Y-Ya-bastard!"

Sesshomaru, scowly face and all, just watches with secret tolerance and satisfaction. It is good to hear his brother's mirth (even if it is at his own expense). This means he would survive whatever the dragon had done to him without permanent damage to his personality. As he has proven over these many years, InuYasha would keep surviving. Covering the lower half of his face with one hand, the demon lord is actually smiling yet again.

After the hanyou seems to finally calm down to a few chuckles and panting breaths, Sesshomaru sighs and picks himself up to stand gracefully.

"I trust you are through?"

Golden eyes peek through his fingers and one puppy ear crooks adorably in question. With a final guffaw, InuYasha sits back up and wipes the tears from his cheeks with a sleeve. "Hoo, damn. Oh, man. Heh, heh, heh. Yeah, okay. I'm good, I'm good," he waves a hand in Sesshomaru's direction.

"Hn. Then follow." He turns without explanation and merely waves a hand at the far wall. A few words under his breath and the outline of a circle with several smaller kanji markings glow for less than a moment and the wall shifts, leaving a gaping hole and more steps going further down. A soothing warmth wafts from the passage way.

"Wh-Wow. That's—some really neat shit." Wafts from over his right shoulder.

"Indeed. Did I not tell you this is an excellent hiding place?"

"Well, yeah, but you're idea of an excellent hiding place could be a nasty-ass bog with poisonous swamp gas for all I know."

"Ridiculous. As if I would chance my robe's cleanliness for such an endeavor."

"I'm just sayin'."

With excellent night vision, the two brothers venture down into the earth.

"It's warm down here..."

Sesshomaru steps on the packed earth and spots the natural spring bubbling up from underground. As he walks forward, he is already unbuckling two of the straps that hold his armor in place, listening to InuYasha's soft footsteps behind him. Certainly he could have left the hanyou up into the previous chamber to bathe in private then allow him to come down afterwards, but in the demon lord's mind, InuYasha would need to become more comfortable in Sesshomaru's presence—particularly if they would be forced to mate again soon. This was an opportunity to break some of the barriers of InuYasha's modesty and aversion to mating...it may also prove to be quite a prospect if Sesshomaru must indeed resort to sly seduction to assure his brother survival.

*The things this Sesshomaru is forced to endure...*

The hanyou in questions watches with wide eyes as the armors slides off his brothers back with ease for such a heavy piece of equipment. His brain registers the smells of the spring, but he didn't know they were going to...get, well shit, he didn't think Sesshomaru wanted to bathe...you know, with him.
His suspicions are confirmed as the flowing white haori leaves the broad expanse of demon lord back wide open to his gaze. The curve of spine vanishes into the hakama still tied around his brother's waist.

Sesshomaru casts one golden eye over his shoulder, "it has been a difficult battle. Do you not wish to ease your wounds? To wash away the dirt of the slain?"

Tempting...damn, he was still kinda achy in places, and unconsciously rubs his arm where the arrow sunk in to make him drop that sword.

"After all that cold water, yeah, I guess it would be nice," he shrugs and moves around Sesshomaru to untie his own clothing. He purposely averts his gaze from the rustling beside him as his brother steps out of his hakama and walks with his usual grace to the large pool. Keeping his gaze firmly on the ties to Tetsuaiga's sheath, he only looks up once he hears the splash and assumes his brother is in the water.

Damn. He shouldn't have looked up.

Standing with water up to his waist, Sesshomaru arches his back in a stretch, head back and throat exposed. Waves of silver hair flow down his back. The water laps teasingly at the indentation of his hips, just below the slashes of demon markings. As if to make the hanyou suffer more, the lord's hands cup water and slowly slide up to leave the achingly smooth flesh wet in their wake. The hanyou's eyes unwillingly follow the path of those hands up the carved curves of abdomen to the taunt muscles adorned by two pink nipples, the same color as the marks on his body.

InuYasha sucks in a breath and lies Tetsuaiga on the ground, tearing his eyes away. His heart gives a meaty thud and resounds in his ears.

"I shouldn't do this. I can't."

But if anything, the hanyou is not a coward—and can't, shmant. He could damn near do anything as proven by the fuck-ton of powers the Tetsuaiga got over the years. He glances up again, bangs camouflaging his intense gaze like a wild animal. Sesshomaru's back is to him now, the demon lord bends over to run hot water up his arms, and bares the curve of ass cheeks—the only soft plumpness on his whole, muscular body.

"So tight..."

InuYasha's face gets flaming red instantly, the abrupt blood movement making him light-headed for a moment. Stop it, now. That's enough. It's Sesshomaru for fuck's sake.

Blustering up his balls, he drops his hakama and moves to the water, testing one foot before stepping in up to his thighs. A breath hissed through his teeth as the water hit the sensitive place on his calf and the muscle spasms with a quick bite of pain.

Sesshomaru straightens and turns at the sound, moving through the deeper body of water to come to the shallow end where his shorter sibling stands.

"What is it?" His eyes scan the leaner body for open wounds or lacerations. No scent of blood, but he catches a dark spot on the back of InuYasha's leg under the water.

"Nothin'," the hanyou assures with a guffaw. "I'll heal just fine." He turns and finds Sesshomaru much closer than he should be, neck craned to look at his backside.

Feeling strangely exposed, he blusters for words, "it's fine, dumbass."
"There is an arrowhead in your leg."

With that, the hanyou blinks and cranes to look back as well. There it is, a dark spot with the skin of his leg healed over the damn thing.

"Sonofabitch. I hate when that happens." With a sneer, he lifts a clawed finger, ready to slice himself open to get the offending metal shard out.

Sesshomaru is already kneeling in the water, hands on the hanyou's upper thighs to turn him around.

"It's fine! I'll get it out."

"I am able to see more clearly. Turn around."

*Never thought I'd be shoving my ass in Sesshomaru's face. Man, I should be enjoying this.*

With a frustrated huff, he turns and lifts his leg out of the water. One clawed hand cradles his ankle in a gentle, almost tender way that makes the hanyou forget he'd naked and Sesshomaru's naked, and well, they'd kinda been naked like this before. 'Cause, see, there's no poison coming out of his brother's claws or the sharp bite of them sinking into his skin. All he can feel is the pads of fingertips and fleshy cradle of a palm. But still, InuYasha looks back at Sesshomaru's intense gaze focused on a piddly-ass piece of metal that got stuck in the meat of his leg. It makes him feel, well, warm, and not just from the water. Sesshomaru gives a shit about that hunk being there.

"Relax your muscles. The shard is deeper than I originally believed. This will be painful."

"Keh! Seriously? Nah, getting a couple holes shoved through my chest by a giant fucking grasshopper kinda hurt. Do yer worst. Long as I still have a leg, it'll be fine."


Claw poised to slice, Sesshomaru gives him a quick glance and times his movements to the rise of InuYasha's abdomen. Quickly as possible, his steady claw opens the skin with a hot spurt of blood and enters the cut to nudge around muscle and tissue for the shard.

It takes long moments of work, with only their combined breathing and soft noises of dripping water, for the demon lord to maneuver the arrowhead away from the meat of muscle to finally pop free of the skin. True to his word, however, InuYasha doesn't utter a word throughout. The hanyou is actually looking curiously around the underground cavern while the slight feeling of a deadly claw cuts through his muscle.

With the metal safely in hand, Sesshomaru does not think about his next move—leaning over the wound and laving the torn skin with his tongue.

"That's good!" he jerks his leg back and stands for just a second, throwing a look over his shoulder because he really doesn't want to turn around. Sesshomaru's golden eyes do that slow blink up at him, his throat, shoulders, and collar bone an alluring shade of pink thanks to the warm water.
"Better?"

Pointedly, the hanyou ignores staring at his brother's mouth. "Much. Thanks for getting the damn thing outta there."

Without waiting for a reply (and to put some distance between them), InuYasha moves brusquely through the pool, wading deep enough to lap at his belly. He ducks under the water to soak his hair and stays under for a minute to scrub at his scalp with his claws.

*Miroku...pink kimono... all right. Good to go.*

Sesshomaru's eyes narrow when the hanyou rises out of the water, back arching, muscles extending, mouth open... But, his youkai is not spiking. *Hn.*

Crossing his arms over his chest, the demon lord merely finds the same comfortable niche that always seems to be perfect for his bum. The water levels at the base of his throat, and he lays his head back to rest on a convenient out-cropping to let the hot swirls ease his muscles. Indeed, it was a good idea to bring InuYasha here.

A wet thump makes him crack one eye open. The silly boy is whacking himself in the side of his head to get water out of his ears—as though it helps. Sighing, Sesshomaru wonders if shaking like a mere mutt is also one of his brother's strange quirks. Be that as it may, at least he is washing away the scent of their sexual encounter.

Sloshing through the water, InuYasha likewise finds a nice little curve to nestle his ass in to relax for a few minutes. They lay side-by-side without touching or (InuYasha) feeling awkward.

"Something troubles you still." Without moving, the demon lord breaks the easy mood. "I would know what it is, InuYasha."

Said hanyou blinks up at the dark stalactites dropping down from the cavern. He hesitates a second, but eventually comes out with it "...what's really going to happen once the Heat bullshit is done? I mean, you don't really expect me to live in the West or anything, right?"

The gruff tone is unsettling. Through the dark, Sesshomaru's gaze cuts to his brother.

To take the edge off his words, InuYasha blurs out, "I mean, damn. I'm a busy hanyou, y'know? I got places to be, asses to kick, evil shit to kill, humans to piss off. The usual. I ain't cut out for the courtly life and stuff."

This would require some finesse in order to make certain the younger didn't just blow everything out of proportion. In fact, Sesshomaru hadn't considered the possibility that his brother might not *want* to return to the Western lands and live in the palace. He, the heir to the land, hadn't really been given a choice in the matter. The palace was the first place their lord father had taken him after the trial ended. The first seven days had been hell if he remembered correctly; him fighting off guards every day to make a break for freedom, and his father there to thwart each escape attempt without bloodying them both. Only when Father finally showed him the specially-made dojo and swore he would train his heir in the art of the sword did the young Sesshomaru stop trying to escape.

In some strange fashion, he always knew what would sway me...

"...I was in hopes you would come back to the palace for a while, at the very least. Simply to see if living there would be to your liking. Perhaps you would be curious to see your mother's and our father's possessions that are still in the castle, or to read the scrolls left for you to open, written in
their own hands."

This time, InuYasha did turn to meet Sesshomaru's gaze. Of course, using the hanyou's mother was unscrupulous, but if it would snare his promise to return to the Western palace, then Sesshomaru would fight dirty.

"Mother's things? And letters?"

"Indeed. I have not opened her chests or her missives to you in all these years. All have waited for you to finish the Great Trial. More so, it is a change to have food and security at all times rather than fight for them—this is something I learned from my own time in exile. You owe it to yourself to try living at home for a while. Should you find it unsuited to your tastes, you may leave whenever you wish."

"Keh. Home...The village used to be home." He looks away, and his tone sounds so very hollow.

"You had not returned there for some time, I take it?" Sesshomaru turns his body in the water to face InuYasha, propping his cheek on one arm.

"Not since Kaede died." The hanyou does his best shrug, but it does not hide the tinge of pain in his voice.

"The villagers forced you out?"

"Naw, not really. They kinda got used to me not being the terrible demon pinned to a tree in their forest. But, there was just no point in going back after that. Kagome gone, Kikyo back in her grave politely not dragging me to Hell, Sango and Miroku took Shippo and went back to the demon slayer village...nothing really to go back to, I guess." Even Goshinboku's branches didn't feel the same, and man did he hate passing by that fucking, thrice-damned well...

Movement through the water and a hand closes around his, making him turn back to his brother.

"Then come home with me," is all Sesshomaru has to say.

Even with his reservation about being a prince and all the shit that goes with it, InuYasha swallows around a lump in his throat, eyes vulnerable and raw. Slowly, piece by piece, Sesshomaru is making him into a total sap, a girly, frilly sap with a big fricking sword and matching red ensemble. Sheesh, what's next? I'm not gonna embarrass myself by crying on him again—Hells no.

"...Maybe." Is all he can promise for the moment. The reassuring squeeze to his hand is almost as comforting as the initial offer. "We'll see when it comes time. I wanna get out in a minute and go hunting again. Buncha fighting really gave me an appetite, and I need to stretch my legs anyhow." He rolls his head back and closes his eyes again, but still hangs on to the stripey hand in his grasp.

VIII

His lungs are ready to burst from lack of air.

Kouga, Prince of the Northern Wolves, can't stop to get in a full breath. Without the jewel shards in his legs, he's one fast motherfucker, but no longer a whirling tornado of speed leaving his followers in the dust. Well, by followers, he meant the slower-than-frozen-water bodyguards, Ginta and Hakku. Those two had been mated for years, and had foregone following Kouga to start their own brood of pups. He was happy for them, but dammit could he have used those knuckleheads now.
The slayer is going to kill me. She's going to rip me apart piece-by-piece and make that monk send my soul straight to Hell—I just know it!

Blood lingers in the air, kitsune blood, from where those sons of lame bitches dragged Shippo away. He doesn't know if the kit is still alive, or if they questioned him for information, killed him, and left his body for the buzzards. All he does know is that he is a shitty leader for bringing the kid along and leaving him alone to keep an eye on where the small forces might be off to next. He never, never, should have left him alone.

Sure, the kid got right in the middle of the shit storm of blood during the Naraku years, but for Kouga to assume Shippo would run or be able to hide if he got spotted was just plain out stupid. No kid should have to do what he did.

The only up side to this whole mess is that the Western army wasn't really that hard to find or that far. Well, it's probably kind of hard to miss a few thousand humans and demons meandering around, but the gods must have been smiling to make them less than a mile from where Shippo got taken.

Hold on, kid. Hold on! Help is on the way!

IX

Arms crossed over his chest, InuYasha taps an impatient foot while Sesshomaru carefully unwraps the spells keeping the hidey hole safe and secret. He meant to ask how Sesshomaru learned all this magic hokum and why he'd never seen his brother use it in battle before (magic swords notwithstanding), but he figured that was a whole basket of worms that might take a while to explain. Better leave it for the time being.

The steps formed and the demon lord turns to face him one more time.

"I will reiterate: you will stay close to me if I allow you out."

"Keh. I heard ya the first time. On with it already, it's hot as dog balls down here." He uncrosses his arms to make a shooing motion with his hands.

"I am the one guarding your virginal rear, little brother. Do not make it an impossible task."

InuYasha blanches, "I can't believe you just said that! Shit, Sesshomaru, haven't you ever heard of the guy code? Some things are just understood."

The demon lord merely sniffs, "as long as we are in agreement," and takes the steps two at a time, clawed hand on the hilt of his sword. He makes sure he is the first to hit fresh air and strains his senses to scout the immediate area before moving to allow InuYasha outside.

It's a mistake—a few seconds made this an obvious problem.

The very forest around them groans in protest, and something is very, very wrong. The sky, while dark, is ominous with black clouds lingering only in sparse spots further into the woods, and the ground trembles under their feet with minute vibrations that are not the normal cycles of nature. Even the sharp winter winds sweep in frigid waves and make swirls around the duo before sailing back into bare branches. Sesshomaru focuses on locating and gauging power signatures while InuYasha cautiously sniffs the air around them. It is still full dark, dawn less than two or maybe three hours away (he isn't sure how long they were underground or anything).

Behind them, the open doorway to the underground slinks back to solid, earthen floor, and
InuYasha instinctually moves to put his back to Sesshomaru's. His ears twitch to gather as much sound as he can, but all he can make out is snatches of noise that could be random youkai foraging before the sun rose. His angles his head away from Sesshomaru's scent just as the winds shift.

Eyes widen in recognition. "S-Shippo..." Not sweat, but blood and tears.

The demon lord's head whips around, he too trying to catch the scent. "The Western army is closer than it should be and not bedded down for the night. Something has gone amiss." His eyes narrow dangerously, "our forces to the north, and a shadowy signature to the East. I must go and investigate before the army reaches a potential threat."

"My ass! We're goin'!"

Mouth in a grim line, Sesshomaru looks down at the shorter inu. Before he can open his mouth, a clawed finger is wagging in his face.

"Just save it. Yeah, this is pretty damn dangerous, but that was Shippo, Sesshomaru. Not some trick 'cause he's still got some of my smell on him, but it's Shippo, and he's just a kid. I won't leave him out there."

Sesshomaru's jaw tightens even more, "if your Heat spikes at any moment—"

"—They'll be over me like wild animals. I know that, but you just have to trust me this time. I'll have my own back, and if I don't see my kit right away, I'll turn and run while you whoop some mighty ass."

Still, the elder calculates opening the doorway behind his back and simply throwing the hanyou inside, but looking down into that ferocious expression and reading the waves of his youkai make it impossible to leave him behind.

"You swear you will run?"

"On my mother's grave."

A sharp nod and the two condense into a single orb of light.

Chapter End Notes

Someone on FF.net remarked how odd it was that Sesshomaru actually liked Lady Izayoi, respected her even. I think it works in this fic with the whole premise I'm going with. Sesshomaru respects strength, so it made sense to me that he would respect strength in a human woman, well, and it makes me happy to write a maternal figure for him. I dunno. I like it ;) Thanks for reading.
Don't be fooled by the title. It got me too.
Warning: Graphic violence and feels

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This night...will never end...

Half-aware, the young kitsune returns to some form of consciousness, registering sharp agony at the first impression. He is too weak to really scream, but the moan of agony is muffled behind a gag tied in his mouth. Even in the frigid air, his face thumps with hot pain from the broken cheekbone and nose on which he just happens to be laying. At least the smelly guys aren't holding him standing and don't seem to be milling around anymore. He's laying on the cold ground, clothing torn and bloody, caked in mud and grime. His arms are pulled at the small of his spine and bound tight enough to make his shoulders ache; ankles and knees also lashed together to keep him from gaining his feet and running.

I'm alive...

But who knew for how long. As a full demon, Shippo had earned his share of wounds in the Kitsune training academy, but nothing compared to the pain radiating throughout him.

Am I bleeding inside? Will I die?... If Kagome were here, she'd have a magic cure out of her bag and give me some candy or crayons.

The blood loss and beatings have gotten to him—possibly a concussion with the amount of blood drying on his forehead and the base of his skull. He opens his eyes to nothing but blurry darkness—blinking only helps a little bit. He can make out the invaders sitting in small groups around their fires, one or two awake to keep watch while the rest sleep. They'll probably wake and move out soon...but he doesn't know if they'll take prisoners or not.

It's...'kay. At least I tried to do something right. InuYasha woulnda done the same thing.

His body relaxes. Even with the possibility of dying, the little fox is brave enough not to be afraid.

However, he jerks when hands smooth over his back in what is supposed to be a soothing gesture. A male voice speaks their weird language softly, almost whispering. In his disorientation, Shippo gets nothing from it. He curls in on himself, pulling his knees up to his chest as far as he can until the pain makes him whimper against the gag. Like fire in his belly, the broken ribs grate bone on bone.

One hand keeps stroking his back while another brings a damp cloth to his forehead, the cold jarring him out of the haze. The hands push him over on his side and a pair of muddy knees are right by his face. Shippo makes an attempt to slither back, but a palm presses over his abdomen and his breath whooshes out in agony. Tears come to his eyes, and all Shippo can think about is how stupid it is to cry. After all that crap to Kouga about not being a kid anymore, and he's crying like a baby over injuries InuYasha would be laughing over.
To make his shame more acute, the hand against his abdomen is pushing harder against the broken ribs and that smooth voice is still talking gently. Shippo grunts and his small body turns again, his shoulders, neck, and head are propped up on the invader's knees for the kitsune to lay boneless amidst the pain. Hands pull his shirt up and the smell of herbs and sunshine waft from one side. The hands rub the poultice gingerly over the bruised and torn skin in some attempt to alleviate the agony.

From this vantage, Shippo's vision finally clears to see the foreigner's face intent on treating what wounds he can. Out of his furred coat (is that one of my cousins? Comes from nowhere as he catches the fox fur on one shoulder), the invader pulls a long strip of bandages and reaches to wind the first half around Shippo's abdomen. The pressure makes him yelp abruptly behind the gag, but actually does make it feel somewhat better... The hands seem to be warm, or getting warm to ease the hot, angry ache in his face and chest. This one guys seems to be okay, or so Shippo can guess. It doesn't matter in the long run, though. There's gonna be more, and the kitsune knows it.

Well, if they want to treat him in order to torture him for more information, well, that would be fine. He's never going to give these jerkwads anything. All he can do is bide him time, hope to get the knots around his wrists loose, and stall like he's never stalled before.

II

The dense forest is a minefield of hidden branches, holes, hibernating animals, and slippery spots of ice and slush. Regardless, Kouga shoves himself through. Around him, armored soldiers pace just as quickly even though the majority is exhausted, hungry, and cold. Even Kouga's own wolves, formerly joining the West in the massive attack, are slower keeping up than normal. The smell of them, however, is a soothing balm to the adrenaline and rage coursing through the Kouga's body—reminding him that he actually might need brains rather than just the element of surprise. With the rest of the forces with him, strategy would be the key.

The scents are closer, though, and far off light breaks the darkness of trees. As long as some huge baddy doesn't pop up to attack the West, then they are either going to avenge Shippo or pull him out alive. Either way, Kouga isn't going to let the kid stay.

A random branch fwoaks him in the face. Not a good omen.

Not far behind the Wolf Prince, Yao Xin moves with silent, graceful speed. At his order, a group of demons are hauling his powerful children through the woods in case there is a plot afoot to divide their forces. However, Xin is quite certain the kodomoto's magic will keep their threat to a low priority. He is not taking chances, and so the twins are hauled along for the ride.

Before taking off behind the Prince of the Northern Wolf Tribe, Xin left Matsu with the human troops and fliers. Urgent missives have already been sent out the four kingdoms in warning. Apparently his people have become craftier in the centuries since their last attack—using strategy to worm their way around the main body of forces to attack the sparsely guarded palaces is an intelligent move and explains why so few of the combatants were elementals in the water/land siege. If his people saved their greatest assets for a sneak attack, the demons in all four nations may be at a disadvantage. Neither he nor Sesshomaru knew how many demon soldiers are left in the North, South, and East that would be able to stand against elementals. He can only assume the worst case scenario.

From ahead, the Kouga gives a loud shout with a high leap. He comes down with a vengeance and the sounds of yelling, scrabbling, and fighting soon take over.
As the Western troops arrive with renewed vigor for bloodshed...they are understandably
dumbstruck with confusion.

The ragtag group of Japanese demons and humans are scrambling to flee from the soldiers' swords
and arrows. Xin pauses only a moment with sword lifted for a killing blow.

"The barrier failed!" A skunk of all things yells from up in one of the trees and Yao Xin has had
enough foolishness. If these are just petty demon thieves skulking around in the woods, then the
other invaders are still out here somewhere. With a deep draw of breath, Yao Xin blows out and ice
spews forth. The scrambling becomes struggling as many are frozen to the spot and others caught
by guards in the attempt to flee.

Yao approaches a half frozen badger, eyes flat with anger.

"Who are you?" He demands immediately.

The badgers jaw is clicking together at the extreme cold, his body frozen to mid-chest, "N-N-Nao
o-of th-th-the B-B-B-B Brrrr-akk-k-umin."

*The Burakumin gang? There is no time for this!*

"Twelve of you stay and round up these murderers and thieves. As for the rest of you, we will
continue on!"

II

Before his body reforms, cells re-condensing into a whole butt load of hanyou, he has the rusty
sword in hand. The second his body is, well, his body again, Tetsuaiga explodes in its'
transformation. One second the sword is a beat-up piece of shit, next moment, ta-daa, awesome
fang of ass-kicking. Watching the reaction of the transformation from whatever dumbass thinks a
hanyou can't hold his own is always entertaining. Just that moment of 'what the fuck is up with that
steel?' just before he strikes a sweet pose is enough to make all the jeers of his half-blood not even
matter.

Only one thing really kills that moment of enjoyment, however, and that's when one he calls his
own is in trouble. Nothing, *nothing* pisses him off more than that—not even cracks on his mother.
That's why he's on his game the second they reform—cause someone fucked royally fucked up,
and it's gonna be pretty clear how badly. The hanyou's lips curve in a parody of a smile that is
actually quite frightening—especially considering he's highly pissed that Shippo somehow got
mixed up in all this crazy fighting. Yup, that scary, calm anger might be worse because of the
Heat, and it might just send him into another bout, but none of it really mattered. What mattered
was his kit, alive and whole. And he would be. Shippo *would be alive*, there just wasn't any other
way.

Because if his kit was dead, then it was going to be a slaughter, and only Sesshomaru would have
the strength to stop him from going bat-shit berserk on the whole goddammed island. InuYasha
might lose his mind to rip apart any thing or person that would dare harm a hair on that kid's head.

The sun is just now peeking over the horizon, spreading red and gold haze through the small
clearing to where they've tracked Shippo's scent. His ears swivel to gather as much sound as
possible, a low growl already reverberating through the dense woods surrounding them. Using his
eyes and nose to get the full gist of how far they are from Shippo's main scent, InuYasha doesn't
even notice his body is taking on the signs of battle rather than Heat. His miraculously powerful
hanyou form is no longer emanating the sweet pheromones of a ripe demon waiting for a mate.
Rather, he smells like sharp adrenaline and tangy strength. His youkai isn't even hitting a spike but is deceptively even. Sesshomaru merely glares the darkness into recession, his eyes steadily on the half mile stretch of clearing they are almost upon. It is there Sesshomaru can calculated somewhere near sixty soldiers. A great mass for just the two of them. If more than a dozen are elementals, then the fight will indeed prove...interesting.

In some silent agreement, the two demons move silently through the snow to get closer to the clearing where the enemies slumber. Even in gaudy outfits, the two demons meld into the landscape, moving seamlessly silent through brambles and bare limbs. Crouching behind a clump of thorn bushes, InuYasha uses Tetsuwaiga to ease back some of the thin, lashing brushwood to get a better view of the ground. His golden eyes take in the scene with attention to all details: seven groups of ten or so in a circle, weapons close to hand, and smoldering fires long died out. He didn't sense an incredible amount of energy from this group of humans, but sheer numbers are enough to overcome anyone.

Movement at his side, and Sesshomaru's eyes are narrowed dangerously—a mental flash makes the hanyou tense up for long moments, replaying the day a poison-laced hand was shoved through his gut. That face is the old Sesshomaru he used to know so damn well...

"Run."

Blink. Run? I'll never run from you, asshole.

"You swore on your mother's grave," Sesshomaru hisses at him, "you would run."

Oh, hell. Got lost there fer a seoncd. But, well, yeah I did promise, didn't I. "My heat's not spiking," he hisses back, "and there's a fuck-ton of them."

Miracle of miracles, Sesshomaru's face contorts in disbelief, one stripey hand flinging out the camp site. "Ridiculous! In my full form, I would have the majority beaten in one bite."

"Well, y' ain't in yer full form, and SHIPPO is in there somewhere! We gotta be careful."

"I would not hurt your innocent kitsune!"

"You'd drown him in drool, moron!"

"I would victoriously save him before that!"

"Seriously? The kid is doomed. Now untwist your panties and let's do this."

"I do not luxuriate in women's undergarments, fool! You should know this from previous experience!"

Not the time for embarrassment! But his cheeks reddened anyway. "What the fuck ever! Are we gonna sit here and argue or go in there swinging?"

"That depends," Sesshomaru's hand cups his brother's chin and now they are eye to eye, a hair's breath apart. "Will you stay at my back while we fight?" If not, Sesshomaru would de-tatch his tail and leave InuYasha bound up in it without qualm.

What the demon lord didn't expect was the light that entered his sibling's eyes, something...very gentle. Alien for InuYasha's usual gruffness. He wants me back-to-back with him like that time with Sou'ung...
His throat suddenly tight, the hanyou nods. "I'll stand with ya."

Not exactly what I meant, but he will do as I ask. With one sharp nod, Sesshomaru releases him. "Follow me, then. If that is your wish."

The demon lord stands to his full height, face returning to that displeased, narrowed-eyed expression. He swipes a hand faster than InuYasha can see and their path is suddenly just clear of bramble. The noise and power strike wakes some of the sleeping invaders and the watchers call out in alarm as the Lord of the West simply strides into their camp with golden eyes glowing and youkai swirling around him.

He looks like his name's sake, destruction made flesh. Any who had never seen him, but only heard the tales of his power and prowess, would cower at the press and magnitude of the youkai streaming from him like a second skin. The lord, one of the few of their kind remaining, Sesshomaru of the West is death come a knocking. Grudgingly impressed at the show, InuYasha stands slightly behind left shoulder (to be away from the sword arm) with his full fang over one shoulder and a snarl marring his features.

In Mongolian, Sesshomaru speaks in a dangerously calm tone. "This demon before you is Sesshomaru, Lord of the Western Lands. You will surrender your arms and offer your lives to this lord. Else, your blood will taint the ground with your shame." His eyes bled red, jaw crackling with elongated fangs to put on a very frightening show.

His hand pulls Bakusaiga, youkai swirling around the blade—a flashy show that is normally beneath him; however, with InuYasha's unstable state, he wants as less fighting as possible. "This Sesshomaru and his younger brother will gladly relieve you of your miserable existence. Forfeit your arms or your lives!"

Invaders leapt to their feet, looking back and forth to one another to weigh the words of this fearsome demon and the dog-eared warrior beside him.

The generals, three in charge of the undercover operation, are not swayed by his warnings. The first general, young and foolish, raises his axe in hand and calls out,

"There are two against the many of us! Killing them will bring the West to its' knees! We can avenge our ancestors in this battle! Attack!"

Sesshomaru's eyes narrow, and his free hand comes up with one green, glowing, fingernail.

"InuYasha, down!"

Ears twitching, the hanyou automatically does as he told, and the poison lash extends with a flick of the wrist. Gracefully, Sesshomaru rises up on one toe and begins to spin in a circle of death. InuYasha watches with rapt attention as the first line of Mongolian ass-heads run right into that blur of poisony-goodness.

Heh, that shit hurts like a bitch, don't it?

Long moments later, body parts are strewn about like leaves and the once pristine snow is red and squishy with gore. To his credit, the demon lord doesn't have a single spot on his white robes. He ends his spin almost daintily, coming to face the remaining horde with the same expression as the Grim Reaper coming to call.

"Very well. Your lives it shall be."
InuYasha leaps to his feet still holding Tetsuaiga and snarls. Sesshomaru turns slightly and the two brothers are back to back at more invaders coming to the charge.

Unbeknownst to the Princes of the West, there is only one elemental in this group of spies, and he is their healer, not a soldier. The elder man has been sitting with the young boy they captured last night spying on them in the stance of a tree. His heart went out to the child as he was beaten ruthlessly while tied so he could not defend himself against the blows. This was not honorable in the healer's opinion and so he tried as best he could to tend to the young one's grievous injuries. He was forced to expand much of his energy to start mending the broken bones, yet he was not able to heal the child completely. The fractures in his cheek, ribs, and shoulders would still need to be set, but he could keep the young child out of pain should his comrades decide to beat him more. The healer, past his prime for battle, could only give the child a weary sigh in apology for the brutality of his people. It may be wrong, but the majority knew no other way. A ruthless khan would breed a ruthless army.

Now, as the two demons step into their camp with murderous gazes and frightening power, the elder healer makes the attempt at shielding his young charge with his own body. With horror, he watches the first charge explode in body parts and viscera without the demon lord giving so much as a downward strike. So many dead with such little effort—truly are these Japanese formidable beings.

Never should our people have come to this forsaken shore. We come to our deaths...

The two demons face off with the second wave and cleave through the bodies like a sickle cleaves through a field of newly grown hay. They brothers are immensely powerful foes, indeed.

The secondary general, however, is already in panic as bodies pile up at the feet of the enemy. Thirty men, forty men, all fall without ever striking a blow. In a last moment decision to save his own life, he remembers the runty little child and moves across the camp to throw their healer's body off the captive. He hauls the blood-soaked body upright by the hair, waking him from unconsciousness with an agonized, muffled but open-mouthed cry.

"Enough!" He yells over the dead throes and metal-on-bone screeches.

The remaining soldiers part to give InuYasha and Sesshomaru a very good look at the sharp, curved blade lying snugly against Shippo's jugular.

"If we die, so does this one!"

InuYasha's eyes widen at the kitsune's beaten-to-shit face and the smell assaults him like a dragon's fist—his sight blurs with a surge of rage. In an incredible pause in the fighting, the invaders turn back to the brothers, ready to renew the attack—but, the hanyou is no longer simply a little pissed off; he is radiating scalding hot anger in waves, clenching the Tetsaiga in one hand hard enough to make his knuckles turns white and his claws puncture the soft meat of his palms around the hilt. From gold to red, his eyes do not move from the form of Shippo kneeling in front of a slimey, cowardly, stinkier-than-a-dog's nut, son of a bitch that is about to get a beatdown of his fuckin' life.

The hair on the back of many necks stands up straight in an instinctual flight reflex. Now would be the time to save themselves and run...however, stupidity seems to run rampant on their side.

A group ignores the signs of death and rushes the hanyou, specifically. Sesshomaru attempts to turn into the attack, attempts to push InuYasha back with his shoulder, attempts to be the big brother.
But, the clawed hand shoves him to the side instead, and a hard pulse of youkai resounds; a
different pulse than the demon blood rising to the surface, this pulse is like a high-frequency pitch
only dogs might hear, one that signals danger. With Tetsuaiga lowered by his side, InuYasha isn't
even raising his arms in a strike. He knows instinctually that he doesn't need to.

Like a shockwave of power, a concentrated gold light is his youkai expanding and contracting
rapidly enough to burst from his chest like a burning fist. He doesn't need to direct the blast or to
use his hands or sword to release it. He only needs will to release the mass of his power into a
concentrated blow. That power, purely his own and not a hand-me-down from the long-dead
General, cuts into each warrior in his path, burning whatever parts are in the way of the condensed
power. Burning flesh and viscera, putrid scents, swirl in the breeze as half-burned bodies fall to the
snow, some still with shocky expressions on what remains of a face.

Not even giving Sesshomaru a moment to gape, InuYasha's legs bunch, and he leaps over the
destruction his own power wrought and lifts the sword high in one hand. With his downward
momentum, the fang is shoved into the mouth of the motherfucker holding Shippo and rips through
human meat in a vicious stab down the throat and clear through his belly. The invader doesn't even
have enough time to be afraid to die—the curved blade in his hands gives barely a twitch when his
muscles spasm in final jerks. Effortlessly, InuYasha merely jerks his wrist to the left and cuts the
body open to get his sword un-stuck—spewing intestines like rancid fruit. Only his head swivels
around to look at the last survivors with glowing red eyes. His jaw opens to wicked fangs and a
rolling growl of warning.

Intelligently, the final ten or so, in a singular, un-choreographed movement, drop their weapons to
the blood encrusted snow and fall to their knees with hands over their heads.

III

Out of his one good eye, Shippo looks up at a familiar and frightening sight. He knows the signs
and smells of demon blood rising to the fore. But, even with the beads still around the hanyou's
neck, there is not Kagome to rein him in when berserker mode kicks in, and a lick of fear skitters
up his spine. Dying this way is not how he wants his short life to end...

"i—ippo.." The crazed demon snarls out, and the good jade green eye widens.

"Inuuyapha?" Muffled by the gag still, tears start to cut a path down the blood and grime still on
his face, making the puffy red, black, and blue bruises glitter. His jaw isn't working well enough
for him to attempt to say more.

The hanyou drops to a crouch, elongated claws coming dangerously close to Shippo's face. He
keeps himself from flinching (in case he cuts himself on the claws like an idiot) but can't help his
whole body trembling in strain, stress, and fear. The gag in his mouth is suddenly gone, and his
mouth is so dry he coughs weakly. The one hand not holding Tetsuaiga moves around the kitsune
to pull him against the rough fabric of the fire rat robe and the beating rhythm of InuYasha's heart
underneath. Even though it hurts his battered face and chest to be held so tightly against the
hanyou, Shippo doesn't even make a squeak in protest or utter some inane crap about being a
pansy. The smell might be frightening, but it's still InuYasha, and the kitsune huddles deeper
against the warmth and safety he used to feel any time InuYasha was around.

"Sh-i-p-p-o,\," speaking around huge fangs makes the words harder to get out, but the demon
InuYasha knows the kit will be further at ease by knowing he is recognized.

"Yasha.\" Sniffling at the sudden bout filling his eyes, Shippo tries to keep the wave back. "I missed
ya, big lug."
Just like that, the hanyou lowers his face into the kit's red hair and snuffles to assess the injuries as well as relay comfort. He uses a claw on his other hand to cut the bindings on the kit's wrists, lying his cheek on the crown of Shippo's head.

"Sa-afe now." The intense anger recedes, and the growling turns into the normally rough tone, "it's okay, kid. I gotcha."

His shoulders start shaking and the wave bursts in silent sobs, "InuYasha...InuYasha..." Numb hands clench fists full of fire rat and Shippo burrows deeper into the scent of safety.

Plopping back on his ass, InuYasha pulls the kit with him, arranging Shippo to sit in the niche of his lap so he could keep his face buried in the robes over the hanyou's chest. His long sleeve covers the kit's cold upper body with the arm around thin shoulders. His other hand goes to finish off the bindings on Shippo's swollen knees and ankles, not focusing on the tingling starting in his hands and arms.

Once freeing his not-so-little munchkin, InuYasha winds the other arm around the kitsune to layer both sleeves over him. Sure, he wanted to know how the hell Shippo ended up out here in the middle of fuckin' no where instead of at the Kitsune school or with Miroku and Sango keeping their passel of brats rounded up, but answers will have to wait until the shivering stops and one of the healers can see to him. Somewhat awkwardly, he wracks his brain trying to think about what he can do to comfort the little kid. Five years ago, it would have been so much easier since he learned an iota of compassion from Kagome and her constant sympathy for anything suffering (sheesh, she once made him pick up a baby bird with a broken wing and carry it with them until the damn thing healed. Talk about lame..well, maybe he felt a little good when it finally flew off but whatever).

Then, he feels the moisture, scents the salt in the air from the little kitsune in his lap. Time rewinds and the kid is smaller, tiny even. Almost smaller than InuYasha himself when his mother died. Some distant instinct kicks in at the smell of tears. His hands seems to unfreeze and hold the young one's slight form tighter. For the moment, InuYasha rubs soothing circles on Shippo's back to generate warmth and comfort at the same time.

Sesshomaru, on the other hand, faces the invaders that have thrown down their arms in surrender. He generously allows his sibling time to calm down the traumatized child while giving the enemies his best, most effective look of disdain.

"You will tell this Sesshomaru how many more of your warriors have come to these shores," one green fingernail glows intensely. "You will not lie, or it may be a prudent punishment to feed you to this lord's younger brother. He quite enjoys the taste of human flesh from time to time. He also claims human bones are better for keeping his fangs painfully sharp."

Terrified eyes return to the hanyou's straight back. Stuttering over themselves, three men begin talking at once with exaggerated enthusiasm spurned by the motivation not to die. The end result is a garbled string of words the demon lord cannot unwind, and his eyes narrow in displeasure. Immediately, all three shut their traps with an abrupt snap. The first hurried tells of the two other ships making way around the island to catch the South and East kingdoms by surprise while another land-bound battalion is making it's way to the Western palace.

With a sneer, the demon lord inquires, "and is your khan so foolish as to actually believe so few would have the strength to attempt such as assault?"

"Our spies saw all the soldiers sent out from the other three kingdoms! They have no defense!" One soldier snarkily snaps back.
In a blink, his head is rolling around in the snow and his body slumps bonelessly to the cold earth.

"Hn. Ridiculous. Each kingdom maintained several hundred soldiers inside their castle walls. Your pathetic numbers would not have had a chance of victory."

"T-The ships have elementals, all of them." The man beside the be-headed corpse make certain to keep his tone respectful. "Over thirty. They planned to break the land around the Eastern palace and send it into the sea!"

One brow arches in understanding. *Hn. If the khan assumed their forces would win the day, then the plan is a sound one. If the Western army failed, more humans than demons would be left to defend the kingdoms of Nippon.* Grudgingly, Sesshomaru can see the validity of the plot; however, to achieve such a plan of action meant the khan is far too arrogant of his own power...

*Perhaps, after InuYasha's Heat is over and the threat to Nippon diminished, this Sesshomaru will sink to the level of his enemies and make a short trip over the sea...* His quick mind mulls over multiple possibilities and plans of action to assure the safety of his people and country. Unbeknownst to him, his expression is murderous while he is considering the best course, staring down the prisoners with a frightening intensity without realizing he is doing so.

Voices shout.

Both he and InuYasha turn in a synchronized movement, ears twitching to gather sound. With barely a sniff, the wind brings in the scent of Yao Xin and several soldiers of the Western army. Also, the musk of wolf paints his senses. Judging by the crashes through the brush, they are still half a mile away.

"InuYasha."

But, the hanyou is already standing with the kit held against him in one arm while the other holds his sword. "Go on and get 'em. I'll wait here with these asswipes. They make a move and I'm gonna Wind Scar 'em straight to Hell."

Sesshomaru gives him a knowing glance at the soft, sweet smell starting to get stronger by increments, and actually hesitates before asking, "you...are certain?"

In response, the hanyou grins cheekily, "awww. If I didn't know better, I'd almost think you might miss me or something. Ain't that just cute."

Bristling, Sesshomaru resists the urge to speed next to the foolish hanyou and smack him in the back of the head for even uttering such sentiments. "Hn. Very well, vile hanyou. This Sesshomaru will retaliate another day for your blatant stupidity."

Shippo, face buried in InuYasha's chest, tenses at the verbal sparring. He's wondering if he should leap away from the hanyou before Sesshomaru, true to his word, retaliates by slicing a huge chunk out of them both. He has no idea why the two of them were in the wood together in the first place when the army should have been by the shoreline? There's a bunch he's missing apparently.

"Keh." Bringing the sword up with a fangy grin, the hanyou can't help but enjoy one upping the asshole...it's, well, pretty fun actually. "Bring it on, big brother. I ain't afraid." At that, Shippo's body tenses in his arms, tail straightening in alarm.

A second later, the demon lord merely vanishes in an impressive show of power.

"Well, that was kinda cool, I guess," grudgingly, the hanyou has to give credit where credit is due
and moves to stand facing the assholes on their knees, giving the evil eye and a good, scary growl in case any of them get any ideas.

"All right, kid. Sesshomaru is gone to get help. So's you gotta tell me what yer doing here and how these fuckwads got you. 'Cause if any of them had something to do with yer face, they ain't gonna be prisoners, you feel me?"

Shippo lifts his face from the hanyou's chest and looks at him, really looks at his for a few moments. This feeling of being held is one he actually missed while away. Years ago, if he was cold in the night, InuYasha would wait until everyone else was asleep before pulling him up in a tree to sleep surrounded by fire rat and warmth. When he was so tired from travelling, it was InuYasha that would pick him up by the scruff and carry him. When memories of his father's death would assault his dreams, it was InuYasha that would hold him and awkwardly pat his head and back until he could fall asleep again. As part of the hanyou's pack, Shippo never knew fear, real fear, until after InuYasha left the village...and didn't come back. Again, the kit was all alone and decided himself that it was time to stop depending on others to keep him safe. He would have to learn to protect himself—the Kitsune Training School was the place for it.

Being saved, however, makes him feel relieved, beholden, and shitty about his own lack of survival skills, all in one confusing bundle of emotions now that he doesn't fear death.

"...I asked Kouga—to bring me along. I wanted to fight for the West. S-spotted these guys while we were on our way."

InuYasha glances down then back at the group of cowering jerks, "Kouga, huh? I didn't see flea bag at the battle."

"We were on our way...he went to find a general to tell them where these foreigners were... I stayed behind to keep an eye on them."

"Did they sniff you out?"

The jerks in the line start whispering to one another but shut up immediately when he steps up and brandishes the fang with a menacing swipe.

"No." Cough, cough, "they almost cut me down for firewood, so I had to change back."

"Come again?" The hanyou asks flatly.

"Heh," the dangerous look on his face makes the kit just shrug with a pained wince. "I transformed into a tree to watch 'em."

"So that school did ya some good after all?"

"Yeah, I'm much stronger now, InuYasha...but, I mean, thanks...for coming to get me." He slumps more against InuYasha, a breath puffing out through his lips. "Like old times, huh?"

Looking over the tuffs of red hair, the hanyou's golden eyes noticeably soften. "Keh. Like it's some big deal or something, Shippo. Geeze. I'd never leave any of my pack behind. Not even that fucking pervert."

The rustling from behind them doesn't even make the hanyou twitch. He merely glances at the last guy over his shoulder, the scent that is lightly on Shippo's injuries and the bandage under his shirt. With the blade of Tetsuiga, he motions to the line of other assholes, not bothering to speak since the guy probably didn't understand Japanese anyhow.
With hands above his shoulders, the healer calmly walks to the end of the line and kneels down.

Shippo sighs again, "I was ssstupid, that's how they caught me. If I would have hid, or something, they never would have found me. I would've killed 'em with one of my new attacks...but, I didn't do it right."

"Oh yea? New attacks? Hn. Well, yer goin' back to the Western Palace with the army and letting the healer guy there take care of you for a while. When I get back, you can show me all the nifty shit you learned."

Shippo's head moves, "the Western Palace?"

"Uh, well, yeah. Sesshomaru wants me to come home for a while, and I agreed."

"...InuYasha, are you feeling okay? I mean seriously okay? Did you get hit in the head or something?"

"Shuddup, kid, geeze. Naw, I've just—" most closely guarded secret of the royalty—"I'm not the fuck-up in the family anymore. I agreed to help his army against these jerks from across the sea...so, I guess he finally realized I'm the only family he's got...er something like that." InuYasha shrugs this time, "he hasn't tried to kill me in a while, so maybe someone knocked that stick out of his ass—"

With a little choke, the kit laughs gently. "T-that really good, dog breath. You need family. Everyone needs family." With that, the kitsune finally passes out now that he knows he will be protected.

IV

The Western soldiers leap into the clearing as if they expect a full-scale attack in progress or some inane shit like that—sheesh, didn't they know how to use their ears? The hanyou stares with one ear crooked up in question, still holding his unconscious kit in a protective hold. Sheepishly, the soldiers bow to him before gathering around the kneeling Mongolians. Catching a smell on the wind, InuYasha rolls his eyes.

Seconds later, Kouga vaults over the big patch of brush and comes skittering to a shaky halt beside the soldiers. His eyes are wide at the information his senses are gathering: Shippo's blood, bruises, and broken bones; dog breath's sweet tinge of dog demon's Heat; the scent of the sea and foreign blood; the shit storm of ass-kicking that must have happened in this clearing. A whole bunch of shit he missed while trekking through the woods in search of the kit.

The big general, Shin or something, strides right past the wolf prince.

"Lord InuYasha!"

His sword hand comes up and two fingers wave from the hilt, "yo! Good timing. We got some plottin' assholes that need to be taken care of, and I need a healer for my kit in a bad way. He's going back to the Western Palace."

Xin bows at the waist, "of course, sire."

"Thanks, Xin, and uh, you can also throw out that nasty smellin' pelt, maybe even burn it. Shit stinks to hell—" he cranes his neck around Xin's broad form, "oh damn, nevermind, then. It's just Kouga. Well, fuck, I guess he can stay." Through this glibness, the hanyou is grinning like a madman. He hasn't seen the mangy bastard in years—good to see him still alive.
The mention must have shaken the wolf's tail, and he bristles immediately. "Hey flea bag! Long time, no see. Y'know, I been running and shit, but at least I don't got lice like some puppies I could mention—"

"Oi! You wanna talk about lice, wolfy—" Yao instinctively steps in between the two, nostalgia of his own warring offspring hits him like a fist.

"Oh, any day you stinkin' mongrel—"

Before he gets the full sentence out, a white blur moves with incredible speed that the wolf's senses reel. He doesn't even realize he is being attacked until a wicked blade is right on his jugular and white blinds his vision.

"I suggest, Prince Kouga, that you do not slander the Prince of the West in his own lands," Sesshomaru's smooth voice echoes in a very obvious warning. He presses minutely against the hilt of Bakusaiga, small enough to draw just a little blood to send his point home. "This lord will not overlook such disrespect to his little brother."

"Long time no see, Lord Sesshomaru. You forget who lent you a shit ton of wolves, or what?"

"Your father, not you, little Prince. Yet, as I recall, the Northern Lord has seven sons. I am certain he could stand to lose one."

Kouga's eyes widen at the completely serious look on the demon lord's face. He actually swallows.

"Oi, Sesshomaru! I can fight my own battles, geeze." InuYasha steps around Xin to the stand-off and pushes Sesshomaru's blade away with his own, still cradling the injured kitsune in one arm. "Besides," he gestures to the wolf, "I mean, it's Kouga fer cryin' out loud."

"The person does not matter," Sesshomaru counters coolly, "any that dare slander this Sesshomaru's sibling will taste the Lord of the West's wrath in a most excruciating way."

"Well, Kouga's the exception, then. I give him shit, he gives me shit, and we don't kick the ever-lovin' crap outta each other. Fair deal. Now, we got more important issues to worry about than getting' in a pissing contest over nothing. There are more guys out there gunning for our land and my kit needs a healer, like yesterday. So howzabout you make with being the lord and get some shit done. Make it snappy!"

Kouga's eyes widen in horror, huge in his face with pupils fully dilated, "Holy shit, mutt. Do you have a death wish?" he hisses, leaning an inch to the side.

"Keh. I'll care when Shippo isn't beat to shit and crazy motherfuckers aren't stinking up my forest."

It's then that Kouga looks and sniffs at the same time. His expression grows grim. "Shippo."

The kitsune doesn't reply, nor does he lift his face from InuYasha's chest.

The demon lord's expression tightens ever so slightly, "you may have a point, InuYasha, but this Sesshomaru is your elder brother and lord. You will not speak as such."

One black eyebrow hikes up a notch, and a sneer mars his face. "Look, you. Just because we're not fighting right now doesn't mean I don't remember being an exile beat to shit by my own kin. You get your priorities straight, and I'll remember who the fuck I'm talking to. My memory is pretty damned good, Lord Sesshomaru."
With that barb, the hanyou turns away, kit in arm, to find a healer in this mess of soldiers.

Sesshomaru, powerful demon, blinks at InuYasha's retreating back, uncertain as to what the devil just happened.

V

*Man, I wish that damn fox was here instead of back at the West,* helpless to do anything but watch, InuYasha mentally cringes when the centaur re-breaks Shippo's shoulder. The lean little body arches hard off the cot, but to his credit, Shippo doesn't scream. A strangled bark of a cry escapes, but he takes the pain like a man and just breathes. He knew, when the centaur's face turned grim, that his broken bones hadn't healed properly and would have to be broken again. His shoulder hadn't set right while InuYasha carried him through the throng of soldiers and demanded a good healer had best get a move on. InuYasha would never change and that thought soothed the pained kitsune.

From over the hanyou's shoulder, Kouga lounges by the flap in the healer's tent. His tail decidedly drooping, he visibly cringed when the kitsune's ribs and arm were re-broken. He felt lower than a snake for allowing the kit to convince him one of them should stay behind. Hell, Kouga himself was three hundred years old, and he knew, he knew better than to leave a child in so much danger, no matter how much the kit had improved over the last few years. No kitsune under a hundred could hold a shapeshift with adrenaline and fear in his blood.

The hanyou, however, didn't even flinch and hadn't left Shippo's side. With one glance over his shoulder, InuYasha's expression makes Kouga feel even guiltier—not in that, I blame your dumb ass for this shit but in that, I'm disappointed you didn't take care of him kind of way. It makes the tinges of his conscience wilt. The mutt is one of those warriors that doesn't focus on the how shit happened or who caused it, but he just takes one step after another to try and fix whatever wrongs he can. At least, that's how Kouga interprets his actions for the last five years; the mutt wandered through the lands like a ghost, doing all he could to protect the innocent ones from being hurt and killed or taken advantage of by the strong. Maybe, like he, InuYasha missed Kagome so much, he saw her in every human that needed his help, but maybe, the dog was just...well, an honorable warrior—more so than Kouga ever realized. But then again, the half-demon standing before him today is not the same one he'd seen in the last battle against Naraku five years ago. That expression, well, that's not the look of InuYasha from the Shikon Jewel days...this is a completely different animal all together. Much as it pained the wolf prince, he's sure this is the outcast InuYasha must have been before the Shikon Jewel ever showed up.

With a sigh, Kouga steps up beside the dog and crosses his arms over his chest while they both watch the centaur apply healing herbs and poultices to the swelling bruises littering the kit's face and chest.

Without prompting from the hanyou, Kouga tells him how they came to be in the woods. The story of meeting up with his father's troops, passing the Slayer's flourishing village, and grudgingly agreeing to let the kit come as long as he held up his own. However, he pointedly leaves out the death threats Sango and Miroku.

"I told him to stay back from their site and just watch," the wolf finishes, "but I shouldn't have left him out there alone."

Shoulders tense as the wolf waits for a berating on his intelligence, but after long moments, the hanyou simply shrugs and casts a glance over.

"Shippo was with us for the Naraku days, Kouga. For a kid, he's always held his own when he
In those few words, the guilt in Kouga's chest eases a bit and he stares at the mutt's tall profile, wondering just when the late Inu no Taisho started coming out of that flea bag's mouth.

Wrapping the kit's wounds didn't take long and the centaur gathers his supplies. Facing his other lord, the half-horse, half-man bows in respect. "I have done what I can for now, sire. His wounds will heal correctly before dawn. I will check back in a few hours to see how the bones are healing, so he should not move until I return."

"I got it. Thanks for seeing to him."

"Of course, sire," with a nod, the centaur leaves the tent, tail swishing behind him.

InuYasha just steps up to the kit while Kouga notes the respect with a raised brow. The wolf, while impetuous, is not a fool. His eyes narrow at the hanyou (whom had raised a hand pat the kit's firey red hair), and his nose doesn't lie. Not only is the mutt in his latent stages of Heat, but his very essence is...off somehow. The wolf isn't sure how InuYasha managed to change his scent in the last five years (or how the hell he's managing to keep his Heat from overwhelming him), but he suddenly has a buttload of questions now that he and the dog are on equal social ground.

"InuYasha..."

The hanyou leans over,"...yer scent lead me to them, Shippo. It's thanks to you we found 'em...Ya done good, kid. Real good."

The half-aware kitsune drags in a breath, his voice suddenly thick, "I—I—I d-didn't tell them nothin'."

Once again, the hanyou gently pats the kit, leaning closer to surround Shippo with his scent. "Naw. Never thought ya would. You got guts, Shippo, always did have."

From his swollen eye lids, tears ran gently down the youthful, battered face, "I wanted—to see you again." A choking hiccup makes the hanyou's ears flatten to his head, "I missed you so much, InuYasha."

And so, perhaps because he had often thought of the little kitsune as well in all those long, agonizing years alone or perhaps because the kit is obviously distressed, the half-breed lays his forehead very gently against the kit's.

"...I'll never admit it, so you only get this once, but I missed you too, runt."

With that, the little kitsune starts the waterworks. Not loud, gasping sobs, but a quiet, raw weep that makes the hanyou want to move him, want to put the kid on his lap and shush him like he used to do in the top of Goshinboku when Shippo was still just a kid and scared from the nightmares of his parents' death. When those hands, not so little anymore, grab on to his sleeve, InuYasha just winds an arm under Shippo's neck and holds him closer to the scent of the hanyou's strength.

Kouga, respectfully remains quiet while the kid cries out his pain and loneliness.

Sniffling, the kit finally stutters, "I—I didn't think you'd ever want to see me again. I was a jerk when I was with you and Kagome."

Surprised at this, InuYasha feels a little shitty at staying away for so long. "Keh! What a dumbass." He eases Shippo back to the cot and wipes away the residue of tears with his sleeve.
"It ain't like that, Shippo. With or without Kagome, once yer part of the pack, yer always part of the pack!" Looking into the one green eyes, he gives a shrug, "but, you started a life. I didn't wanna fuck it up for you, y' know? I mean, damn, I can feel your youkai is crazy strong now, so I let you be. Figured you'd come wandering in the forest somewhere when you needed me."

Absurdly, the kitsune chokes on a laugh, "are you kidding me, InuYasha? Do you know how much forest is out there?"

The hanyou sniggers, "a fuck ton, yeah I know. But Sango and Miroku know whereabout I am most of the time, so don't worry about it. You need me that bad, and they'll let me know. So's that's enough of all this girly crap, okay? We're good. Fer the time being, you need to relax and heal. My guys are okay and they'll keep an eye on ya. They're gonna take you back to the West, and after I hunt out the others, I'll see you there."

The one green eye widens, "the West?"

"Yeah. Sesshomaru's place. He's okay with it, don't worry."

"...Sesshomaru?"

One side of the hanyou's mouth quirks, "yeah. Long story. Me n that icy princess are kinda okay, so nothin'll happen to you there. 'Sides, his people know I'll rip apart the bastard that so much as stings yer baby toe."

The kitsune giggles again as the hanyou turns and gives a wave over his shoulder on the way out.

The mid-morning is clear and cold outside the tent, and the Western soldiers are camping close to the healing tent, getting what shut eye they can. Two guards are standing outside the tent to guard Shippo while the army rests and gets ready to move once again. With the new threat to the lands of Nippon, all the soldiers—demon and human alike—are on high alert and sleep does not come easy. However, to be in top fighting condition, they have to set up their own tents and rest before the next round of fighting surely meets them on the road to home.

Watching the play of the campground, InuYasha nods to the guards and waits for Kouga. His breath visible, he just stands outside the entrance with his hands in his sleeves and buried in the snow to the tops of his ankles. Ears twitching like mad, he spares a glance at the same gorilla-faced riders thawing the wings of their mounts with warm blankets. The one female that saved his ass gives a small bow and goes back to tending her flying beastie. The dragon lifts its' head and nuzzles her in return. InuYasha smiles gently.

Finally, after long moments of soft words between kit and wolf, Kouga steps out behind InuYasha with hands on his hips and shaking his head with a sigh.

"Kit'll be fine. Don't go all namby-pamby on me, flea bag."

The wolf gives a half smile, "I'd call you Inu-koro, but I don't want your brother showing up with that killer sword again. I don't need another hole to breathe out of."

"Keh! That bastard does know how to back the fuck down. Guess it's somethin' we got in common," but, just talking about Sesshomaru makes the hanyou's mouth sour. The insult pissed him off, true, but his brother also saved him a few times and seemed legit in his sentiments...

The wolf visibly flinches and looks around furtively, "just 'cause he might not want yer sword anymore doesn't mean he holds a candle for me or some shit." Blue eyes dart to the side, "...speaking of which...are you Lord InuYasha now or didja just come for the fighting and the
food? Last I heard, you were wanderin' all over the place killing anyone pissy enough to make ya. I mean, didja really take out that gang of shark pirates?"

The memory makes the hanyou's expression turn feral, "rat fuckers. Gave 'em an adamant enema. They were just goin' along the coast hitting villages. Killin' kids n shit."

"Yeah. I mean, I heard the stories, but didn't know for sure what happened t' ya after Kagome—well, you know. I kept stopping by yer village and forest, but you were always long gone."

*Say what?* The hanyou turns to Kouga with a raised brow.

The wolf, in turn, read the 'why' in the mutt's mug and blusters out, "the old priestess died and the other left ya. I mean, damn man, we teamed up to kill Naraku; we lost Kagome together—all o' us. You shoulda come North and hung out with me n the pack." Awkwardly, he folds his arms across his chest plate.

Even with the prime opportunity to needle the stinky wolf a bit is soooo right here, InuYasha ignores several retorts and taunts (especially with the Western army around) and lets himself feel better that the mangy hide would even say something like that. Hell no, they weren't friend or allies, but they were never really enemies or rivals either. Yet, the hanyou had never really considered having a place in the wolf pack, never even stopped by since he had a pretty good idea what kind of hell he would encounter with a pack of full-blooded wolves—most that probably had a hate-on for hanyous. With that knowledge, he turns the weight of his stare to the wolf.

And Kouga feels a sudden, haunting chill run up his spine at the look directed at him. It's not the look of the old, brash and overly brave InuYasha. The one that jumped into the fight with people at his back and the determination to save the world. This mutt is actually a little scary with the age in his eyes—like he's the oldest demon that's ever walked the earth and has seen centuries of misery. There's a wary expectation of hate and prejudice, a mistrust of any kindness or compassion while still maintaining his own sense of what is right regardless of how others treated him. It's the kind of look that makes Kouga wish he'd taken more effort seeking the dog out in the last five years.

"...never really considered it, I guess." The hanyou finally admits, "everyone just left and moved on. I thought it'd be lame as hell if I just stayed around the village of humans that poked me with sticks and shit while I was still bound to Goshinboku." But that wasn't it, and he knew better. Staying still, like when he was trapped to that tree, ended the second that girl from the future grabbed the arrow in his chest.

"You coulda gone with the Monk and his woman, taken Shippo with you."

Point, but, "Miroku and Sango didn't need me hanging around to remind 'em of Naraku and stuff. Besides, my nose is sensitive, you dig? I don't wanna fuckin know how good their baby-making time is goin. I mean, shit, we ain't that close."

The wolf chorts, guffawing in agreement, "I feel that. What about the kid. He—uh—well, he hasn't been the same since everything ended. You know—"

"Yeah, I do," the hanyou harshly interrupts. "He's only thirty at most, and no fucking kid I've ever met has youkai in his aura. Shippo's been bustin' ass."

"He moved up three ranks...in a year, mutt. No joke."

"What the hell's up with that?"

Kouga shrugs, "from what he told me...he thought he needed to know enough to protect himself—"
then he could always go back after the Monk and taijiya...you know, died.”

An ear twitches.

"Well, humans die, and they die fast compared to us. I think it hit Shippo hard when Kagome left, sure, but when the old priestess died, he had some kind of realization. So, he started stayin’ with those two and their pups—waitin’ for you to come visit again."

"Keh." But the hanyou's demeanor gives him away.

Going out on a limb here, Kouga lifts a hand to InuYasha's shoulder. "Y' did the best you could, man. Shippo has to figure life out for himself."

"...He was supposed to stay with them, have a family and shit. What the fuck could I give 'em that they couldn't? Shit—no home, hard ground or a tree for a bed, always moving, and every cock-suckin' demon in smelling range trying to kill him just because he travels with a half-breed? For shit's sake, I didn't even know if I was going to live out a few years. Couldn't leave him alone again—not like his parents."

Something in the wolf stills at this admission. 'Has he been suicidal all this time? Fighting until he finds someone nasty enough to kill him off? Without the others, well, I thought he'd be okay...

"Don't get me wrong, asshole. I'm not going girly or anything like that—"

"Heh! W-who're you kidding, mutt face? You gotta sword with like, what, seven attaks? And a list longer than my dick of dead fuckers in your wake! Shit, my dick's longer than my arms, so that's a fuck-ton of dead demons."

Despite himself, InuYasha shakes his head with a guffaw, "you mean a baby's arm, asshole."

"Still a long list, dog shit."

"Before the Jewel, every mother fucker wanted a piece of me. All of 'em, even my own blood, wanted nothing more than to see me dead. Didn't matter when I was a snot-nosed runt. Just always seemed like I had no right to live. Looking for the Jewel, that gave me purpose. Taking care of Kagome and avenging Sango's family and trying to get that Wind Tunnel out of Miuroku's hand—that made me better than I ever was before. When it was all over... I didn't wanna go back to that, especially not with Shippo—no kid should see that shit." Even though I didn't have a choice. "Shippo deserves better. I made the right call by him."

"I suppose. Kinda karmic that here he is, though, ain't it?"

"Maybe. But, I don't believe in karma. If I did, Sesshomaru would be grade-A fucked."

"Oh, damn. Yeah, I guess. But, really, mutt. You royalty now? He finally swallow his pride and accept you back into the family?"

"...Something like that. He wants me to stay in the Western Palace and check it out, see how I'll like it. I mean, damn, a futon instead of a tree would be sweet."

"Uh-hu. Furs are pretty good, too, but, I mean, you're not going until after you get—ahem—taken care of, right?"

An ear crooks up and the hanyou's blank look makes the wolf draw back. "Seriously, mutt? I have a nose, you know. It's right here on my face."
Realization dawns and the ruddy color rises in InuYasha's face, "Keh! So it's not just to keep yer ugly face from lookin' even uglier? Hn, but yeah, there's still that, ain't there?"

"Well, no shit!" He lowers his tone immediately, glancing around to see if anyone noticed their topic change. "Man, no fuckin' around now. Heat's a serious thing, you know. It can kill your stubborn ass, crazy-powerful or not. I mean, damn, I don't know how you're suppressing it like this, but you gotta get it taken care of fast. Sooner the better. Go find a bitch, fuck her for a few days, and tell her to piss off."

"Are you a complete dumbass? What bitch would fuck a hanyou? Uh, answer: none. But, it's all right. I got it. This shit with Shippo came up while I was on my way out. Soon as the army is on its' way and these invading fuck-wads are taken care of, I'm outta here."

Kouga has nothing to say to that, but he noticed how the guards behind them kept their eyes on the hanyou rather than the kit's tent. Something told him that Sesshomaru was going to have a word or two to say about his brother just up and taking off.

"Well, I gotta go check on my men. Don't run off til I get back."

"What? Whadda ya think I am, some pup?"

Kouga gives him a raised brow, "maybe I just give a fuck whether or not yer okay, mutt. Kagome woulda wanted me to."

At her name, the hanyou looks away. "Kagome ain't here and she didn't know about demon customs anyhow. You're off the hook, flea bag."

Kouga's tail twitches, and he moves to be in the hanyou's line of sight, startling the hanyou with his serious face. "InuYasha."

I don't think the damn wolf has ever said my name before."

"I'm not a run-of-the-mill demon, you get me? I'm royalty, too, a younger prince, just like you are. I'm not trying to find a mate or anything like that, but if it comes down to do or die...I'm here for ya."

Is he saying what I think he's saying? InuYasha's brow hikes up into his hairline. But, Kouga doesn't look away.

Not like that isn't creepy or nothing. Me and the wolf? Naw..."Go check on your wolves. I'll stay until the healer gets back."

Visibly, Kouga hesitates,"Y' sure mutt-face? I can stay, guard your back."

"Nothin' doing. We're safe here. There's guards everywhere."

"All right, then. I'll be back once I get a report on our numbers."

"Later, flea bag."

"Yo," without even looking back, the wolf gives a wave over one shoulder and disappears through the milling soldiers and tents.

With Shippo taken care of and Sesshomaru busy, this is an opportune time to piss off. The hanyou waits until Kouga is gone and turns back around to the guys outside Shippo's tent.
"You guys keep an eye on him, all right? I'll be back." He starts walking when the soldier on the right speaks out.

"We cannot, milord!"


"We are not on his detail, sire," both immediately kneel, hasty at his tone. "His guards entered the tent once you left!"

"Uh, okay," in a flat tone, "they what're you two doin' here insteada getting something to eat?"

"We are on your detail, sire. We are to stay with you. Orders from Lord Sesshomaru himself."

InuYasha sizes up the two, big ass demons. They were probably fast enough to keep up with him. Fuckin' Sesshomaru.

His eyes narrow on the kneeling soldiers, "And where is my asshole brother right now?"

VI

The table of advisors made his stomach turn—their very scents were a testament to their weakness. Keeping his face schooled from a disdainful snarl, the newly-returned prince is completely out of place with these sniveling fools.

When he blinks, all eyes are suddenly on him and he straightens in his chair with a seemingly bored expression.

"And what is your opinion on the solution, my son?" The Inu no Taisho speaks from the head of the table, eyes only for his offspring at the other end.

After long moments of silence, the air tense with waiting, the younger inu finally speaks, "the humans of these lands are a cancer to progress. Their warring nature belays the disrespect they have for their betters," bitter words cross from his tongue in an empty tone—but, his memory of abuse at the hands of humans has not yet left him. "If these worms persist in obstructing their demon lords, then they should be dealt with swiftly."

"Milord, humans are our servants and farmers. They produce commerce for the West as well as—"

"Demons have no need of human servants or their grains." The young inu counters immediately, "others of our kind tend the fields and serve their betters as well as any human. Demons live longer and work harder with their strength and endurance. Pray tell, of what use are humans other than to war with each other and cause destruction to our lands?"

The minister, cowed by the frigid aura of the powerful prince, is at a loss for words.

The Inu no Taisho, however, stands. All eyes move to him, clad in full armor, with a face as empty as his son's. "Humans may not have the strength or prowess we possess and their lives are short and fleeting; however, my son, humans are creatures of our lands and thus under our might to protect. For they possess a power of which many demons will never be able to conceive... strength of will."

Blinking, the prince's expression changes into a sneer, "ridiculous!"
This one word made the entire table visibly flinch, and the general's eyes narrow dangerously. Few fools dared to talk back to him; fewer survived such an insult—to question the wisdom and will of the Lord of the West. From halfway down the table, Yao Xin, a foreigner, sees the storm brewing behind his friend's golden eyes.

"I am your Father and your Lord, Sesshomaru. You will not speak to me as thus." The deadly calm in that tone should have been enough to send hordes running for cover. Like the eye of a tsunami, the calm is only an indication of the chaos yet to come.

Unafraid, the young prince, hardened by his life in the wilds, mirrored his sire in more ways than just with silver hair and golden eyes. He is also unable to back down, especially not with the bitterness of his exile still souring in his belly. Slowly, gaze never wavering, the young inu stands with the grace of a serpent ready to strike. He does not look away from his dread sire to speak.

"Leave us."

Reinstated as the Prince of the West, Sesshomaru's order was valid, but many of the advisors sent furtive glances at the Inu no Taisho for conformation. His minute nod signaled affirmation. The many advisors and governors stood from their spots and bowed before turning tail to run. Only Yao Xin at the Inu no Taisho's right hand stayed, moving to stand at the back by the door to be out of the way but close for in-case things got...difficult.

Father and son stared one another down until the others left.

"Your bitterness sways your prejudices you, my son."

"This Sesshomaru has seen the destruction humans have wrought upon the land. They are a plague."

"Regardless, they deserve the benefit of the doubt, for they are our people."

At this, his eyes narrow, "do they, Lord of the West? Your own offspring was banished and beaten without just cause, yet humans that obliterate one another and demon-kind are given mercy? Perhaps bitterness merely gives this Sesshomaru, perspective as you so desired when you cast me from your lands." His hands are tingling, muscles coiling with the moment to spring should his sire attack—a high possibility Sesshomaru is prepared to face.

The Inu no Taisho doesn't flinch at the accusations, but his eyes are darker gold with inner turmoil.

"Your strength is mighty, Sesshomaru, and you walk the path of conquest. A sovereign must be cruel to be kind and make difficult decisions that may affect all those under his might. But, any lord worthy of his title must have weaknesses in order to have enduring strength, and you do not have the heart of a ruler—not yet, pup."

With that, the Inu no Taisho sweeps from the council chambers and leaves his offspring wondering what just happened.

With Yao Xin in the main tent, Sesshomaru is satisfied they have taken every precaution to keep the final groups of Mongolians from sweeping through the lands to the other palaces of Nippon. Even the ships sailing around the island have been spotted and several demonic units detached to eradicate this threat. His eyes roam the huge map laying out before the groups showing where the invaders have been spotted and their troops sent in as offense. The traps are in place, and only time stands in the way of the spring. Yet, the main plans stay in place—the bulk of the army would
return to the West, others would be dispatched to scour the area for any more stragglers in the dense forests. All contingencies are covered.

"Tonight, the army will camp and regain its' strength, then continue to the palace at dawn. This Sesshomaru and his brother will return soon. There is still much to be done," tonelessly, the demon lord dismisses his generals and advisors.

"As you command, milord!" Shuffling out, they move to spread orders, delineate troops, and send missives via dragon. The late afternoon sun is slowly nestling into the curve of the mountains, and the moon is already reflected in the sky.

Yao Xin also takes a humbling bow and exits the war tent, going to check on his children and other preparations to feed such a large army. Perhaps he would send out a few groups of hunters to bring back extra meat.

Sesshomaru, however, remains staring at the map before him—the memory of that first meeting still lingering on the edge of his consciousness. At that time, he was still unschooled in the art of political maneuvering or the burden of responsibility necessary for becoming a lord, a shogun. He had been overly-arrogant and mistrustful, even after his father's welcome back into the royal house. At every opportunity, Sesshomaru had defied his seemingly ever-patient father out of some need to continue the blood feud that haunted his every waking moment for two hundred years. Grudgingly, over time, he had eventually come to respect his sire as a monarch, but never would the younger inu give over his trust. Not until several centuries later would Sesshomaru, Prince of the West, place his faith in the Inu no Taisho—as well as in human kind.

Closing his eyes to disperse the past, Lord Sesshomaru fights the strange feeling of déjà vu when he last argued with InuYasha. As before, his own past rises up from the ghosts of memory and strikes as inopportune as Naraku, and give him the patience and will he may need to deal with his baby brother.

The scent fast approaching breaks him from staring at the map in front of him, and the demon lord turns to the flap of the tent—calm and emotionless as always.

"SESSHOMARU!"

That tone certainly brings back memories. Automatically, the demon lord's hand twitches closer to his sword on pure, blank instinct—if he didn't have the self rigid self-control honed during centuries of solitude, he would have pulled his sword in preparation for battle. Then again, if he and the owner of that irritated tone hadn't shared something so intimate, so close, then he wouldn't be here in the chase for a lost kit in the first place. He restrains the need to sigh with irritation.

In less than moments, an irate hanyou shoves the flap back and comes stalking across the floor. Trailing behind him are the two guards from the kitsune's tent, hot on his heels as they were directed. Once seeing their lord standing unfazed in the face of the hanyou's angry youkai, the two soldiers bow hastily and back out of the tent to stand at the entrance flaps.

None of this stops the striding hanyou, murderous intent on his face, and he comes perilously inside the demon lord's personal space bubble. He stops pointedly, crosses his arms over his chest, and his bare feet strain to raise him on his toes to put them as close as nose-to-nose as possible. Inflamed golden eyes meet the same gaze, more controlled and calm. To accommodate the hanyou, Sesshomaru tilts his chin down to give InuYasha the full benefit of his stare.

"What in the name of Buddha's left nut is up with tweedle dumb and tweedle fuck-head? I ain't some goddammed puppy that needs a keeper or some shit."
"As usual your choice of language is entertaining yet unnecessary."

"Shit, damn, piss, assface, cock-sucker, motherfucker, kissass, pissant, bitch-lickin', shit-for-brains, left nut. There, now it's outta my system."

"Charming." Sounding as bored as possible, the demon lord arches a brow.

"Ain't it just? That's why the chicks are all over me. Anyhow, what's up with the guard detail?"

Giving him a patient look, Sesshomaru merely sniffs, "we are obviously surrounded by an army of demons—soldiers, lords, and generals. Many are powerful ones that would not mind having the Prince of the West as his mate, beta or alpha. The two guards are loyal and strong of will enough to help you fight off advances from other demons. Unless, that is, you prefer to face another such as the dragon from the cavern?"

InuYasha eases back down on the flat of his feet, hackles slowly easing down.

"Granted, creating a wave of youkai without the use of Tetsuaiga to concentrate your power is quite an impressive feat; however, demons with the need to mate will not stay still long enough for you to utilize such an attack, or that of the Wind Scar. Close quarters combat is what will keep you safe."

Well, damn. I didn't even realize that's what I did at the time.

"My youkai is changing and crap, yeah, I get that, but there ain't been any spikes, so I think the worst is over." (Hard dick in the cave, nonwithstanding).

It is then—miraculously, that the demon lord's cold, calm expression falls completely away. He even draws back an inth in surprise. Surely he cannot be that incredibly ignorant of demon ways. Even in exile, this Sesshomaru witnessed many demons in the throes of maturity Heat...

The surprise on his older brother's face makes the hanyou have some immediate doubts.

His irritation is back and wells up deep from the recesses of his belly; hadn't he told the hanyou about this more than once? Hadn't he explained about the potion? Hadn't he already forbade, forbade his younger sibling from running off so another demon doesn't violate him? Hadn't he already suffered a difficult blow to the pride for this little mongrel's sake? Nothing, not even meditation is going to help right now.

"How in the Seven Hells have you lived this long?"

InuYasha cringes back even though Sesshomaru hasn't really raised his voice in the slightest but hisses the curse between clenched teeth. It's enough the icy asshole actually lowers himself to use a world like Hell. Part of the hanyou (that isn't leaning back) is slightly impressed.

"Is it sheer luck or rampant stupidity? Do the Gods refuse to kill off the most simple of fools?" Sesshomaru advances small steps at a time, "have you survived simply due to some quirk of the fates designing you to be this Sesshomaru's downfall? Foolish little brother!"

"Hey now—"

"Not only have you dishonored me in the eyes of my troops and an insolent, flea-ridden cur, when only your welfare and honor my goal, but now you dare accuse me of deceit! As if this lord would lie about something so dire as your miserable life." Nose to nose, toe to toe, the demon lord's anger radiates higher as each word falls. "You dishonor me!"
"Like hell! "Don't be getting all high and mighty on me, Sesshomaru. Yer the one that said ya didn't know about this Heat crap because I'm a hanyou. We don't know nothing for sure!"

Taking a deep breath, and that spicy tint invading his sense, the lord merely curls his upper lip to bare a fang and his youkai rises to the fore. "Then we shall have to test this theory, won't we?"

Like a scalding wave, the power slams headfirst into the young hanyou with the force of a fist without knocking him clear on his ass. His jaw clenches with the pressure and tingling that marches all over his body like insects pressing in on him. The hanyou takes a step back before he really thinks about it, but the feel to Sesshomaru's youkai is so very different from before. It makes every muscle in the youngster's body tighten in anticipation of a bloody, down-and-out fight.

His blood screams for his body to run, fast and far. This feel was and was not Sesshomaru. This twist to his elder brother's power reminds him of the days when they hated one another, when all the asshole wanted to do was end his life. The anger, the domination, the coercion to kneel in submission is there in that press of power. You are nothing. A mongrel bastard from your weakling of a mother.

Fangs glint in the light.

Outside, the waves of youkai permeate the forest and drive even the strongest of demons to their knees. The urge to submit to such an incredibly powerful alpha aura is more than compulsion or instinct; the pure force of that power acts like a hand pressing upon the army—soldiers, general, and prisoners alike. Badzar and Sarangerel cringe in the very backlash even thought hey are far from the main tent, staring at one another in abrupt realization of what their people have faced in battle. Close to the group of prisoners, Yao Xin and several wolves stare wide-eyed in the direction of the alpha aura while their men fall to their knees in supplication. Only Kouga and Xin stay standing against the oppressive force, but the effort is obvious in the strain of their bodies and the fine sheen of perspiration.

"What the fuck is mutt face trying to do?" Kouga muses aloud.

"My lords are seemingly in a battle of wills," Xin guesses accurately, "Lord InuYasha is strong, but his elder sibling is much more stubborn than even his father."

After some hesitation, the wolf prince asks, "...he gonna—hurt the mutt? I mean, they hate each other, right?"

"Lord Kouga," Yao Xin spares the prince a patient look, "you are also among the upper echelons of royalty. Do you truly not know of how the hierarchy trains their sons?"

For a few moments, the prince doesn't get what the advisor is hinting in that mild tone of voice. His gaze is drawn unerringly toward the waves of youkai and that sickeningly sweet smell starting to permeate through the woods...his own body begins responding to the pheromones and his instincts come alive. The strength of that smell goes in through his lungs and into each cell of his body, causing goosebumps to break out all over. A powerful demon in need of a mate...

Training their sons...training their heirs...

Intellect kicks in past the arousing scent, and Kouga forces himself to calm down off his hackles and turn toward the advisor with wide, blue eyes. The next bit comes out in a hushed whisper, so soft Yao Xin has to strain to hear. "The...the Trial? Seriously? They put mutt face through the Trial? That's why he's been out of the West his whole life?" The wolf sucks in a breath as a lot of things he's seen finally make some sort of crazy sense. "I thought that shit was just for the oldest.
FUCK, MY BROTHER HAD TO..." SHE TRAILS OFF WITH A SHAKE OF HIS HEAD.

YAO XIN MERELY SHRUGS, "THE COUNCIL IS PECULIAR IN THEIR DESIGNS."

"HOLY SHIT. I MEAN, HE FUCKING KILLED NARAKU AND GOT RID OF THAT DAMN JEWEL. WASN'T THAT SHIT ENOUGH?"

"APPELLANTLY NOT, MILORD." MILDLY, XIN GIVES THE YOUNGER WOLF THE FULL WEIGHT OF HIS GAZE.

"WELL, DAMN... SO SESSHOMARU DOESN'T REALLY HATE THAT MUTT AFTER ALL?"

WITHOUT GOING INTO MORE DETAILS, YAO LOOKS UP TO THE SKY. "I BELIEVE THE WORST OF WINTER IS OVER, MILORD. PERHAPS SPRING WILL BE ON ITS WAY SOON."

BACK INSIDE THE MAIN TENT, THE HANYOU REFUSES TO LET HIS KNOCKING KNEES FALTER OR GIVE OUT ON HIM: HIS HEART IS PICKING UP SPEED IN TIME WITH THE PULSING WAVES OF POWER, HIS SKIN ITCHES AND TINGLES ALL OVER, EVEN HIS MUSCLES TWITCH AND BEGIN TO WEAKEN WITH THE NEED TO TAKE OR BE TAKEN. IF HE ALLOWS HIMSELF TO BE LOST, TO GIVE IN TO THE WALL OF STRENGTH, HE'D BE NOTHING BETTER THAN A BITCH IN HEAT FOR ANY MALE DEMON. IF HE FIGHTS THE URGE TO SUBMIT, IF HE CAN FIND THE INNER WILL TO DOMINATE, HIS PRIDE MIGHT STAY INTACT. IF HE RUNS NOW, THE CHASE WILL START AND HIS DOWNFALL WILL BE IMMINENT.

BUT, THIS IS THE HANYOU, INUYASHA. SLAYER OF NARAKU. WIELDER OF TETSUAGA. OUTCAST ASS-KICKER EXTRAORDINAIRE. SESSHOMARU CAN SHOVE ALL THE YOKAI HE'S GOT DOWN THE HANYOU'S THROAT, AND HE STILL, STILL WON'T GIVE IN ENOUGH TO KNEEL IN SUBMISSION. OH HELL F*CKING NO. IT'LL BE A COLD DAY IN HELL WHEN THIS HALF-BREED KNEELS. GRINDING HIS FANGS TOGETHER, HE LOCKS HIS LEGS AND LETS OUT A ROATY GROWL OF WARNING. HALF LOST IN HIS OWN DEMONIC NEEDS, SESSHOMARU GROWS LOW IN HIS CHEST IN REPLY. THE ARMY OUTSIDE IS FORGOTTEN, HIS PAST TRANSGRESSION, HIS FAILURES AND TRIUMPHS, HIS DESIRE TO MAKE HIS YOUNGER BROTHER RETURN TO THE FAMILY IN SAFETY AND HONOR...ALL OF IT FORGOTTEN ONCE THE WAVES OF YOKAI CREATE A CHAIN REACTION. THE HANYOU'S HEAT SCENT GETS HEAVIER AND MORE PUNGENT, THICKER AMONG THE POWER TO MIX IN A HEADY ENVIRONMENT. THE TENSION BETWEEN THEM THICKENS AS WELL, CAUSING BOTH TO RISE TO THEIR HACKLES.

ONE WRONG MOVE WILL RELEASE THEIR ANIMALISTIC NATURES WITH RAW, WILD INSTINCT. BLOOD WOULD FLY OR CLOTHES WOULD BE TORN. TRUST WOULD BE LOST. WITHOUT BEING FULLY AWARE OF IT, INUYASHA'S ANIMAL SIDE KNOWS THIS IS UNLIKE THE LAST TIME. THERE WOULD BE NO EASY OR GENTLENESS TO THE NEXT BOUT OF MATING...

STILL, HE IS WHO HE IS.

"WHAT THE F*CK ARE YOU TRYING TO PROVE?" INUYASHA STOPS HIMSELF FROM BACKING DOWN AND SHOVELS HIS SHAKING MUSCLES FORWARD TO PUT HIS CHEST RIGHT AGAINST SESSHOMARU'S VIBRATING ONE. "IS THIS HOW YOU TRY TO GET ME TO TRUST YOU?"

RED CLASHES WITH GOLD IN SESSHOMARU'S EYES, "I AM PROVING A POINT, INUYASHA." THE HARSH TONE, SO UNLIKE THE NORMAL, COLD, UNRUFFLED CALM, MAKES HIM FLINCH SLIGHTLY. WELL, DAMN, SEEMS LIKE SESSHOMARU HAS HIS BREAKING POINT TOO...

"I AM POWERFUL," THIS STATEMENT PUNCTUATED WITH AN ABRUPT, SHARP WAVE. "OUR SIRE WAS POWERFUL," ANOTHER SHARP SLAP OF YOKAI MAKES THE HANYOU JERK. "AND YOU ARE POWERFUL." A FINAL WAVE FINALLY TAKES HIS KNEES OUT FROM UNDER HIM. "YOU HAVE NOT EVEN BEGUN TO REALIZE..." TRAILS OFF IN A SOFT WOOF AND SOMETHING IN INUYASHA'S CHEST RISES TO ANSWER, A NOISE COILING FROM THE CENTER OF HIS CHEST TO ERUPT FROM HIS THROAT. THE BARK IS A NOISE HE CAN NEVER REMEMBER MAKING AND IS THE BEGINNING FOR HIM. HIS BODY KNOWS MORE THAN HIS MIND THE CHANGES NEED TO START AND START SOON. SOMETHING, SOME CRAZY FEELING CREEPS ITS WAY UP HIS SPINE AND SPREAD THROUGH HIS LIMBS IN BURNING/FREEZING
bolts to every nerve ending. His eyes go wide, so wide the whites take up the majority of his face.

And then, Sesshomaru has moved too fast again, looming over the younger, reaching down to haul him up with one hand. "But you cannot believe in me or what I try to tell you—even when I do so without so many words but my actions. As always, you must learn the hard way."

In a breath, the two condense in a ball of light and speed out of the tent.

Wide-eyed, the two soldiers stay kneeling and watch as the ball of concentrated youkai speed off into the afternoon sky. Slack-jawed, the two look at one another and in one smooth move, leap up to tell advisor Xin that the lords are... gone.

VII

In a condensed state, clawing and biting should not be a possibility. Really. How can you bite someone if you can't feel your damned jaw? But still, the stench of blood emanates from the small ball streaking across the countryside—a tingy, coppery scent full of the heady weight of power. The mingling scent from two inus isn't enough to draw predators or desperate scavengers—not even starving to death is enough to make anyone that stupid.

A good shot to a recently-grown-back-arm tests the limits of a certain demon lord's patience. The ball re-shapes in mid-air, catching the younger one by surprise as gravity kicks in, and the two inus crash into the ground, tearing huge chunks of earth spewing in all directions to show for the skidding halt. In mid-ass-slam, InuYasha growls and shoves his brother on bottom to take the brunt of the impact.

Animals in the area scatter at the whips of youkai and commotion the two are causing as they pick themselves up and stare for less than a blink before both forms move in barely-there shadows. The first strike at one another causes a blacklash of power that spreads for miles and throws the combatant back into the foliage. It's only temporary as InuYasha rebounds off a broken tree and Sesshomaru's heels dig in to slow himself before he slingshots back to meet the on-coming claws already pungent with the scent of his blood from the earlier cheap-shot. Miffed at being bitten (such a degrading strike, a low-blow even for InuYasha!), there is no delicate treatment or understanding of his hanyou sibling at this time. All his best intentions, all his determination to bring InuYasha home, and all his vows to make his brother feel welcome within the fold are forgotten in the blink of the heat of battle. Specifically claws only since InuYasha pointedly ignores the Tetsuaiga to work out whatever insanity is going on in his mysterious little mind with fists and solid blows. For Sesshomaru, it has been quite some time since he's had the pleasure of claws and fists rather than steel and massively destructive youkai explosions.

In this vein, the two go at one another hand-to-hand in a blur of furious blows. No swords, no poison whips, no huge doggie forms, only claws and fangs. Any pretense of control is slipping away by the moment, by the strike, by the whirl of copper surrounding them, and the animal instincts in both rise to the fore. Biting, nipping, clawing, swiping, the mating dance is an intense display of raw power, speed, grace, and skill. Blood flies from superficial wounds, and clothing tears as the dance goes on and on.

Strike after strike, move by move, the two tear their way through the country side. For InuYasha, this catharsis is long overdue. A lifetime of scorn and disdain, of hate and pain at his brother's hands cannot simply be forgotten—no matter how honorable Sesshomaru's purpose might have originally been. He needs this fight. He needs to sink his claws into flesh, and his fangs to draw blood. He needs to score a few hits for all those "half-breed mongrel" remarks, and that fucking cowardly-ass eye bullshit to get to the old man's grave. Yeah, sure, he fucking gets it: the asshole did all that shit for him. Yeah, so he owed the bastard. Fine. Sure. What-the-fuck-ever. It's true that
Sesshomaru had tried to be a good brother since the trial ended and be all cool about trying to make him feel at home. Whooptie-fuckin'-shit. All that effort didn't change the last two hundred years, and some part of him, some deeply hidden anger, still stews. Mixed with his instincts to mate, with the maturation, with the half-potion in his system, and the press of the alpha aura, all create a crazed emotional mess. His reaction—to fight tooth and claw to every drop of blood and each ounce of flesh.

The earth bares the scars of his fight, his denial, his anger. Sesshomaru's pretty face has four claw marks from temple to chin, from left shoulder to elbow, and thigh to knee; oddly enough, those are the most hits InuYasha has scored at one time, and his older brother doesn't even seem a little pissed about them or the blood staining his haori. Well, that's just fine too. InuYasha has a whole lot more ass whuppin' to dole out, and he's sure he'll eventually strike a nerve. Not that he's totally unscathed or anything. Sesshomaru's older, faster, stronger, and a full demon to boot. He's scored some good, painfully fan-fuckin-tastic hits in his own right. The flesh of InuYasha's side is scored by claws, and a good sized hunk is taken out of thigh and opposing calf in Sesshomaru's attempt to slow him down. Stupid asshole doesn't even realize the pain, the agony, the wounds and sores InuYasha has had while fighting for his life, his very existence. All the physical pain just becomes a dull roar in the background of his mind—to strike, to plan, to dodge, all these are at the forefront of his attention.

And the sun takes the last vestiges of light, her kin, the moon, takes over to spotlight the volley of blows through the dense trees, out into a span of grass and finally to another shoreline.

It's been hours since the first blows were thrown.

Growling, InuYasha reeks of blood, anger, and pheromones. If he isn't diverted from this path soon—the berserker rage will take over. Of course, the demon lord is aware of this very real possibility. With so many unknown factors determining the younger's volatile blood, a small push could be the line between feeding into the primal lust or fighting the bloodlust. At first, the blows were all thinking, reasoning hanyou, but the last hour, as the sun went down, the attacks are more bestial and brutal, less strategic and more constant—heedless of his own injuries. Once the hanyou's body would begin to give out, his strength waning dangerously, he would be even more dangerous—more unpredictable.

Sesshomaru ducks in a blink, barely missing claws to his chest and shoulder, but the hanyou sails over his head with missed opportunity—apparently suprised at the move. He yelps hoarsely in guttural noises and lands with a harsh thug into a gathering of bamboo. The wind is knocked out of him, and the anger-driven hanyou can only focus on struggling to get his feet under him as the gentle breeze brings Sesshomaru's coppery scent closer.

A moment of nostalgia hits him in his half-aware state: the bamboo field, Souryuuha... I should have died there. But he kept humiliating me, keeping me alive.

Sesshomaru's eyes narrow as he remembers the same moment when time seemed to freeze...their eyes meet in that shared memory.

Hands twitch, both toward the hilt of a sword at the waist—the want to pull the weapon almost too strong to overcome. Across the stalks of broken bamboo, hands hovering over the hilt, gold eyes read gold, waiting for the next move. The striped wrist tightens and lowers slowly away from Bakusaiga, the movement obvious. He stands in his position rather than make the next attack. He merely waits for the next move, the next breath, the next muscle to move. Across the yards separating them, the hanyou just stares; he does not attack again.

For the first time in hours, some of his consciousness seems to return. InuYasha stands with back
straight, arms hanging loosely at his sides (away from the Tetsuaiga) as blood drips in a slow staccato from claws and body. Surprisingly, he hadn't tried the Blades of Blood or Iron Reaver Soul Stealer—attacks he favored during hand-to-hand combat. Hot-headed and impetuous as the younger one always was, this attack lacks something very important—something wholly InuYasha. Abruptly, with their scents swirling around them in this field, the demon lord starts as he realizes what is missing. Heart. That is what he is missing now. In all the times I have come across him battling, he has thrown every ounce of strength, every bit of courage and skill into whatever opponent has faced him. His normal passion is not present.

But, the half-animal, guttural tone from the all too-human looking throat interrupts his thoughts.

"I hate you."

Unruffled, Sesshomaru pauses before his eyes lose a hint of that coldness. "I am aware."

"Y-you could have fought for me more—if you really gave two shits."

"I did everything in my power—"

"I always wanted you. Just you to be my brother. Do you know how fucked up that is? How stupid that makes me? How pathetic? Not even a brain-damaged mongrel will go looking for a kick in the gut."

"...I did, once. With our father." No elaboration. Nothing more than that simple admission.

A harsh bark, a laugh and half growl holds no humor. The shadowy figure again, the wavy ghost that saved his mother and left the Tetsuaiga—that Sesshomaru fucking worshipped, his excuse for beating the hanyou into the ground. And still, he'd always hoped for better every time that scent of lightening and power—electric sizzle—carried to him on the wind. The fleeting hope that this time, this time, might be different somehow: maybe without the obvious disdain and insults, without steel or claws, without bloodshed or humiliation... Each meeting, before and during the gods' damned Jewel debacle, hacked away at him in slow, minute increments. That whatever instinct Sesshomaru went on about, the one that made inus need and identified with family just got hacked all away.

This admission spills out of him from out of fuckin nowhere, "I'm—broken up," even though it's not exactly what he means. "I'm trying and shit, but—"

"I know." The elder interrupts, countering in a tone softer than his bloodied, battle-disheveled appearance portrays. "I know this feeling you have now, brother mine. This hate and hope, despair and love. Uncertainty combined with expectation. You desire to believe in me as your instincts bid, but your mind cannot allow it to be reality—even to save your own."

And is why you had to be tied the first time, he thinks inanely to himself—attempting to keep his neutrality in the midst of such sweet, alluring scent emanating from the only being that held any sway over Sesshomaru in the last two centuries...only his mother and their father had before him. Combined with his bestial instincts on edge from battle and bloodshed...it will happen. It must happen before both of them snap and do something of which their newly found sibling bond might not survive.

Yet finally, the feral tinge bleeds out of InuYasha's scent in increments.

"I wanna fuckin' bleed you for a few hundred years," this hoarse snarled out without some of his previous fervor, "N' then again, I just wanna—y'can't just expect—fuckin'damn." The words fail.
"It is your demon nature," similarly, the gruff edges to his brother's tone draws a raised brow. "And we have come to a draw in this dance, InuYasha. It is time."

"There's still too much other shit-!"

"We have gone through this before. Trust will take time and of that we have precious little. This must happen, now." The last word is lost in a span of empty air since Sesshomaru is well-aware of the younger inu's rather skittish behavior once intimacy is involved. Like a leopard waiting patiently for prey to lull into secure inattentiveness, his tightly coiled muscles were just waiting for the moment when he could spring.

He is on the hanyou too fast for the mind to even comprehend movement.

The two do down quickly in a tumble of limbs, crimson, and silver. The hanyou grunts as the weight of his brother, armor, tail, and all knock him back into broken bamboo. His hands are momentarily entangled in sleeves and give the demon lord the open moment he needs. Before more banter starts spewing, Sesshomaru dives in and silences this strange, emotional side of normally fiery sibling that he is finally coming to understand.

The body beneath him squirms in an attempt of escape, the jaw clenched against the demon lord's mouth. Lips smash without any of the previous heat or desire. It would not be an easy fight, for the hanyou is and always has been a fast learner and adaptive to any surroundings.

Sesshomaru, however, has age and experience on his side. Another flare of his youkai makes the hanyou gasp just long enough for a smooth, wiggling appendage to slither inside his mouth and wrap around his tongue. As gross as it should have been, as pissed off and confused as he is with the way life is just getting fucked up, the combination of power and sensation feels way too good to ignore. Well, it feels better than it should, and a tinkling of that previous lust uncoils from somewhere in his lower belly. Even with all that metal, bone, and kimono keeping their bodies separate, the hanyou's mind's eye knows the sights and scents below the surface. Unbidden images flash before his eyes as his senses fill with the sizzle of Sesshomaru's musk, the taste rolling over his tongue and down his throat when he convulsively swallows.

Here he is again being wrapped up in his brother, even with all their clothes on—his body starts to respond, and damned if he can just blame it on the Heat still hiding the surface of his pride. It's not the burn or scorch of maturation...it's the memory of those hands on him, that mouth's wet, velvety paths over his body in places no one had ever dared touch a hanyou. The demon lord had lowered himself to touch and rub against his tainted half-sibling.

The mouth moves on top of his own the tongue sweeps, tangles with his in an unwilling dance he can't escape. His mind fogs out as the beginnings of his Heat responds to the this simple stimulation; even with clothes still covering him, his skin tingles with anticipation and becomes more sensitive to the stimulation of his fire rat rubbing against him as he moves. Noises of denial eek out of his throat and into the mouth above him but lust has begun wrapping around his brain and senses until all he can smell and hear is Sesshomaru.

Rising up abruptly, the armor is gone in the blink of an eye and the pounding youkai presses in on him again without the bone and metal as a dampener. Golden eyes snap open when the mouth leaves his own, and InuYasha stares up at his brother with wide, innocent eyes, watching the demon lord's striped wrists move to untie his obi and open his kimono with measured movements. The wildness is there, under the calm surface, but Sesshomaru's eyes are different than the first time. The gentle attentiveness might still be lurking, but there is something very different about his brother's intense gaze that makes the hair on InuYasha's neck stand on end. He should move, now. He should be trying to get up and lash out, to start the fight all over again. He should remember all
those years of pain and abandonment. He should want to die than give into the guy that left him to live or die alone. He should rear up right now and shove his claws right through the bastard's gut until it comes out the other side.

He shouldn't, under no fucking circumstances, want the icy fuck-tard to go on and give him more—more touching, more tasting, more tight pressure...

However, even though InuYasha is famed for fighting until the last call, for his insurmountable will and stamina, for his value of life and lack of care of his own, for his pride and honor...his mind cannot will his body to strike out. As much as his pride rails against him, as much as his mind refuses to connect with his lusts, the truth is that he's been waiting for this...wanting this again. Every muscle in his body tenses as Sesshomaru's shoulder, arms, and abdomen are bare in the moonlight—the glow reflecting off his skin like the gleam off a precious gem. The carved perfection that is his brother is truly something to behold. His mouth waters. His own member swells under the hakama at what he knows will come next. Their last encounter surfaces, and to see his brother smile, to hear the small noises, to know he causes and will be given such pleasure of the flesh...

Unavoidably, the trigger sets off a massive pulse, and InuYasha's body unconsciously arches hard from between Sesshomaru's legs, his back bowing. In surprise, the hanyou's mouth opens in an O just as the full force of his expanding power peaks and sends a pulse through him and outward. The Heat rears up and surrounds him, boiling him inside his skin. It's all so quick, a small cry of shock is wrung from his throat, eyes rolling in the back of his head at the abrupt pain lancing through his insides. With every beat of his heart, the pulses of his maturing youkai resound.

The animal in Sesshomaru responds immediately with a low growling, and his claws render the hanyou's covering to strips. The logical part of the demon lord that is still functioning knows the clothing has to come off to try cooling InuYasha at the height of the spikes, but the animal is only concerned with baring its fare to the skin. With such an enchanting creature under him, the inu wants to roll around in that scent, to lave the sweet skin with his tongue, to make the creature smell even more tasty with the hint of arousal permeating the air...

Shredding his clothes make the half-aware hanyou snap back into reality, to swim up through the layers of pain to take in his surroundings. His body is on fire, but his muscles twitch with anticipation and strength. The weakness in his knees is nothing compared to the surges of power expanding inside him, barely contained in a sac of skin and tissue. At that moment, the fire rat in shreds and Sesshomaru's eyes flickering from red to gold, InuYasha is actually sure, almost positive, he could take his elder brother. The awakening animal in him knows the ass-kicking would be fucking glorious. Another rolling growl echoes from his brother's throat, a warning as though he is reading the hanyou's mind and body language.

Without bothering to retort, InuYasha bares his teeth in aggression and snaps his upper body, claws extended, as his powers pulse again.

Sesshomaru only catches a glimpse of the pale light, his hackles on the rise, before the searing pain of spiritual power touches him in a shocking reaction. He gives a sharp snarl before springing out of the blast range, luckily only taking a partial shot; however, it is a critical one. The scent of his stinging, burning flesh irritates his sensitive nose and makes the animal flinch with wariness. This would be more complex than before. Glaring through the gentle illumination surrounding his brother's body, Sesshomaru is momentarily awed by the sight. No half-demon he has ever heard of could utilize or maintain spiritual energy; as a matter of fact, the spiritual power should be at odds with his demon blood and partially purify him. How he maintains the balance is astounding and impossible.
Could this be part of his maturation? The ability to maintain a balance between demonic and sacred without killing himself in the process...

A flash of Lady Izayoi's face makes the demon lord's eyes narrow in regret and enlightenment. Of course, other than her human form on his night of weakness, InuYasha would have to inherit something else. However, the Heat would still have to be tamed to keep the hanyou alive, regardless of how this new power might affect his youkai.

InuYasha stares for a blink, remembering the moment when he was trapped in that cavern—not able to use his claws or Tetsuaiga to get him free of the two fuckers yanking at him from both ends. Is this it? The power I've used before?

The glow fades into gentle nothingness, but in its place comes the onslaught of his Heat. A great wave of scorching power rolls from his toes up his spine in searing agony. This time, the sound erupts from his throat in a mass of pain. That pain reaches a place in the demon lord that brings him further out of the beast's embrace and into his right mind.

His narrow as his brother's body contorts, tenses, strains at the blast of power rising and falling like a tidal wave. The wide golden eyes are going shocky with the pain of it, and perhaps the stubborn youth will finally give the demon lord a little credit.

As I said, this Heat may kill you, foolish hanyou!

Sesshomaru rises, bare-chested and graceful to make his way back to InuYasha's side. By then, the young body is convulsing with the intense waves of power, ones so strong that Sesshomaru must plant himself in place to keep from being shoved back at the intensity of it. He brings up both arms to shield his eyes and face from the assault of pure energy shoving against his body. Only the strongest of demons would be able to withstand the waves to mate with InuYasha, and luckily, the dai-youkai is up to the challenge. His own animal roars to take the entreating fare, the pure, raw force is a heady combination—the feel of such power contained in a beautiful, delicate yet strong, vessel makes the inu's mouth water to taste the sizzle of power linger over the delectable skin.

Before he fully realizes, Sesshomaru is moving at the wave's de-crescendo and kneels by the squirming, agonized hanyou.

Now, the influence of the potion is kicking in, and it is already too late for any further fanfare. His head dips to the spot just above the wildly hammering heart, his mouth suctioning over the hard pulse over InuYasha's left pectoral. The pulse is too fast, and the demon lord wraps both arms around his eyes and face from the assault of pure energy shoving against his body. Only the strongest of demons would be able to withstand the waves to mate with InuYasha, and luckily, the dai-youkai is up to the challenge. His own animal roars to take the entreating fare, the pure, raw force is a heady combination—the feel of such power contained in a beautiful, delicate yet strong, vessel makes the inu's mouth water to taste the sizzle of power linger over the delectable skin.

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Wringing cries of another nature, Sesshomaru sucks harder, wraps his tongue around the taunt little nubbing to create an exquisite friction. After the waves calm just slightly, he moves quickly to the other nipple and affords the same attention. The chest heaves, spasms and the hard member pressing against Sesshomaru's lower belly proves he is indeed succeeding. The convulsions calm to just twitches and the heat radiates off his skin rather than pulse with power; the bloodlust is turning to physical.

And yet, this is only the beginning.
His mouth skims over more flesh, laving the base of InuYasha's tanned throat with kisses and licks to taste as much flesh as possible. Just like before, the sweat and sweetness that is all hanyou rolls over his tongue and feeds his own desires for this intimacy. Every inch of throat and shoulder is nibbled, sucked, and licked while their members harden painfully between their bodies at the sweet and painful friction. The arms in Sesshomaru's grip strain with the sensations and power pulse like an invisible force wavering between them.

_Safety._

Shaken from his exploration, Sesshomaru represses a groan. However, out in the open, they are too exposed to danger and attack; nothing would be more irritating than being interrupted at a crucial moment. Pulling himself out of InuYasha's scent and reactions, the demon lord rears up to connect their mouths, sharing the sweetness of intimacy. Once more, the two condense into a ball of light and vanish into the night.

Chapter End Notes

Soooo, yeah. Thank-you for reading and commenting and bookmarking and giving kudos and whatnot.
Weakness

Chapter Summary

A demon's Heat could kill; the Lord of the West will not allow this to happen.
WARNING: Explicit content. Reader discretion is advised.

Chapter Notes

This...started out very differently, even in POV, so I'm not a fan, but well, the hanyou needs to not die.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There cannot be any separation. If he allows momentum to be lost, then the fighting would begin all over again. It is imperative that he keeps InuYasha's mind and body in agreement of a singular purpose: fulfilling desire. Should he allow the overly-emotional hanyou even a moment to stop and consider his actions, then the bloodlust will surely rise again. Not that the demon lord begrudges the hurt feelings and mistrust (not that he cares for it either), for he also felt such burning betrayal against their sire for decades after he was returned to the West, but to allow the temperamental youth's demise after so much effort on his part to make InuYasha accepted in the demonic world is an unacceptable reality. If anything, the demon lord refuses to admit defeat. Thus, he will do what he must to keep them on the unavoidable path Fate has designed; his body will be a willing tool for InuYasha's downfall and salvation.

Even though they are merely a ball of light traveling at fantastic speeds, the demon lord keeps a tight hold. In this form, his mouth still moves, still tastes, still nibbles, still licks, still feels, still presses. The sensations are still so new to the young hanyou that his body must be trained to crave them rather than fight—so the sensations cannot be paused even for a moment or the spell will be broken. Sesshomaru barely separates his lips and the flesh under him for long enough to say the incantation to allow them entrance into his secret hideaway before returning to the sweet curve of collar bone and throat. The press of mere atoms against him indicates the chest is arching into his mouth, the sweet noises (a gasp, a bitten-off whimper) make him strain against his own remaining clothing.

The ground opens to offer sanctuary, and the two enter without returning to full shape, bypassing the stairs to float underground before their bodies re-form in full. Sesshomaru is standing, holding InuYasha pressed against him with an arm under his ass and the hanyou's legs still parted around his hips. The hanyou's groin is pressing against his brother's abdomen as he is held high enough for Sesshomaru to suck the sweet niche made by straining tendons and curves of bone without having to strain. His tongue darts out to moisten the skin, red with previous suction and pressure, certain to bare his mark tomorrow. Nothing permanent, for the demon lord is well aware how out of his mind InuYasha will become with his first Heat ready to knock down all his barriers and modesty; his instincts may howl to claim or be claimed at this, his first stint of maturation. Just like his first taste of true power (without the aid of Tetsuaiga), his body might believe itself to be mated in the permanent sense with this sexual encounter. However, Sesshomaru, honorable as a daiyoukai,
would not take away his brother's choice to mate another for life. His marks will be one *without* attachment to their souls, spirits, or youkai. Regardless of what instinct may dictate, his control has been honed in desperation and despair—he will not allow himself to lose it, especially if InuYasha's future is on the line.

To maintain control (of InuYasha or himself?), one hand still holds the twin wrists captive behind InuYasha's back while the mouth on his skin moves. Both bare-chested, the hanyou's form is trembling minutely against his and soft sighs elicited from the attention to his neck and chest. Ears twitching like mad, the hanyou doesn't fight being held like this or being trapped in an embrace. This complacency is so unlike him, so out of character after the last hours of bloody confrontation. InuYasha has always been the one that fights even more ferociously whenever he feels pushed into a corner. Taking advantage of this docility, Sesshomaru's tongue keeps up the magic touch and flexes his legs to move his hips against his brother's—refusing to let the sweet pleasure be broken.

The heat radiates between them like a tangible object, but Lord Sesshomaru will not give in to his animal desires, yet.

He stalks to the wall, tongue moving up the straining cords of the neck and braces the hanyou's back to free a hand long enough for one fingernail to glow green. He flicks his wrist behind him without looking away from the feast before him, and the whip snaps at the pile of smoldered kindling. The flames ignite while InuYasha's eyes finally open again, ears perked at the sound. His face red from the body heat and first round of foreplay, he blinks away the haze of lust to become aware of their surroundings and how carefully he is caught up against his elder brother. The harsh rock at his back conflicts with the hard muscle pressing against his front.

Sesshomaru straightens to meet his gaze, lust boiling below his calm exterior, and with a small breath, InuYasha is the one that leans in with some trepidation and lays his lips on his brother's. Pride and past pain aside, all he can think of is what his body cries out for, what his body *needs* and has been denied for the majority of his life. It's Sesshomaru, all Sesshomaru that coaxes these feeling coursing through him with such painful pleasure, such exquisite care and consideration. It's still all a confusing mess in his noggin, rolling around with implications of what each move might mean. Hell, he's been trying to anticipate his elder brother's next move for most of his life; each time they met, he always found himself honing in to focus on the next move, the next breath, the next twitch, in order to prepare himself for battle. Even after all that effort, he still can't predict what Sesshomaru's thinking from one moment to the next. Worse, this new elder brother isn't such an incredible fucking ass-hat to make it that much easier for InuYasha to make the next strike. The bastard he wanted to gut less than a few moment ago is the one he needs to keep touching him, tasting him, making him feel this insane amount of warmth, and gods help him...he wants more. Maybe...just maybe, this could be a new beginning for them both. Maybe those assholes that made him an exile knew what they were doing after all...heh, naaaaaw.

Sesshomaru's free hand moves to splay around the curve of neck as his mouth and tongue opens the sweet lips to plunge inside to sweep and taste. Any previous notion of being gentle and careful is thrown to the wind with this kiss, the wet dance of tongues, when InuYasha responds with an almost desperation to have more. He pushes back, arching his chest against Sesshomaru as much as possible while his wrists are still held behind him. The blood remaining from their wicked dance, the wounds still open and healing, casts tinges of pain amidst the pleasure spiking—the copper scent combined with rising lust perfumes the air.

The hanyou's legs tense and pull their lower halves more firmly together—succeeding in nestling Sesshomaru's impressive erection tighter against his own bulge in the cradle of his hips. The demon lord gasps in to the kiss when the hanyou's leg muscles tense and his hips gyrate, causing torturous friction between them. Slowly, the hips and thighs work to rub them rhythmically
together, an instinct InuYasha isn't even aware he has. Well, fuck, he didn't think he'd know what to do the second time around since Sesshomaru did everything last time... but apparently his body (the one that always just has these crazy knee-jerk reactions when his life is in danger) seems to have the basics covered. His cock needs more stimulation. Period. Needs some good feelin' and nothing doing with his hands. Their pinned behind his back. His hips take the lead and find that huge curve just under the silk of Sesshomaru's hakama... he's feeling it too... not just a one-time thing, eh? This hanyou enough to get it up for you big brother? The grind lasts for long moments, gyrations making them both breathless.

With the demon so close, Sesshomaru cannot find it in himself to wonder if InuYasha's sudden capitulation is due to the Heat making him more manageable with physical desire or if his younger brother wants his acceptance to be re-affirmed by this physical closeness.

Is this your Heat screaming for release? Or, do you want me, InuYasha? ...Yet, perhaps you fear I will turn from you once again?

Does the younger believe if he allows Sesshomaru access to his body that he will not be exiled again? Is he, Lord Sesshomaru, walking a fine line in his brother's mind?

Even with his body heartily responding, Sesshomaru cannot allow those thoughts to be proven as a reality. He pulls back from the kiss reluctantly, waiting for InuYasha's eyes to open.

His throat working to swallow, the hanyou does finally look at him again when no other move is made, and his brother is again looking sexily disheveled and undone. His pale skin illuminating in the dancing fire, surrounded by the curtain of mussed silver makes the hanyou catch his breath. For long moments, the two stare at one another with all the past and present anxieties in the real world hanging between them, weighing them down with duty and honor, pain and hope.

Finally, the demon lord's heart cannot take the silence, "I would have given my freedom to save you."

InuYasha's eyes go wide.

"I offered to return to exile to save you from the trial. I petitioned for your return every year since you were forced from my side." He leans in to put them scant inches apart. "I fought for you, more than you can ever know, brother mine." The memories try to re-surface in the demon lord's mind: the moment he told the council he would return to exile to allow InuYasha time with his mother, time to grow a little, time to be a child... their looks of disdain that he would even make such a sacrifice still turns his stomach. And in this past of pain, Sesshomaru may lose himself in the regrets and bitterness as he has wallowed in for most of InuYasha's life, all those carefully hidden emotions churning under the guise of disdain—yet, in the here and now, his brother is in his arms and in desperate need of his aid in order to stay alive. He could go into the whole sordid story, all the grim details, but with the earlier pulses, it would be time he'd need for seduction.

The hanyou stares at him, ears wilting, as he tries to pull his head outta what's doing in his hakama to focus on this moment.

"Bleed me, InuYasha, for that is your right. But know that your absence from my side has caused a more painful wound than your claws could ever inflict." With this, Sesshomaru releases the hanyou's wrists but twines the free arm under the arse to hold him up against bare skin and pulls away from the wall to hold all the weight with his own massive strength. The hand still holding the tender column of throat holds the hanyou's gaze directed, not allowing him to look away from the honesty in the demon lord's golden gaze.
And InuYasha...InuYasha has never been one to take time to focus on the why's and what for's of his life. He's never seen the benefit of lamenting the circumstances of his birth or his loneliness after Mother died. He's never been one to wallow in self-pity or weak enough to lie down and just die because of things he cannot change. He has always dealt with the raw deal life gave him, adapted, and refused to become bitter just because of something stupid like life not being fair. Moreover, he's never thought of himself as overly strong or brave, but simply pragmatic. He does what he does because even if he gets shit-on in his life, the weak should be to be protected. No one took up for him when he was a weak little kid, so why let someone else take an ass-kicking just because they're up against someone stronger? He always wanted that, so why not pass it along? Actually, he's always thought of himself as pretty damn selfish—taking up for the weaklings because somewhere in his heart of hearts, he wanted someone to take up for him when he was weak.

...even if he never realized it before, that's exactly what Sesshomaru was trying to do all this time.

With the light in his brother's eyes changing, Sesshomaru takes advantage of the impact his words have caused and leans back in for another searing kiss; the mouth under his perfectly pliant and sweet. For the hanyou, the burn is like a living thing worming, growing inside him, trying to wiggle its way up through him and into Sesshomaru's mouth. The first time the Heat started kindling, it was torture but a slow one (maybe because he dived headlong into some cold ass water)—now, with Sesshomaru pressed so close and bare skin adding to the heat along with his own, the burning is more intense and acute. The instincts that tried to get him to weaken, the ones he fought with all the pride he has, are taking over.

While that mouth is attacking his like a motherfucker and the words still ringing in his ears, his head automatically tips back in some demon-lingo for submission or some shit. Not like he was a full demon or anything, but, fuck, for the life of him, he couldn't start up the fight again. Not—not after, well, that.

Please, don't be fucking with me, Sesshomaru. Let this be real so I don't haveta shove Tetsuaiga up yer ass later...

With this, he's falling back into the haze, not even noticing that his brother is sinking to a crouch and balancing the hanyou's ass on his thighs to reach between them and work the knot of InuYasha's hakama ties. Rather, the face nuzzling into his exposed throat and collar bone feels good, so damn good. Without so much as a soft pet of his ears in the last five years, one bout of intimacy was not enough to sate the crazy part of him that, like any animal he supposed, needed, craved affection—attention. Craved touch...to touch and be touched. But, is that so wrong? Well, fuck no. Demon siblings can-can have sex and stuff, no big deal. Even siblings that are really good with their tongues and mouths, even the ones with perfect upper bodies and hands that make the other shiver with barely a touch...

The hips jerk again, and the hanyou moans, hands moving up to thread through Sesshomaru's silken tresses and cup the back of his brother's head in both hands. His chest vibrates against Sesshomaru's with a rolling growl of pleasure.

The demon lord's hand finally leaves from between them and suddenly their hakamas merely fall away to bare their twin erections and long lengths of skin. Even the cuffs at their ankles are gone, cloth no longer separating their bodies from perusal. With only a thought, Moko-moko spreads itself out behind Sesshomaru, and still grasping InuYasha's thighs, the demon lord allows gravity to take them both backwards for InuYasha to be on top, straddling his brother's thighs. The hanyou is fully aroused and naked, sweet-smelling and flushed with desire, looking down at his equally bare sibling with the breath locked in his throat. Even in the pitiful light, Sesshomaru's skin glows with
ethereal beauty—too much for the eye to behold at once. The long graceful lines of throat, chest, arms, and abdomen; the sensuous curves and hollows made by his collar bone and musculature; the musk wafting from ever pore; all of it pulls at the hanyou like an awaiting feast to a starving man.

He's already leaning closer before fully realizing he's moved and pauses at the crucial moment...can he really...? But, it wouldn't hurt to just give in to his urges just a little...right? Hell, anyone with a pulse would be tempted.

His mouth watering for a taste and hands itching, the hanyou clenches his fists and just breathes. Pragmatically, he doesn't want to die, and not for some stupid reason like Heat killing him. He'd never live it down (and fucked if all the other demons would laugh at him in the afterlife for being a complete dumbass. That shit wouldn't roll.). It's do or die time since Sesshomaru is making no move to force things along—it is up to the hanyou to make his choice.

Sesshomaru keeps himself from moving, but the effort makes little beads of sweat trickle from him. He sucks in a breath and closes his eyes for a moment—just a moment—and a sweep of hair fall tickles his face and throat. Softer than it appears, the sweet cloud smells of little brother, family, and need. The next sensation is a warm wetness that jars him enough to open his eyes and look down at the top of the head bent over his chest and a delicate pink tongue moving to lave the sweat from his left pectoral. The first stroke is tentative yet electrifying enough that a noise emerges from him without authorization. A gasp, perhaps a moan, both...

The tongue pauses after the trepidations first stroke and a shiver passes through InuYasha still looming over his heart with tense biceps and clenched fists braced over Sesshomaru's shoulders. The smell of arousal magnifies double and the hanyou dives back with mouth ready to taste once again. Lips and tongue move over the demon lord's chest and up with more voracious appetite, and it appears little brother has found his courage and...Nnnngggg. The sharp edge of teeth kiss his throat and is soothed by a tongue, sucking and kissing. The mouth finds a tender spot right in the niche between neck and shoulder that makes the breath woosh out of Sesshomaru's lungs—his carefully planned aloofness breaking under that curious and suddenly insatiable mouth...

As the demon lord before, the hanyou cannot help but be lured in more and more by the taste and texture of skin and muscle, of bone and the rushing of blood through the veins under him. The heady scent of big brother's enjoyment and the lingering salt and coppery flavor is wholly Sesshomaru...and the hanyou simply cannot stop himself. He has never known addiction—that would be a weakness he couldn't allow himself to feel, not when any weakness could be used against him by outside enemies. But there is not help for him once he gets a taste of bare flesh. He follows the path of tendons up the neck, savoring the skin unconsciously rubbing their straining erections together with gyrations he isn't really aware of doing; all that he can think of is how much more there is for him to explore. Moving from throat to the gracefully pointed ears, his teeth gently gnaw the outer edge and his tongue darts in to sweep around the delicate shell. Hands thread through his hair again; Sesshomaru's claws gently scratch his scalp and hold him closer in the same move. Even shorter than his brother, being on top puts them chest to chest, heart to heart. With that, the hanyou's clenched hands move to brace himself on Sesshomaru's shoulders instead.

The touch is somewhat bittersweet, nearly painful. During his own Heats, the lord had no emotional attachments. His only objective was to ease the burning inside his skin. His few partners were solely vessels for biological necessity; none were marked and thus were not incubators for progeny that may have come from such a torrid union (to the shame and dismay of a few)—for inu demons could impregnate a partner after sharing marks of ownership, the true mark of a mated pair. In his convoluted past, he sated the scorching burn with whatever female he found pleasing and gave off the correct pheromones to be the least bit enticing. The moment his Heat finally left
him, each female repulsed him, not by deed or action, but as an affront to his very senses; the odor of sex and arousal, the skin marred with bruises from his handling, a satisfied look at luring the Sesshomaru into her bed all disgusted him. Just as the fawning bitches from royal families reek of greed and arousal at every gathering he's ever attended, the bitches he fucked in necessity only succeeded in quelling momentary needs of the flesh. In truth, if he is honest with himself, he has never experienced unadulterated pleasure in mating...that is, until little brother's hands start moving over his flesh and that mouth latches on to a pink nubbin to suckle.

It is a phenomena he cannot (does not want to) explore—while he had meant to remain calm and in control during their earlier skirmish, all his plans eek away as his own flesh becomes more sensitive to tentative, feathery-touches of roughened fingertips; InuYasha carefully letting his hands trail from shoulders down to the bend of the arm that is more sensitive than the demon lord can ever remember being. Down the inside of his forearms and over to his abdomen draw out more noises and sensations than he can remember ever feeling. It so conflicting, the mouth working confidently and tongue flickering, but the touch of InuYasha's hands so very cautious as if afraid to overstep some invisible boundary. So endearing is this hanyou with his brashness and bravery but his insecurities and care. It seems keeping himself removed and aloof from pleasure is proving to be more difficult than the Lord of the West previously conceived...The attention is tortuous, a sleek little tongue dipping into niches and hollows that have never caused such a spine-tingling reaction yet before. In all his dalliances, bloody and brutal or soft and sensuous, he has never been aroused by a partner.

Something twitches, a shadowy flicker in the slow burning firelight. It catches Sesshomaru's eye as the suckling becomes licking and the mouth moves to his pectoral and finds the other nubbin of pleasure. Flick, flick. Those enticing little triangles with soft fur and pink insides, the sweet taste, and reactions they draw from the hanyou are laying lazily against silvery hair, flickering once and a while when the demon lord moans and catches a breath as if trying to capture every sound. Gently, as if trying not to startle a hare before the pounce, Sesshomaru's hands gingerly touch the small InuYasha's back and follow the curve upward. The touch is electrifying, a completed conduit of youkai.

His curiosity still unsatisfied, Sesshomaru's hands move further up until those clawed fingers find his ears and scratch lightly at the base. Normally, scratching behind the twitching triangles on his head does little for InuYasha's libido—it just makes his belly feel warm when Kagome used to do it. But now, with Sesshomaru raking the very tips of his claws over that crazy spot, a bolt of something makes his spine arch and toes curls. The breath leaves his body in a rush ending with a moan, startling the both of them with the intensity.

Breathing hard, the demon lord gives a "hhn," and scratches again. Abruptly, InuYasha's arms go out, and he flops bonelessly against his brother's chest; at the same time, his erection throbs painfully. The scratching goes on, making his body warm and tense at the same time, his face flame.

"So, little brother has a weak spot after all?" with an arm winding around the hanyou's back, Sesshomaru flips them.

"Oi!" The hanyou now sprawled over moko-moko raises himself up on his elbows, legs lying over the lord's thighs. "Damn ears." His only weakness.

His grousing doesn't stop the demon lord from leaning down to put them face-to-face, his hair cascading around them in a cloud of fine musk and arousal. The expression in his brother's eyes sobers his embarrassed blustering, and he just stops with the false bravado—briefly reminded of his human night and the vow of protection, the same look he's staring into now. Yeah, his brother
had a way with words, sure. But what politician didn't? He could spin all the bullshit he wanted, but the eyes were something that couldn't lie.

So the hanyou falls silent, staring up into the still shockingly expressive eyes of his cold brother, the fire burning his skin where they touch.

"You are my only weakness," is whispered between them.

"Keh," but it is only a soft admonishment, "and yer my strength. Always have been, y' moron. Why do ya think I just kept surviving all this time?"

Sesshomaru blinks silently in his own surprise, but the hanyou isn't deterred, "if it weren't for you, I mighta, mighta, just laid down to die after Mother. I wouldn't have kept movin' forward...So, I guess I owe you or somethin' and I ain't all that good with gratitude—so...all I got to give back is...me." His body arches with implied meaning, cheeks even pinker in embarrassment. "y-you can take me this time." Is the hanyou going to admit he wants to be taken? Hell fuckin' no, but the facts do not change that the idea of Sesshomaru being inside him, moving to bring them both to the breaking point, makes his cock twitch hard against his brother's.

A pause of hesitation, "with my claws...I cannot prepare you, Inu Yasha. It will not be...pleasant in the beginning."

Well no shit, asshole. The hanyou's expression turns flat, "you ran me through with your fucking arm, dumbass. I think I can take a little pain."

"Hn," he leans in even closer, his breath fanning the younger's flushed face, "as strong as you are, this pain is a different matter—"

Between words, the hanyou's eyes go wide as his body (wound for far too long) gives a throb of youkai. The pulse is enough to physically push the demon lord back an inth and tears a cry from the hanyou's throat. This pain drowns out his arousal; his muscles lock in the waves of agony. The full force of Heat hits him like an expanding fist of power and pain. His claws bite into his own palms, more blood scenting the air.

"Fuck," the demon lord dead pans, face serious. The body under his freezes in the abrupt pain. Soon the spasms will start.

Sesshomaru hikes the hanyou's legs higher and positions himself, leaning back over InuYasha's twisted face. No time... in a breath, only his own fluid lubricating him for entry, he penetrates the tight outer ring of his brother's body. At the crucial moment, his fangs sink in to the soft flesh at the base of InuYasha's throat; the hanyou's body jackknifes at the physical pain at both ends of him and his youkai expands inside his skin. It feels like his insides are trying to rip his body open and escape, pushing against his skin with searing pain and power.

Sesshomaru, only a moment to gasp at the warm insides surrounding his throbbing member, releases his fangs with the metallic tinge of hanyou on his tongue, so sweet...He is brought back to the moment when a hand clasps onto his bicep, and he looks down into wide, scared golden eyes. InuYasha's chest is heaving with short pants—but, more to the point, the hand clasping Sesshomaru's arm (ironically the left one that was previously cut off) is lightly glowing with gentle golden power, his tan skin taking on the golden tint.

It is finally happening...

"S-Sesshou..."
Gently, the demon lord's hips move slowly back, and their mouths meet, an electric sizzle with their power clashing and melding. He silences the fear making the slightest catch in his brother's tone and tries to make the beginning as easy as he can for the virgin. Time had again interrupted the demon lord's plans to be gentle and attentive to the inexperienced hanyou; it seemed InuYasha's body is determined to fight Sesshomaru's good intentions. His hips shift in and back out, spreading the channel thrust by thrust, inching deeper and deeper slowly while InuYasha's arm wound around the small of his back and made grunting noises in Sesshomaru's mouth. His aura throbs with the same warmth turning hotter and hotter...

Another wave of youkai makes the hand around his bicep clench and the body spasm with power; the cry muffled by Sesshomaru's mouth and tongue. No pain could be like this—even as InuYasha fought his own youkai before in an attempt to keep from becoming a berserking killer or when he fought Sou'ung's influence filling him up like a cup fills up water. The demon lord understands why the brave fool is fighting his own power rather than accepting it as part of himself—it's the instinctual reaction bred out of fighting strange youkai for the majority of his life in order to survive...but he cannot keep fighting himself, or else.

"Breathe, Sesshomaru..." "Do not fight your nature, my son."

Father... It seems we are more alike than I had ever imagined.

Keeping up his rhythm without a break, the demon lord leans down across the hanyou's chest to a rosy nubbin just begging for his attention and finally wraps his free hand around the softening erection lying nestled in a nest of silvery curls. He works the svelte little body under him in several sweet spots at once—the chest and cock—while moving deeper and deeper inside, determined to get the hanyou out of his own head to respond to the outer stimuli.

The sexual aspect of a demon's first Heat is secondary to the main event that differs vastly from the animal world, for maturation is comprised of more than physical growth (which the hanyou might not ever do) and sexual awakening as he had explained to InuYasha before the battle between Mongolian and Japanese forces; Heat is the awakening of raw power and potential, when the 'true' youkai amasses in full. If their sire and Sesshomaru's own Heat were any indications of how the hanyou would fare, then the backlash would be detrimental to one other than a full-blooded demon. A lesser being might be destroyed by the awakening potential.

As it is, his hips finally find the right spot—InuYasha's body arches and his eyes widen with the abrupt pleasure—longer strokes reseating in a clean line; with each hit against that spot, each pull against a hardening member, the pulse of youkai is pressing against him with more and more force. His own body is fighting its' instinct to give more and more, to achieve the pinnacle of pleasure and spill himself inside his addictive little brother, but he has to make the hanyou reach his height of power first...but the friction, the pressure of that tight warmth...

Under him, InuYasha is in Hell. He feels the demon in his blood climbing and tries to keep it subdued while feeling this intensity. The initial pain, like that fucker said, was a kind of pain he had never known before. Leave to that icy bastard to understate the obvious!

But, the bite of teeth is gone and the slow movement of hips fills him in a way that is so different...and strange. Not like a sword, a hand, claws, or youkai ripping through his body, but filling in a way that almost feels natural...like he's needed this feeling for so long. It's then that his brother's mouth finds his in this fucking weird moment, making his belly tighten uncomfortably amidst the grunts. But still, he wraps his arms around Sesshomaru's back while trying to adjust to the power pulsing inside him and the invasion of the dick up his ass. To say the least, it's uncomfortable as fuck in the beginning, but gets easier as movement and friction take over...
He took it without bitchin' and gods damned if I whine.

But then, something inside him gives and the head of that penetrating cock hits a spot inside his body he never knew existed. An abrupt feeling of utter pleasure washes through him in a wave, taking his mind away from the thrumming power expanding in his skin.

"Ah! G-gods..."

And again, the spot is hit more sharply. "Haaa."

"There is little brother's perfect place," those words whispered against his nipple rub over him like the fur rubbing against his back.

"F-fuck!"

Sesshomaru rises up over him, braces both hands over the hanyou's shoulders, and gives that crazy little smile once again...

II

The cavern is hot beyond what a human would be able to stand; the maddening, relentless pace would most definitely be one's final demise. Sesshomaru, carefully controlled Lord of the West, is crimson-eyed and insane, moving with demonic speed over the younger hanyou under him. The keening youth is at his peak, almost screaming at the tortuous tightening of his body as his spot is hit over and over. Sesshomaru is already bat-shit crazed and not letting up even for a second; the slight pain of penetration is worse with the strength and speed of a full demon, but damn if it don't feel good at the same time. His body doesn't know what to feel, the pain or the pleasure, all the signals are mixed up in his head with the pulsing of his demonic energy trying to escape his flesh. It's all too much, and staring up into his normally composed brother's face is drawing the wildness out of the hanyou. His deadly claws rake into his brother's back with a particularly hard thrust, and the scent of blood, fresh and power, is the final stimulus needed to break his concentration and bring his blood to the fore.

Fear invades for a split second, a moment that InuYasha tries to fend off his release to stay in control of himself; the beast in him would go for Sesshomaru's throat or belly, you are my weakness... He closes his eyes while his body is plundered, biting into his lip hard enough to draw blood.

Without pausing in pumping sweet hanyou ass, Sesshomaru snarls and leans in to put his face a mere breath from InuYasha's, panting in the strain. He hikes the lithe body higher to hit that spot dead on, and the hanyou's golden shoot open at the position change taking away all his thoughts on controlling his beast. Right there, Sesshomaru's face takes up the whole of his vision, the demon lying in wait under the normally icy exterior stares in his eyes so deeply, he may be looking into InuYasha's very soul. Those blue pupils dilate sharply, and a rolling purr is the best speech the demon can muster with the punishing pace,

"Ll-liberate-your-beast."

The small place inside InuYasha, the one that strives to break free of his self-imposed, rigid barriers, surges through the hot, racing blood. Red takes over the whites of his eyes, fangs lengthen, claws sharpen, and the hanyou's power finally, finally burst in the same moment a fiery orgasm slams into him from out of nowhere. InuYasha's body arches sharply, head thrown back, and an animalistic howl erupts from the depth of his chest, spilling from his throat in pleasure tinged in pain. Every nerve ending tingles and burns as his seed explodes over the two of them, the
power like a double-edged blade of ecstasy and agony...

*I'll never survive this!*

In a crash, his aura lashes out sharply with the force of a thousand men charging into battle—slamming into Sesshomaru viciously with intense golden light. The twist of power, demonic and holy, eat at the demon lord's skin and tries to shove him back from his finale; the animal refuses to be tossed away from the delectable creature he's been fucking—not when he was so close, not when this little one smelled so much of family. He would spill himself inside the incredibly powerful hanyou, not matter the wounds he would suffer in the process. His claws sink into the hips of the body beneath him, and he fights the waves of power to shove himself back inside to the hilt before the waves of pleasure peak, and his body arches in a graceful line. His seed fills the keening hanyou to the brink. Time stop and the waves of youkai fade to a gentle pulsing.

In the aftermath, the crimson bleeds out of Sesshomaru's eyes first and he weakly falls on top the panting hanyou with his heart thundering in his ears. The taste of his own pulse on the back of his tongue is the only thing his senses can read—everything else is fuzzy in the aftermath of such pleasure.

Long moments of crushing InuYasha's frantically falling chest finally brings him back to the moment, and Sesshomaru pushes himself up to look down at his little brother. Eyes closed, pulse still racing, the hanyou is tacky with sweat, seed, and blood, breathing but completely out cold. His muscles still weak with the intensity of the hanyou's Heat, Sesshomaru moves off his little brother without further pause and lifts the smaller male with both arms, hefting the boneless body as he stands. His silver waterfall of hair sticks to the claw marks marring his back as he carries the hanyou down into the hot springs cavern. They would need to be clean for the next round. In no way would the hanyou be ready to leave in less that three days. Settling in one of the deeper pools, he arranges InuYasha to lie against his chest and focuses his concentration on the feel emanating from every inch of the younger demon.

He is...so very different from before. The waves of youkai, his aura of power and the hidden potential in his Halfling blood, are that of a changed creature. The full manifestation would remain to be seen; perhaps after they arrived back in the West, rigorous training would enlighten the demon lord to the extents of which InuYasha would now be capable. Indeed, for a hanyou, his resilience was only partially thanks to his indomitable will and heart but more a matter of his exquisite body focusing, channeling the excess youkai in his blood to wounds and crucial strikes. It seems life would become very different for the youth once they finally vacate this sanctuary...

Steam slowly curves and dips around the hanyou's ears and draws the demon lord's eyes down to the twitching triangles. Muscles contort against his chest and the hanyou arches abruptly even as a high-pitched whine spills from his chest even as the jaw clenches against such a sound.

InuYasha's eyes open, warring between golden pupils and crimson-filled; his body responds with physical need.

Hn. It would be a long few days...

Chapter End Notes

The idea of InuYasha hitting the stride of his maturity, like gaining some power and
whatnot, has always been a cool idea for me. So...I have about four more chapters of this done and then the muse die (was killed). Soooo, I will get those chapters uploaded as soon as possible and then, well, hopefully the people that like this can help me out with suggestions. This was my first attempt at fanfic writing, so I’d hate to see it go by the wayside. Again, thanks for sticking with me.
The Western Palace is totally awesome. Like, more awesome than any human could even frickin' believe.

Shippo's neck cranes as he looks up and up and up at the towering rock before them. It's take the army two days' travel to reach the massive structure before them, and in that time, the kit had healed enough to insist walking on his own rather than be carried in a liter like some kind of baby. Sure his arm is still held up by cloth wrapped around his neck, but the healer guy was still impressed he could hoof it on his own. Not that he wouldn't doubt it himself. He'd had worse ass-kickings at the Kitsune training school since the other guys didn't like over-achievers or something.

Kouga, hanging right by the kid's back (and still guilty he hadn't watched out for the little shit), chuckles as he too glances up at the monumental structure painstaking carved out of solid rock. He's sure the Inu no Taisho's great-grandfather built such a palace for security as well as stability, but damned if he didn't have a "holy shit" factor in mind, too. As a cub, Kouga'd actually met the old Inu no Taisho, just once, when his father came to barter for more land for the wolf pack. He'd only been a squirt then, crazy impressed with the huge dog general in all that armor, and seeing the palace after living in a complex network of caverns all his life had been jaw dropping. Not a hundred years later...and the Taisho died. Sesshomaru stepped up to the title, and the word was that the newly-born pup had been exiled. Imagine his surprise two hundred years later when he happened to be wandering around a forest and came upon a dog nailed to a tree...still with the rankled scent of exile. He really hadn't put two and two together until the Naraku shit when he actually saw Sesshomaru fighting beside the hanyou.

Kouga pulls himself out of the past and glances at the movement around them; the soldiers are glad to be home and hurrying to get inside after the massive gates open. Other humans and demons from the palace's staff come out to welcome home the battle-weary soldiers and take the spoils of war. The Prince's nose twitches at the mouth-watering smell of lunch wafting from inside, and he glances down at Shippo again with a grin. They are about to get some good eatin' for a while, at least until the Lord and the mutt get back. Not 'cause he's worried about the mangy dog or anything, but it's just good manners to wait on the new lord and congratulate him on a war well-fought before leaving.

A loud ruckus, though, draws the wolf's eye.

In their hurry to get inside, the guys guarding the prisoners resorted to being complete assholes. Not that the Kouga could really begrudge them a little unnecessary roughness or anything, these Mongolians did come with the intent to take over Japan and all, but one of the prisoners was a girl, and when she'd fallen out of exhaustion, one of the guards with Southern army armor brought out a wicked-looking whip to motivate her to stand.

The wolf's jaw clenches at the display, and before he really knew what he was doing, he was already speeding across the plains to catch the shouting demon's wrist before the whip came down on his intended victim.

The soldier spun on him with a curse already half-way outta his mug before he caught sight of who was standing there with pissed-off radiating off him. Immediately, the soldier takes a knee.

"Lord Kouga..."
Nice, he was recognized on sight. Heh. Meanwhile, another prisoner, a male, had thrown himself in front of the intended blow to shield the female from being beaten. Blue eyes dart to the two and return to the kneeling soldier. The others wrangling the prisoners likewise freeze and bow low at the waist, getting right with the program.

"So I'm not pissed at keeping these guys in line or anything," the wolf prince begins with a thumb hitched in their direction, "'cause if the positions were reversed, they'd probably be beatin' the shit outta us and whatever, but we are Japanese, and we're honorable enough to strike when we are struck agains. There ain't no honor in this. These prisoners are worn out and hungry, and that ain't a good enough reason to go beatin' 'em down. At least, that's what Lord InuYasha would probably say, right?" Or Kagome...she wouldn't have held a grudge.

At the mention of the new Lord of the West, the soldier's eyes lower in shame. His hand hovers over his sword, like he might just draw it out and shove it in his gut. But, Kouga just holds up a hand, "I know you guys want revenge for our fallen, but these guys are just like you in a way, following orders. So we can give 'em just a bit of dignity, if you know what I'm saying?"

"Hai, Lord Kouga!"

"Good. Then I'm making it your job to make sure these guys are secure and don't got nothing up their sleeves...but maybe you can even see if we can scrounge up something fer 'em to eat, yeah?"

Now with a purpose, the guard's hand falls away from his sword, and he bows low to the ground with an affirmative noise. Leaving him to do so, Kouga steps over to the two prisoners still on the ground, waiting for the soldier to get up and resume the beating. The male's eyes are hard with the things he'd seen in his life but resigned to whatever fate may be waiting for them inside the castle walls. He stares with wary attention to the wolf Prince that stands with arms crossed and straight-back. That stare and those eyes remind him of someone

After the little staring contest, the wolf extends a hand to the Mongol soldier.

II

A nose wrinkles, flares. Ears twitch. Earth...smells just like Goshinboku. Then, there it is. The tangy electric scent like thunderstorms and metal. Sesshomaru. And water, water is somewhere close. Gotta get up or he'll be on me with those poison claws. Hate that shit, takes days to heal...

He tries to open his eyes, to force himself to be alert and ready for the next attack, one is definitely coming if that bastard's scent is so close—right on him! He needs to get up, get Tetsuaiga, get ready! His hand only twitched and won't move to his hip. Why don't I feel the hilt against my side? Why isn't the sheath on my leg?

His attempts are useless; life is just too confusing with that...his body, the unnatural, unpredictable mound of blood, bone, and meat is being a royal pain in the left nut. Nothing feels right, doesn't move immediately at his commands, and apparently hasn't healed or something because he's sore all over—like, sore under his skin. Why the fuck does his body always have to do some crazy shit to make life just that much more complicated? Keh. Skill.

Was there a fight or something that he's not remembering right away? The fuck-?

Some bits return in fuzzy pieces but who knows how much time has passed? He certainly couldn't tell. Memory only comes in snatches—some are just straight up impressions of what was doing according to his nerve endings, and others are smells, sounds, sights; the rest is all the burning agony of pain, the attempt to keep that beast, the wildness trapped away so he doesn't have fucked-
up, blackout, berserker time. It was all so close, close enough that some of the demon spilled over—but how fucking much? Inanely, he had thought at one point that the beast might be a real downer to the whole brother-I'll-save-your-ass mentality. Then again, maybe Sesshomaru already knew all the in's and out's before he signed up for hanyou daycare.

All the pieces still don't make a whole lotta fucking sense yet. Why would that icy bastard want to save him? Why was he so close to losing control? Was his life in danger? Was he still? Is that why his body felt so heavy and fuzzy and buzzy all at the same time? Why is his youkai still burning inside his skin? Usually his shit calmed down after a good brawl, but it feels like ants marching inside his nerve endings, all itchy and weird and powerful at the same time.

Well, just layin' here ain't gonna solve any mysteries.

Finally opening his eyes, the blurry darkness sharpens after a blink or two, and the hanyou shivers. He's lying on his back with something warm and furry wrapped around his naked body. Furry? The thing he throws me around with?

His senses, sharper than before, can pick up flies fucking on the wall and the single drip of water from somewhere down an echoing tunnel. The drip hurts his ears, and his arms can suddenly move fast enough to reflexively cover them.

Something's not right. He feels like he just woke up from being trapped on Kikyo's arrow, effectively nailed to Goshinboku. The second Kagome touched that arrow in his chest, his senses awakened before he did, working over-time; if that wench hadn't smelled so close to Kikyo, he'd probably struck at her long before Mistress Centipede wrapped her coils around them.

He snuffles to clear his nose, body is sore and bare, and memory blurry as hell.

Is he really in some kind of danger here? Well, where the hell is 'here' anyhow?

"You are my only weakness..."

The abused body eeks in protest when he flings himself up, wide-eyed and surprised, ears straining—suddenly wide awake. For some crazy reason, he's holding the white, fluffy thing in tight fists against his chest while scanning the immediate area for Sesshomaru. The fragments come together with a click, and the 'ah-ha' moment crowns. The hanyou allows a moment of indecision since the scent of his brother isn't fresh. The demon lord isn't in the underground sanctuary. His normal brashness drops away like cherry blossoms in the fall. He slumps over himself, fists clenching hard enough to puncture his palms through moko-moko and soil its purity with crimson. He doesn't notice the stain. The chain of events was pretty standard: fighting, running, saving Shippo, fighting again, blah blah. But damn, his brother and he...did it. Like, a bunch of times. It.

He takes a deep, shuddering breath, ears trembling with the effort to just calm the hell down and let it all roll off his back. Really, all things considering, he'd taken just about everything in stride from the moment he'd been picked up on his human night to now (well, except for pansying-out at the Elder's island and pissing off Sesshomaru, which might just become his new favorite hobby: burned his eyebrows... damn, still funny). So, well shit, not even demons are completely unfeeling. Jiji didn't skip out on his education in the early years...just later on, not long before he'd heard of the Shikon Jewel and thought being a full demon might be the way to go.

For the royalty, it wasn't uncommon to have concubines for Heat seasons without having to take a mate (or "to keep those morons from pupping a low-born bitch and fucking up the line of ascension" so he read). But other demons mated their first Heat, and some even kept that mate for life. Or so Jiji said. But he'd never scented, seen, or heard hide nor hair of a mate anywhere near his brother, so he didn't think he'd have to worry about some crazy bitch stalking him or some shit, but...he'd kinda always assumed when it was his time, to y'know, do naked stuff, it would have
been with a female he intended to stay with and watch over. The memories coming back to him of being so passive are not what he expected at all.

Ears twitching, his runs a hand through his hair, looking uncharacteristically solemn, and lifts his knees to rest his forearms.

After the hot springs, the demon him whines in a low tone, a moan in want. Sesshomaru was on him in a blink, their bodies pressed together in the ass-deep pool, and it was happening all over again—less painful this time. And did that bastard tease him with it, whispering dark things in his sensitive ears, making him shiver and strain with the want of completion.

Later, when the power again peaks, the animals come to the fore. Their coupling was more bloody and viscous, harder and faster with snarling moans, teeth and claws. He'd been so hot, so drunk on the new power flowing through his veins like fire; he and the demon became one...sight and smell, taste and touch. The pleasure reached them both, and during his final orgasm, he and the beast joined in mind, body, and heart. Just as Sesshomaru predicted.

Again. The world tumbles and he's on top, filled with every inch; his brother's hands and hips direct him to the rhythm of the ride. He leans back, bracing his hands behind him, and the power builds in his belly just as the pleasure coils tighter. Sesshomaru throws himself up, latching onto the hanyou's ripe nubbin, growling low in his chest. Arching more sharply, he seats himself completely and the power sweeps through them both in a rush...

Energized, the moment of truth came a very short time ago; the demon lord held his sibling upright in his lap, keeping them joined while their mouth met in a tangle of wet tongues and sweet breath.

Time fuzzed out for a while, and he must have slept, deep in unconsciousness. A first in, well, ever.

Still, it was weird to wake up next to his brother each time the lapses ended; even stranger to see the demon lord passed the fuck out inches away from him. Eyes hidden, breathing evenly, face relaxed. It wasn't hard, then, to image Sesshomaru as a young demon in exile, returning to the Western Palace kicking and fighting. As a matter of fact, InuYasha could picture it clearly as if he'd been there watching the show.

But not long and those eyes would open, youkai would flare, and the whole Heat started over again. His body was an enemy he couldn't fight or claw, and Sesshomaru made him give in each time. Sure, the bastard may have been trying to be helpful and shit, but he had no clue how mortifying it was to have to depend on his stuck-up ass for survival. The ole' man pride took a hit over this bullshit, and damned if he wasn't, well, embarrassed now that he was somewhat back in his right mind. His bastard brother had, had done things, like, fucking crazy things to his body. Things that shocked him, made him shudder down to the bone now that he wasn't bat-shit. That mouth and tongue had been all over him, licked him from base of the spine and up, had laved the indentations of his hips, had twirled and tasted the pale span of his thighs to the knee. He'd held the hanyou down so easily while this torture went on, making him helpless to the needs and weaknesses of his own body.

Hand over his eyes, InuYasha gave an annoyed huff. How in the hell was he supposed to hang around Sesshomaru, well, look him in the eye, and not get embarrassed over the stuff they'd done here? Simple. He'd have to man-up and just not think about it!

Sure! What happened in the underground would damn well stay in the underground. Feh. End of it.
Nodding to himself, the hanyou decidedly flings off moko-moko to get away from that scent and stands tall. His robes are close; he pulls on the kimono, hitoe, and hakama, his clothes and the familiar ritual of dressing makes him calm somewhat now that he's covered. Unconsciously, the familiar armor does lend him the feel of being protected even if he doesn't (and never has) fully realized the effect. With the robes, he pulls on the attitude of a fierce fighter, a brash half-breed without a fuck to give unless he gets to kick a little bit of ass. The persona is complete with Tetsuaiga strapped around his lean waist. He stands for long moments, looking down at his hands, chewed up and calloused, opposed to Sesshomaru's lean, graceful fingers...

It's all good.

III

The dark is too hard to beat...

So, yeah... Five damn days. That was alotta fuckin'. In his usual manner, his ears perked when Sesshomaru told him how long they'd been literally underground, and he told his brother the same thing in not so many words. Of course, he had a mouth full of sweet meat, bloody and tender and just godsdammed awesome, at the time and the asshole had just given a brusque nod with a 'Hn.'

Then, he went on summore about how it was normal for a Heat to last about a week and yadda, yadda, yadda. Since the scent and fever were gone, and even though his body felt decidedly different, the weakness in his joints and bleeding youkai were pretty easy to control again. He felt confident enough to think the shit was over and done with; other than his youkai feeling heavier and lighter at the same time (yea, weird but still the best way he had to explain the tingling numbness in his limbs along with the heaviness he suddenly fought while standing upright), he thought maybe it was time for some normalcy. Ya know, he's all back to this 'I-am-an-island' attitude again. Keh. More blabbering about heading back to the Western palace to make sure everything was all right (and he needed to check on Shippo and flea bag) while the meager fire smouldered between them, and the hanyou destroyed his half of the doe. Other half was already eaten, so maybe the guy been just as starved. Finally, as he was cleaning the blood off his claws with relish of a good meal, his brother quit flapping his gums abruptly, and the hanyou glanced over with tongue still wrapped around his finger.

He'd never seen Sesshomaru stare that intently unless they were fighting, but those eyes were glued to what his mouth was doing. Without even trying, the hanyou's face heats, and he looked away fast enough to make a muscle in his neck spasm. Ears laid back, he let his hair and forelocks cover him while busying his hands with burying the bones and carcass. The two said nothing as the demon lord flowed to his feet like water. But, he stood up and oddly didn't have to look so far up at his brother's face.

Both inu's blinked in surprise at the hanyou's mini growth spurt, his forehead now reaching the demon lord's nose and ears at eye level.

Looking down with his detached gazed, the demon lord studied his younger brother for a moment, "it seems you may need to eat more vegetables should you ever wish to reach this Sesshomaru's stature, little brother." And turned on his heels to leave the cavern.

For a moment, he was left speechless to digest those words before it clicked. "Oi! That was another joke, right? Damn, man, yer turning out to be a regular comedian here, ya know?" He gave a leap to follow.

Yeah...all good.
"Ba-san! Baaaaaaaaaaa-saaaaaan! BAAA-SAN!"

The very noise sets the Lady Arikura's teeth on edge. The dainty tea cup in her hand sloshes every so slightly to show her displeasure of the screech coming from the great hall of her floating palace.

She sighs and lowers the cup, waiting to be invaded by her grandchildren, the children of Sesshomaru's older half-brother: the heir to her kingdom and her legacy. Just like Sesshomaru inherited Taisho's empire, Katsuo already oversaw the business of running her lands. Gratefully, she allowed him to take over a bulk of the responsibilities shortly after Sesshomaru was born; with Katsuo ruling and Sesshomaru old enough to begin his exile, it had been time for her to join the ranks of elder demons when her youngest son entered the Great Trial. Unlike she and her younger son, Katsuo is a warm husband and father to his family and his people. He is so drastically different from her while Sesshomaru so similar, yet still Katsuo's sire (a marriage of convenience) had not been tender and warm, either. The elder son was merely a very different animal. Apparently, he learned a completely different lesson during his time within the trial—warmth and emotion, people one cared about enough to protect, all traits of a great ruler. He came from his trial earning the respect of the peasantry and had proven to be a fair and kind ruler to his people.

The end result, of course, is that her several grandchildren are much too warm and inviting for her tastes; however, her bloodline will continue, and in some small way, she does love her progeny.

This abrupt visit from her son and his family (as well as from several of her cousins, nieces, and nephews now taking up space in her home) comes upon the announcement of the hanyou's release from exile. The living shiro-inus are few in her family, and even scarcer on Taisho's side, but those that were able would inevitably travel to meet one of their own. In this way, she is certainly an oddity, lacking the instinct to be close to family. She has and will always be a lone dog.

"Ba-san! Where is baa-baaaaa?!

Sigh.

How is it the royal palace must now be meeting place as well as a conveyance to the West? And that is precisely the direction the castle is leisurely heading. Once Katuso, his mate Hiromu, and their three pups came to the palace (and later told her they believed her to be heading to the Western Palace the whole time—ridiculous), it seemed the rest of the family took it upon themselves to join en masse.

"Ari-baba!" Closer this time, not far down the hall. It is Katsuo's youngest of three pups, the runt of the litter. A female, Emiko.

"Follow your nose, child." She really is disgraceful, calling out to the little one, but resumes sipping her tea and waiting (with masterfully hidden irritation) for the pup to find her.

Padding of feet and the swish of armor, the child is not alone.

"Really, Mother. She is only a pup." Katsuo peeks into her entertaining room, the child cradled on his hip. Disgracefully, the child leaves fingerprints on his chest plate, and he didn't even seem to mind.

Knowing any attention to the matter would be for naught, the lady raises a brow. "She is an inu, my son. Her nose is her strongest weapon."

"Hn." Her oldest is as tall and lean as Sesshomaru, all sinewy strength with the characteristic
golden eyes and white mane. His marking are the likeness to hers and his brother's, making the two
inus seem almost like twins rather than Katsuo four centuries older. Their only differences lie in
the crinkles around Katsuo's eyes and mouth, laugh lines. His face knows how to smile.

He bows respectfully to her, child still in tow, "it seems we will be having quite a family reunion,
mother. Akio and Manami have arrived."

*More?* "It seems you may have a point, Katsuo." She sniffs, "though why your cousins and uncles
could not take their own transportation is beyond me."

To her disdain, he laughs aloud, drawing the eyes of his precious child up to his face. "Mother,
even as ancient and wise as you are, is it really such a stretch to image that our family may *want* to
be in one place together?"

"It is ridiculous to gather everyone here. It *is* a floating palace, after all. What if our cloud begins
to sink?"

Again with his boisterous laughter, "then I'm sure this many demons and sorceresses could figure
out how to get us to the West. Surely you would know what to do, wouldn't you, Lady?"

"It is possible not even I could keep us in the air if the whole of our family came to the door. Why
they are all congregating here is a mystery to your mother."

At that, Katsuo grinned and the twinkle in his eye caught her suspicions immediately. The lady
flows to her feet, not a single wrinkle in her expensive and tasteful kimono.

"Katsuo," a world of warning in her coldly calm tone, "*why* is the whole family coming here?"

"Keh, I haven't the faintest, Mother."

"Katsuo."

At her tone, the younger dog just feigns innocence all the more. "I had nothing to do with the
invitations, Mother, so do not blame me!"

"Invitations?" Her perfect face crinkles as a brow arches up and she stills.

"To my little brother's inauguration as a lord! Surely you would want all the family to bare witness
to our returned pup? He will be taking his rightful place after so many years of exile."

*You little...!* "...Regardless of what you may think, my son, you are not too old for punishment from
your highly annoyed mother."

He gave her a cheeky grin and wave while Emi sucked on her teether, a bone made for her to gnaw
on when her teeth hurt. That brat just brought the child along to yell; he knew of her irritation. He
was just like his sire. Annoying.

"I will see you at dinner, Mother!"

II: *Two days prior*

"We fly."

"We run."

"We fly."
"We run."

"Fly."

"Run."

"Fly."

"Run."

"Fly!"

"Run!"

"Flying will save time and aggravation."

"Running will get us a little exercise after being cooped up for days!"

"The West needs this Sesshomaru in attendance. Things are still unsettled."

"You've got good people to do what needs be done. C'mon and live a little."

"Hn. Your turn of phrase is idiotic, this Sesshomaru is very much alive regardless of whether in flight or not."

While walking on the same path the army took recently, the hanyou pauses long enough to give his brother a raised brow.

"Seriously? That's where you're going? I'm revoking your right to make any jokes, ever."

"Hn. That should have been sufficient to fulfill your strange comedic requirements, except for including random curse words and pointless blustering."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"As you yourself would say, InuYasha, 'I believe you are full of bullshit'."

"Keh. That's too much, asshole. 'Yer full of shit' or a simple, 'bullshit' gets the point across."

Dryly as possible, InuYasha shakes his head. While his moods and actions are pretty well set and predictable, Sesshomaru can jump from one end of the spectrum to the other. This icy sonofabitch shouldn't be a guy trying to make jokes. The perfect opponent, Sesshomaru is one to keep you on your feet and adapting, but at least he was trying to take it easy on the younger inu and not be weird with all the mating stuff. Luckily, he also wasn't sore about that blast of holy helluva light either.

The hanyou takes in deep, cleansing breath, expelling a puff before going back to ignoring the stoic demon lord beside him and reigning in on his newly expanded senses. His nose is twitching like mad with the even more numerous myriad of scents stuffing his brain full; he could damn near map out the whole area without moving from this spot. Sure, for a half-breed, his nose is pretty impressive, helluva lot more sensitive than any human, but full-demons could scent for miles away. For all he knew, Sesshomaru could scent all the way to the sea. His picture from far away used to be sketchy at most: a body of water close, not depth or span. A demon with poison or distinctive auras, not enough specifics to give him the whole picture of what he was smelling. Made it easy for demons to get the drop on him.

Well. Apparently shit got real. Standing two days' travel away from the Western Palace, and he –
the shameful, weak half-breed bastard—can get a whiff of the mangy wolf inside rock. He can get a hint of brimstone from the fires lit in a single chamber...but not just to their north. Naw. He knows a village is lying ten miles to their backs, one he and the pack had visited during their search for the jewel, one that had always been too close to the Western Lands for him to visit before. You know, all that exile business.

To the west of them had several smaller bands of humans and demons, not close enough to be on his ass before he could get Tetsuiga out for some slice and dice time, but something he shouldn't (couldn't have) picked out so clearly a few days ago. Hell, he can count the humans down to the one gross fucker with lice and a bad case of swamp-ass, and he ain't even downwind.

He is receiving everything so clear now, so many more details he could pick out just from nuances of scent, traces of a smell.

_Damn, if Sesshomaru's got more range than this, no wonder he could smell a war brewing._

"InuYasha."

This said so close to his ear, the hanyou flinches to a stop. He hadn't even been paying attention to his brother, and his instincts hadn't warned him the bastard was on him.

"Gah! That's my fricking ear."

"You were not responding to a very simple question. It has been some time since then."

The hanyou blinks, one of those slow blinks of disbelief. That tone is almost...petulant. Is Sesshomaru _sulking_ at being ignored?!

Stoic face, nose upturned. Yeah, yeah he is. InuYasha promptly bites the inside of his cheek and squints his eyes so he doesn't start laughing. Touchy bastard might get offended.

"Whatsat?"

"The inquiry is why you refuse to fly. Your kit is awaiting you as is Xin and others that need guidance in the next phase of attack, all of which demand an expedient return."

"Yeah, yeah. I know there's shit that's got to be seen to. I get that, but I need to stretch my legs out. Y' wanna go on ahead, that's all right." He started on his way again, determined to feel out the range of his senses. "I'm okay now."

The demon lord frowns and follows, striding up to block his younger sibling's path. "Something troubles you. This Sesshomaru would know your thoughts."

InuYasha give him a "what the fuck are you talkin' about" expression, "I dunno where you're going with this. Nothing's wrong, Lord Frosty-Ass. Yer back to this, 'I am an island' crap again."

Sesshomaru sucks in a long-suffering sigh and gives the hanyou a dry look right back, "you are...disturbed in my company once you are back to yourself, InuYasha, and even before the Heat. We have not had trust before intimacy, regrettable yet essential. However, you do not see the lack of options of which we were faced, and now you are ashamed of giving your body to me, and therefore, I am merely attempting to put you at ease by ignoring the fact we have been erotically entwined for the last several days."

Ears twitch upright, and his face turns red so fast it makes him slightly light-headed, "I ain't disturbed."
"Uncomfortable then."

"What?! Horseshit."

The expression on the lord's face is enough.

"Well, damn...maybe a little, but I got every right to be." Here, Sesshomaru opens his mouth to speak, possibly to defend his actions or whatever, but InuYasha doesn't want to hear it all again. "Look," he blatantly interrupts and takes a breath, "you saved me, okay. I know it was do or die and do is all ya' did...yeah, you get what that means. Anyhow...you saved me from my own body trying to kill me. You. My head's all wrapped around it, but...I don't get saved, y' feel me? It's weird. Being a hanyou is never knowing what's comin' next, an' my body changes from human to half-demon to crazed-fuckin'-slaughter-everything demon to kinda-on-the-cool-side demon to what the hell ever next. I adapted to just about everything, but with this," he shrugs a little helplessly, "I dunno yet. I don't do owing someone my life."

This little piece makes Sesshomaru lose some of his harsh angles and expression. He moves quickly, putting them chest-to-chest, and focuses his gaze on the hanyou's. Instead of flinching or of averting the gaze, InuYasha remains solemn even as the demon lord lowers his forehead to rest against his brother's. '...given my freedom to save you. How could anyone be pissed off at a guy like him? Jeeze, I'm not made of stone.

"You are so incredibly simple at times, little brother. One of God's special creatures, surely."

Right. That's how. "Hey!" The hanyou attempts to move back, but a cool hand on the back of his neck holds him still for their faces to be close.

"No one dictates the actions of another. Not even of master and servant. The master may choose the right path, but the servant chooses the master; I chose to give my body to you, and in turn, you chose to give your body to me. Choice is not something you may repay, InuYasha. As I have asserted, several times, saving you has been my goal all along and it is now time to build the trust between us. It is...unsettling...when you are not your normal self." Finally releasing him, Sesshomaru straightens and stands aside for the two to start walking again. InuYasha's give a cheeky grin, folds his hands in his sleeves and starts with his normal strides, fast enough to keep up with his brother's longer legs.

"...It was still weird." Said so quietly, the demon lord barely catches it.

"Explain."

"Explain what?"

"Why it is strange for you. Perhaps discussion may aid in your acceptance."

"Weh—I, uh. Yeah, okay then." Goddamm heat in his face. "I mean, we did that, and it was good an' all, but what does that mean? For us? It's done and over with, right?"

A sculpted brow rose and the demon lord's gaze cuts over. Ah, he is still embarrassed yet. Face red and fingers fiddling with his sleeve. How tedious. What was done cannot be undone, but the possibility of InuYasha just taking off rather than deal with their intimacy is a very real. Certainly, he would come up with some excuse, "I gotta go to the borderlands, bunch fighting breaking out, so I'm gonna go do what I can. I'll—come back at some point." But, the result would be the same, Sesshomaru watching the flash of red and white blur back into the wilds.

"I would not have forced your compliance and taken your virginity had it not been life-threatening,
little brother. You are aware that siblings in the demon world may mate with one another, that it is not a strange practice as in the human world; however, I would hope," the cunning politician glibly asserts, "if I find myself without aid during my own Heats, you would see fit to accommodate me as I have you. Yet, other than that circumstance, I do not believe you know how to feel about me as of now. There are still too many past aggressions for your comfort, understandably. I would prefer we learn to be brothers before we discuss the possibility of more. Is this assessment agreeable to you, InuYasha?"

Finally, the hanyou looks over at him, both solemn. Possibility of more? But, he doesn't want to ask that just yet. Naw, he can see what Sesshomaru is saying without the guy actually coming out with it—he needed more time to make decisions about tomorrow and the next day. "Yer really serious about the brotherly thing? Keh. Here I thought you were the Ice Princess, that you got no instincts 'er anything." The joke fell flat after everything, his brashness just covering up the pansy-ish feeling coming out of Sesshomaru's mouth.

"But, yeah. Least I can do is help you out if it comes down to it. Not a big deal," but he lightly shudders at the thought of that naked flesh against his own, of their mouths and tongues, of pleasure and heat... Not gonna think about it that much. Seriously head, cut it the fuck out. "You wanna try this brother thing, then like I said, I'll stay for a while."

Something in that tone catches the lord's interest, "still, InuYasha, you have reservations about returning to the palace?"

"I dunno. I guess part of it is this not knowing what's waiting for me all around." Too fresh are the scars of his past. The hanyou is no fool, scent marker or not, living among nobles as a half-breed is not going to be an easy journey. Some will rise up once it's known he's been given his title back. Inevitably, people are going to be pissed.

"I'm not that good with change, so, y' know, just waiting to see what next. "

"Until you are comfortable or find a niche in the ruling of the West, we shall take our relationship day-by-day. You may eventually find that I am not so heartless as you believe me to be."

Too quick, before he can block it, the image intrudes upon the hanyou's mind: that small smile, a minute change to be sure but a world of effect on his brother's carved features. The warmth he'd never in all his years thought he would see.

"Keh," InuYasha fumbles, "day-by-day then. It'll be nice to get used to things before I gotta worry about wandering around the country side anyhow."

"...'Get used to things'?"

"Everything...is different. Now that I'm in the open, it's easier to tell."

"Of what difference do you speak?" Gently, the demon lord prods to see how hard struck his brother is with his expanded skills and purposely ignores this 'wandering the country' remark. He purposely does not speak of the spiritual power the hanyou demonstrated before, just waiting for the younger inu to come to him with questions. Sesshomaru is in hopes they may build some kind of bridge, a tentative trust in which they could train the hanyou to harness these conflicting powers. Perhaps even weave them as mages and mikos.

The hanyou, still focused on the path before them, answers without holding back. "My senses are sharper, clearer. I can smell all the way to the Western Palace."
"Hn." Imagine what would happen were those beads to be removed... But the demon lord wisely remain silent on the matter. He did not miss the reminiscent (even fond) tick of his brothers-the need to rub the smooth claws and it was a subject he would have to broach carefully once the trust between them becomes more powerful.

Instead, his smooth voice fills in the hanyou's unasked questions, "The true power of your youkai has been unlocked, and as it is with many in the nobility, you will need time to explore this expansion of your power; it will change the way your track, the way you hunt, and the way you fight. It is not something to take lightly, but rather to train it as with a sword. You must make this new power like an extension of yourself."

"Keh..."

"It was the same with your brother when the Trial was finally over."

_Perk, twitch, perk._ Yes, the ears swivel and twitch in Sesshomaru's direction, the motion caught out of the corner of his eye.

"My true power, or my true form, did not manifest after my first Heat. In fact, it was a great deal later, when Father came to remove me from the wilds."

"No shit? You didn't grow into a massive dog right in the middle of... y'know?"

The demon lord's shocked face is disturbing but hilarious at the same time.

"I mean, I'd feel sorry as hell for the poor bitch." Shrugging, the hanyou keeps right on walking, pinching his lips so he isn't grinning.

"I believe you are making a joke at my expense, little brother."

"You _believe_? Well hell yeah I am, but that shoulda been reeeeal easy to tell. Anyhow, why did your powers kick in way after? Most demons that survive the first one come out strong, faster." All right then. Big brother wanted to talk, get some of the tension out in the open. Fine. The hanyou'll humor him.

"This is true. However, my mother, who you have met, is a practitioner of more than just demonic magic—and she used her talents to bind my true form and power. During my own trial, I was no more physically strong than you, perhaps weaker still. My first Heat did not change that."

Something in the hanyou's chest gives him a pang; the cold lord knew more about living as a halfling than InuYasha realized. Well, sure being an exile sucked, but as powerful as a daiyoukai is, it couldn'ta been all that bad, right? Apparently, it was for Sesshomaru.

"So? What happened when your Heat struck?"

"...I survived. However, when she released the spell, it took nearly seventy years to truly acclimate to my senses and strengths, especially once I took up the sword." In his mind, the lord returns to the dojo, standing across from his great father, a soulless, deficient, devil towering over him with the scent of earth and the same tinge of cinnamon as InuYasha. He remembers moving, remembers raising the bent practice sword, losing his precarious balance with speed he'd never before known...and falling flat on his face, almost piercing his own chest in the fall. Only the Taisho's hand saved him from being impaled.

"Do not bind yourself with the limitations of the past. You are faster and stronger than before; embrace this change, my son."
"Seventy years? Damn..." Would it really take him that long or not so much since he was only a hanyou? The power difference couldn't have been a crazy difference like Sesshomaru coming into the powers of a daiyoukai...right? But the hanyou has a brief flash of memory, being under water with two demons pulling at him from either side with their claws in him and that pressure swelling up in his chest before a golden burst of light almost blinded him. His view of bastards holding Shippo, with his youkai as one rather than two separate entities—both in agreement: asses needed to be kicked and revenge for the kit had to be taken. The shockwave of power again and again...his own steam beating his enemies without even using the sword. It had all been just him.

"Hn. Mastering one's self is the greatest battle." Just as Father told me, more than once. Control, discipline, things that make an honorable ruler.

"...I guess." Shaking himself, the hanyou clears his throat a little, "who taught you? To handle a sword, I mean? One of the generals or something?"

"After hunting me most of my existence, Father took it upon him self to train me in the ways of the sword. He alone knew my strengths and weaknesses and could train your brother with discipline and restraint. He was the best teacher I have ever known."

"But...you hated him until he met my mother, right?"

"Hate? Very much, little brother. I hated the Inu no Taisho for quite some time after he lashed me with his tail and brought me to the Elders for my freedom. I even attempted to leave the Western Palace several times only to have him come for me immediately."

"How did he get you to stay put?"

"...as I have told you, he created a dojo for my personal use and made a bargain for my presence. As long as I would agree to stay in the West, he would continue to train me well, and possibly to become the most feared daiyoukai in the land. He knew precisely why I strayed to the path of conquest—just as he had done to unite the kingdoms of the West. I wanted power; strength, and to never be helpless again should I be forced to return to exile at any moment."

"So, you didn't trust him?" Ear perks, and he is slightly horrified at this revelation (not that the bastard hadn't already told him he and the old man didn't see eye-to-eye until his mother came into the picture). He had always thought Sesshomaru worshipped the old dog, heart and soul, from all the slurs he'd thrown like knives. Finding out the opposite was really true kinda made the hanyou's heart skip a beat in sympathy. Well, that and he kinda understood where Sesshomaru was coming from. The words resonate within him, a similar sentiment that he feels as well. Maybe he and the bastard weren't so different after all.

"I would not risk his betrayal. Too much had happened between Father and I. Only when he brought the Lady Izayoi to the West could I believe in him, for why would he allow someone so dear to him to be near me if he did not speak true about bringing our family together? Later, when her womb began to swell with you, why would he allow my presence when he hoped to accomplish my downfall or for you to take my place as the heir to the West? In this way, my path slowly changed, and after his passing, after you and your mother were forced to return to her kin, I no longer sought the same end even though I had no choice but to follow the means."

InuYasha mentally shifts through those words, interpreting more than Sesshomaru said on the surface. The softness of his tone held a wealth of things the hanyou could not only hear, but could pick out the warbles of that dulcet tone to find the depth of emotion the icy lord never showed.

"Well...Then, I'm glad she got to meet you."
Sesshomaru hikes a brow, but the hanyou isn't looking at him—instead, there is a softness to the hanyou's face that has never really been present before.

"She...she was kind, even to the family that hated her—hated us—but she still kept her dignity, no matter what others said behind her back or did to her. She never lost her backbone." His voice when speaking of his mother is fleeting, like the wind carries them away after reaching Sesshomaru's ears. He speaks in chopped sentences, the speed and abruptness to try avoiding the painful reality of her death. "And, you know, she taught me some stuff. I mean, I can read and write, not well 'cause I didn't have to do it much to survive, but I'm not a complete dumbass. I know the layout of the land, just not in the West. Until the last few years, I never stepped over the border. Only reason I did after...Kagome left is 'cause I heard screaming from that village in trouble."

"...Your mother was also exceptionally powerful for a human." Sesshomaru unconsciously moves closer to his brother, their shoulders inches from brushing.

"Jiji once said she was more than she seemed. Not just a regular noble lady, but that there was a reason she wasn't outright killed or forced to kill herself when she came back with me." The hanyou's eyes narrow into slits, "and for the old man to take a liking to her, I always thought there was more."

"Mm. Correct. The lady, similar to the mikos of which you have previously been draw, had incredible spiritual powers. Ones that allowed her to survive her trials with our family and her own."

It is then that the hanyou looks over, "my mother? How come she didn't finish off the old man when the met or some shit? Shouldn't she have fried his ass when he fell out of that tree?"

"Your brother asked her the very same question, actually," Sesshomaru's gaze is distant, roving over the high mountains before them; in his mind's eye, the demon lord sees her sitting in Father's office with her rounded belly and striking kimono—soft, sweet jasmine imprinting the picture of her face smiling at him while the Inu no Taisho sat at his desk, holding her hand with tender fingers... His father's smile and hers', laughter for the first time in his long and miserable existence. He found himself laughing with them, the sound rusty and unfamiliar.

"Well?"

"Apparently Father looked so utterly pitiful that she decided someone should have mercy on him. She claimed he made the most wretched noises of a wounded animal so that she had no reason to be wary."

"Keh. Sounds like her," the hanyou smiles.

"Yes. It is apparent you have inherited her spiritual power... I am somewhat surprised it has taken this long to manifest within you, little brother, or how you are managing to control it while still be in the form of a half-demon. Perhaps Kenshin may be able to shed more light upon the matter."

"The old fox seems all right." The hanyou says quietly, "that, uh, that blast thing I did was kinda cool. Like my own version of the wind scar."

Ah. Finally. "Effective, indeed, however dangerous." A casual observation, but the demon lord doesn't want to come off lecturing. As he will have to do someday as a Lord of the West, he wants to see more about how the hanyou thinks.
"Whaddaya mean dangerous?"

"The balance you will have to maintain within yourself is precarious, little brother. It is truly a narrow precipice of which you are walking a fine line. Until you understand this balance, you are a danger to yourself and others. You may just purify other demons around you without so much as a thought or purify yourself in the middle of battle."

The hanyou gives a half-assed shrug, "I already got that shit down. No problem. That's why I ain't in my human form—that time on Mt. Haukurei threw enough spiritual energy at me to know how to handle it. I suppose that arrow in my chest for fifty years helped out, too."

Of course. If his new spiritual ability was truly detrimental (or the balance between this new crazy power and his demonic energy) then his little brother would simply turn human. "I recall that sacred barrier. You went inside, did you?"

"Had to back then with the Band of Seven. Worked out okay, though, no permanent damage or anything. I still turn human and back into a hanyou."

"As I have witnessed. Perhaps, with this very different power, you may find another outlet since you seem to not need Tetsuaiga."

"I don't get what 'another outlet' might be."

"You saw the intricate pattern keeping the sanctuary hidden?"

"Well, sure. You used your youkai to weave a spell. Demon magic, right?"

"Very good, little brother. This is my mother's craft, and one very few demons even practice. You have proven your ability to other attacks into Tetsuaiga with your own youkai, as with the Adamant Barrage and red Barrier-Breaker, why not attempt to weave your youkai with words rather than a blade or a blast?"

This got the hanyou's attention, their gold eyes meeting from a few scant feet. "I—never thought about it that way before, I guess. The youkai in my blood was too unpredictable for anything like that shit, y'know. It takes a helluva fight for the Iron Reaver or Blades of Blood to work right anyhow."

"Hn. I suppose it would. Perhaps after Kenshin tests your youkai, we shall discuss other means you may want to explore."

InuYasha actually stops walking, staring at his brother with something working behind his golden eyes. To accommodate him, Sesshomaru pauses as well.

"You...really think I could do stuff like that?" The possibilities now seem endless to the hanyou; if he could wield spiritual powers as well as demonic, who knew what other attacks he could devise, who knew if the spiritual stuff would work with Tetsuaiga anyhow? But, didn't that blast prove he didn't need the sword the whole time?

"I have much faith in you, InuYasha. You are capable of great things. Hasn't the ridiculous debacle with the Shikon Jewel proven that to you?"

Asshole has a point. "...Guess so."

"Well, then. It seems answers also await you in the West."
"Yeah, I'll take that for now." But, in his heart of hearts, the secret part that didn't believe any of this bullshit, having a home and a place to go after centuries of wandering, is starting to give way just a little more. And the true skeptic the hanyou, InuYasha, has always been is starting to tentatively trust. He glances over at Sesshomaru with something different in his eyes than before.

In response, the demon lord hikes a brow and a small smile makes his lips twitch, "then, as you like, shall we stretch our legs?"

The hanyou grins from ear to ear and simply vanishes. He is a red blur vanishing through the white blanket of hills and bare trees. Sesshomaru gives a huffing breath and takes off as well.

Surprisingly, it takes him a full ten minutes to catch up to InuYasha, of whom is pushing his body to the limits of speed, the sleeves of his fire rat flare behind him like streamers caught in the wind. Sesshomaru can hear his heart beating faster, blood rushing through his veins, chest expanding with breath, and see the idiotically wide grin on the hanyou's face while he runs. Like this, the wild one is truly free.

III

"Sooo. Well, damn, man."

Kenshin is scratching behind his ear and looking down at the two pitiful prisoners watching him with wary, haunted eyes. The elder fox feels a pang of sympathy for the twins, but as a soldier, he cannot do shit for their plight—soldiers knew the deal before they even signed up for battle. These two should have known what might happen if they got caught by the opposite side. If they hadn't been prepared for the possibility of defeat, then they deserved to be right where they ended up, sitting in the Western dungeon with other prisoners just sitting down for a rest, and it was pretty damn good considering the alternative. If he'd been in Sesshomaru's place, he'd have just cut down the twins without a heartbeat of indecision; two elementals that could possibly tear his castle down around his ears? Sorry, Xin, but this is going to be a disaster in the making, I can already see it.

"Yes," Yao replies with a soft sigh, "my two youngest. Badzar and Sarangerel."

The male with black eyes growls something in the foreigner's tongue, and Kenshin hikes a brow at the tone, angry and weary at the same time. Shin gives the youth a narrowed stare, upper lip curling off his fangs—an effective snarl makes the younger man look even more wary of a possible beat-down that might come his way. Who knew? Maybe the brat never saw a real demon before.

Xin replies back in that gobbilty-gook of a language and the two look sufficiently cowed for the healer to give them a better once-over.

The boy (well, man, older than Lord Sesshomaru by a few hundred years) has his father's dark looks and a fiery temper; the girl is Xin's spiritual equal, calm and calculating. Neither seem worse for wear, but damn if the kodomoto magic isn't a huge black hole of youkai-sucking, pain-in-the-ass. The magic itself was originally designed to keep prisoners and slaves under firm control without too much strain on their masters—the right word uttered and the subject is frozen, unable to get away. The magic was later altered for demons, also keeping the slave constantly drained of youkai to keep them meek little servants. On elementals, neither would have the chi needed to call upon and manipulate their token elements. Good for the West, bad for the other guys.

Kenshin has already seen a few others bound with a rosary-like charm (since he'd finally finished seeing the home team, he felt just a bit frisky and decided to come down to the losing side), but unlike the two in front of him, the majority weren't hardened or extremely powerful even without the talisman. Hell, most of 'em were naught more than children just growing into their powers.
Spoke of the desperation of the attack. Too many young and not enough battle-hardened leaders.

Well, it might have been smart for those fools to divide and conquer the land, sending bands of others sailing around the mainland to the other kingdoms while other pockets of resistant took through the wilds, but they must not have realized how many spies abound in the land—well, that and the roving bands of demon and human mercenaries. As the next advisor in line for administration, Kenshin had been overseeing the running of the lands and reports of other goings on. He'd been a busy fox in the week it had taken for the war to be done and over with, but worse, even when Xin got back with the army—without the lords—he'd to keep up with double-duty, healer and head demon-in-charge, doling out tasks and trying to make sure the lands ran as smoothly as possible. His luck, a handful of missives had arrived sporadically to detail these invaders all over the damn place. Two bands had been completely torn apart by animalistic demons a few miles from a human village in the second providence; damn demons probably just wanted a good meal. Another set of a few small ships met the same fate from some water goddess, and the lords of the other lands sent him several messages of other captured foreigners. It seemed things on a large scale had come together without the lords in attendance (not that he and Xin had ever had trouble before). He would have nothing but positive things to report to Lord Sesshomaru.

A few minor details still had to be worked out: one 'em was the kit and wolf upstairs enjoying the hospitality of the West. Kenshin knew the Wolf Prince in reputation, but the kit was one he had seen to personally after hearing the Lord had ordered the younger fox return to the West. The shoulder and arm had been healing well and quickly for such a young squirt, but the kit's youkai hadn't been the average trickster. Most little one's his age should still be in the den being coddled and spoiled by his parents; maybe getting ready to start in the academy to learn the literal tricks of the foxes' legacy. Not often did one see an orphan fox, not when relatives or friends always welcomed a new kit into the fold. Seeing this Shippo stand alone, a babe centuries younger than Shin's own kits, made him grudgingly wander down the halls outside the young one's room so the scent of fox may ease him somewhat.

Now, after days of getting the soldiers settled, fed, intelligence reports read and replied, prisoners tagged, weapons stored, and soldiers from the other lands sent back home is he actually able to see where his friend has been wandering. Bastard has been coming here to check on his grown children, leaving the majority of duties to the over-worked healer.

"All right, then. You tell 'em to show me their injuries and not to bother attacking. They try it and I'll drop 'em both like kits." Trying to look intimidating, the fox folds his massive arms over his chest and give a right good glare while Xin relays the message.

To his surprise, the female is the one that gives him a critical once-over, searching for something in his face. What she was looking for, he didn't know. Maybe it was the scars that littered his face and hands, a testament to all the lot of fucked-up he'd seen in his many years, and if she knew about their kind, she knew very few demons had scars.

Tentatively, her slightly shaky hand reaches out and turns over, showing dried blood on her sleeve and a wicked gash raking up to split the soft skin of her forearm from wrist to elbow. She had apparently tried to wrap it as best she could to avoid massive blood-loss, but probably hadn't done anything to protect against infection. Kenshin kneels swiftly, bag already swinging from around his shoulders to pull out fresh bandages and a poultice; if she and her brother were like their sire, the twin Elementals wouldn't have the impressive immunities against infection and sickness of demons but be susceptible to such things as humans. Sure, they healed faster but could still be felled by disease.

Shin opened his special container and the scent of pine wafted cool and clean over the stench of
sweat, dried blood, and defeat. The female didn't look away as the fox's clawed hand reaches for her; her brother, on the other hand, only sees immediate danger and grabs her arm first, eyes narrowing in distrust.

"Don't piss around with me, cub!" The fox snaps; regardless, Badzar refuses to relinquish his hold on his sister.

Instead, the younger male holds out a hand for the concoction, brows drawn together. He and the fox have a moment of shared understanding and Shin relinquishes the container of white goo. Suspiciously, Badzar sniffs the unfamiliar poultice and rubs a small amount on his own hand as if to test it. After a few moments, he seems satisfied that it is not poison, and hurriedly unlaces his sister's arm guards. Ignoring his traitorous sire and this battle-worn demon, Badzar speaks softly to Sarangerel while un-wrapping her make-shift bandage. He has to peel off the encrusted layers while clucking a tongue at her.

Yao catches the eye of a healer's aid returning with fresh, steaming water and beckons the raccoon over. Bright-eyed a bushy-tailed, the young aid is new to the aftermath of war and is excited to put his skills to use to help the injured soldiers. He hurries toward the wise advisor, weaving around groups of prisoners also being seen to, and bows low as he reaches them. Unfortunately, he's a clumsy little shit and almost falls over with the force of his bow. The water in his bucket sloshes precariously.

"Mi lord!"

"Yeah, yeah. Bring it over here, kid." Shin already has bandages out and accepts the water.

"Of course, Healer Kenshin!"

Too damn happy about life. Shaking his head, Kenshin wets a clean cloth and glances back at the progress of the twins.

Both are staring at the raccoon with wide eyes, all movement momentarily paused at the warm and comforting aura of the newcomer. The kid gives a happy wave at the two and just notices the crusty bandages from the female's wounded arm. He gasps and kneels by Badzar, eyes for all that dried blood before looking up at the two of them.

"That looks pretty serious!" He leans closer to look at the torn skin with obvious concern, hands reaching for the clean cloth in Shin's hand without even glancing at the healer.

Surprisingly, neither twin rebukes his efforts as he gingerly cleans the dried blood and dips a few fingers into the salve still in the male's hand. He gives the female an "I'm sorry about this" expression before gently applying the goop to her torn skin. He almost asks Healer Kenshin if they should stitch the wound with sinew, but the hostile aura makes him change his mind. He simply takes fresh bandages and wraps the forearm tight but not too tight to impede the healing process.

The raccoon looks over his should at Shin, and the fox agreeably looks at the bandage job.

"Good wrap, Tanku. We might get you to be a decent healer yet." Not to mention his happy-go-lucky attitude made the two more docile for treatment.

Beaming, the young demon smiles so wide his face might crack, "Thank-you, sir!"

He looks back at the two with a huge grin and takes out a fresh length of bandage to put in Badzar's hands. Putting on a stern face, the raccoon wags a finger at the female, "this will need re-bandaged twice a day! You don't want to loose your arm because of infection, do you? No, no, no, that's very
bad. How are you gonna eat without an arm, am I right? Well, no matter, follow my instructions and you'll be much better in a few days, okay?"

The two just stare at him.

"They don't speak our language, kid. Xin'll tell 'em what for. You just come back tomorrow and see how the wound is doing."

"Yes, sir, I will, sir!" The raccoon actually salutes him before giving the two a wave and darting off to help out more of the wounded.

"A ray of sunshine," Yao smirks.

"Yup. Like it's coming out his ass or something. Who knows? All right," Shin stands, dusting his knees and picks up his bag. He holds out the top of his container to Badzar, waiting.

No fool to trickery, the young male gingerly reaches out for it and quickly snatches his hand back.

"For the time being, let's get some food down here for them. Not that the prisoners deserve it, but Lord Sesshomaru would be pissed if these fuckers starved to death before he could interrogate any of 'em."

Xin sighs at his children and simply says, "I will return to check upon you later." With a heart of stone, he follows Kenshin out of the dungeon where other prisoners were being chained together and tended. The numerous guards bow to them as they take the stairs up three floors before reaching the ground floor of the palace. It's just like the old fox to keep his jaw tightly closed; he is not a demon of impulse.

The two make their way across the courtyard grounds to the dining hall, nodding to various servants, guards, and guests of the West. Kenshin finally starts catching his friend up with the ruling side while they stride down the great halls.

"...so we have more to be concerned about than we first imagined."

"Seems that way. No counting how many have been sneaking in for the past two decades, posing as merchants or migrant workers, but it's been their Khan's plan from the start. Why not breed an army on our own shores? Long time in the making but pretty damn smart all the same."

"Damn..." Yao pushes open the door to the informal dining room; their situation may be more extensively worrisome than they all originally believed. If the Mongolians had been gathering in for years, having children, living among the people, waiting for the right time to strike, then the outbreak of riots could be worse than what the shoguns overlooking each territory could handle without help from the Western army. This might have been an epic strategic move.

*Hurry back, my lords. We may need your skills sooner than later.*

The two spot Prince Kouga and the kit, Shippo, and leave the subject for now.

"Oi! Great grub today," with a toothy grin, the wolf holds up a huge drumstick almost picked clean. Both advisors laugh a bit, remembering their own days as young, cocky demons such as he and take seats across the table.

"Cook will be pleased with your assessment, Lord Kouga."

The bushy kit, no longer wound in bandages, interrupts the greeting, "any word of InuYasha yet?"
"I am afraid not, little one. I do not suspect he is in any danger, not while Lord Sesshomaru is his travelling companion." Remaining cordial, Yao Xin gives nothing away as an excuse why the lords are so far behind the Western army to return. Only he and a handful of guards have any notion of the younger lord's approaching Heat, but only he knew Lord Sesshomaru would personally help him, ah "take care" of the situation. Given the younger lord is a hanyou, Yao has no idea how long it will take for the heat to die down—the two could be gone for a full moon cycle. Who knew?

"Don't worry yourself, kit. They're probably out scouting for more bands of those bastards." Kenshin leans over and pours himself some tea, "wouldn't be surprised if they ain't scoutin' the land themselves."

"That sounds like mutt-face, too." Kouga gives a shrug, food forgotten. "I should be leaving soon, get back to the pack. If they don't get back in a few days, I'll have to come by again in the Spring to see how he's gettin' along here...I mean. InuYasha is coming back here, right?"

Shippo's eyes sharpen and his utter infatuation with the delicious food before him fades, his shoulders slumping slightly. He'd probably go back to the village if Kouga decides it's time to hightail it out, but...he at least wants to see InuYasha once more before he goes back to Miroku and Sango. Just once. But maybe...maybe he could scout on their way through the land...do something brave for the Western lands.

"I am most certain Lord InuYasha will return with Lord Sesshomaru," Xin looks over at the suddenly depressed kitsune. "If you were to leave before they return, I'm certain Lord InuYasha will be most disappointed. Surely we could send a message to your pack, Lord Kouga?"

"...Well. I'm not gonna wait around forever for dog-breath to show, but I think we can give him a few more days."

"Good to hear, milord. Besides, I'm certain Rin would be most distraught if her new favorite playmate had to leave so suddenly."

Shippo huffs a sigh, "oh come on. Rin and I aren't kids or anything. She's almost fourteen now!"

"Indeed, kit. Yer no baby, and the young lady is certainly growing into a woman. But, that young female has never had a childhood to speak of, followin' the lord around and such. Your presence is soothing to her and I see no reason why you shouldn't be able to play if you so wanted."

Yao nods in agreement with that assessment and picks up that Kenshin has taken a shine to the kit and perhaps might like another apprentice underfoot. From what he stated earlier, Yao has no reason to believe Lord Sesshomaru would return alone. The hanyou prince would be at his side, and finally the two would have rule of the kingdom.

"All right, then. We'll stick around. Never know, we might geta chance to be in battle after all, eh Shippo?" Kouga winks at the kid and the kitsune's smile comes back with the anticipation that they might still be in the ranks.

"I think we'll be secure here," Shin swats the concern away as the cook's aids come out with more plates for the advisors.

The wolf's eyes narrow. "there are more of those ass-hairs running around the land. My father's already taken out a few bands of rioters in the North. So's you meaning to tell me you think this is over with just one battle?"

Kenshin glances to his right, but Yao is stroking his shorter fu Manchu. "All the lords have sent
their own spies to check for uprisings, and we in the West are prepared to return to war. Our arsenal has been restocked, and the only thing we wait for is our lord's approval to move out through the land.

Kouga blinks at their efficiency, "so..." he lowers his voice, "ya think their Khan is really here?"

Likewise, the fox answers instead, voice low so as to not catch the other staff taking a lunch break, "what better way to make a stand than for the leader to already be here, waiting for everything to fall into place?"

"...The Khan is ruthless, the same as his predecessors; however, it seems he is quite a patient strategist." Yao Xin's demeanor changes and the foreigner is suddenly very serious. "We may have underestimated him, but more reports will tell us by how much."

"We got some pretty strong forces on our side," Shin counters when the kit's face hardens, "we'll give 'em Hell either way. Ah! I'm starvin'."

The scent of warm stew and rice touches his nose as the young serving girls from earlier make their way to the table. Meanwhile, the soft scent of soap and girl makes Shippo's (for some weird reason) heart speed up just a little, and he looks up at the cute serving girl beside him serving Kenshin. After leaving the stew, she feels his eyes and turns.

"Oh! I am sorry, sir, would you care for more? Or some dessert, perhaps?"

Instantly, his face turns beet red. He can feel the heat in his cheeks and gets even more embarrassed. "N-naw. I'm okay, thanks though." He ducks his head only to glance back at her under the cover of his bangs.

"As you will, sir." She leans over him to collect his empty plates with her warm smile...and accidentally brushes the side of one breast against his forearm.

The kit's eyes fly open wide and he nearly chokes. The girl (completely oblivious) lifts his plates with a questioning look and her head cocked to the side. "Are you in need of water, sir?" She is slightly concerned with how red his face is! Is he running a high fever?!

Mortified, Shippo draws in a breath, "n-no thanks. I'm good, seriously."

She hears the faint mumble and looks at the wolf beside him. Lord Kouga is giving the poor little kit a quirked brow...and then takes a sniff. He comes very close to slapping a hand over his mouth to keep the laughter in, but forcefully schools his face.

"He's good," with a rueful grin, the wolf prince takes pity on the poor kid and leans around him to draw her attention away. "Just healing up good after all the fighting."

She gasps, hands flying to her face, "oh, my lord! Were you terribly injured?"

Shippo clears his throat quietly, and straightens a bit, "just a few bruises, nothing much to show for it."

"But for one so young as yourself, sire, how brave you must be!"

One so young?! Jeeze, really?

She leans down with a warm smile still in place and raised a hand...to pat the top of his goddammed head.
"You are about my little brother's age, sir. You must be so strong to fight with the men!"

_Her brother's age?! ...damn._ "Uhh. Yeah. Thanks."

"Of course, sir!" She turns to Kenshin's (who immediately wipes the amused look off his face), "and what else may I get for you, Healer Kenshin?"

He holds up a hand, "all good here, Mizu. Thanks."

"Of course! Call if you need anything further, milords!" With a flourish, she strides off, wiggling a cute little bottom with bushy tail in her wake.

Unable to help himself, Shippo watches that tail bounce every step of the way.

Xin audibly clears his throat and the kit snaps back to attention. An awkward pause lasts no longer than seconds and the three elders are ass-deep in belly laughs. Sputtering helplessly and even redder than before, Shippo denies anything and finally throws himself to the side, shoving his hands in his kimono sleeves (reminiscent of a certain someone) and throws his nose up in the air. Nothing seemed to calm the insatiable laughing, all directed at him. The real bitch was, he didn't have clue one what the hell they were all laughing at in the first place!

"Bastards, and I mean the lot of you." He takes to his feet with a "Feh!" and heads out of the dining hall, back straight and shoulders squared. It's fine anyway, the kit thinks furiously to himself. He'd already spent some time wandering the great halls of the palace just to see how many rooms and corridors and places might be hidden in the multiple floors made out of a mountain. C'mon, he's a fricking fox for crying out loud, the joker of the demon world. He would have to know where all the good hiding spots are and where the jerks of the castle lived just so he could give 'em a good scare before they had to go, right? He'd had enough time at the Kitsune Academy to learn a few tricks and even modify some of 'em to be pretty dangerous. Better tricks than his spinning top or meager fox fire could ever be. With twenty minutes to plan and place, he could execute a damn good trick.

With his smug grin back in place, the kit meanders his way down the guest hallway, knowing his scent is already there and no one would think it suspicious he was in this wing. He passed a few maids that were carrying piles of linens to go to the washroom and made sure not to make eye contact so they would just ignore his presence and not wonder why he was back up here so early in the day. Usually by this time, he would sneak in to an always empty dojo hidden back in a corner in the second floor, right above a nice zen garden. It gave him a peaceful feeling to sit and meditate or work on his moves with a staff or practice sword, running through his paces in silence, only his own breathing echoing in his ears.

Maybe later... with a glance over his shoulder, all the maids are already past him, and he unobtrusively opens the door to Kouga's room wide enough that he just slides in without a sound. No one sees the look of utter mischievous on his face.

IV

"My love? Please! OW! No, no, not that! YEEE-OUCH. Ah, gods, you're killing me!"

"Nothing less than you deserve, pervert! Look at what you taught my son!"

The angry taijiya shoves soap into her husband's mouth with more force than necessary and gives his silver tongue a once, twice, and thrice over. In her fist is a hunk of dark hair keeping his head over the wash basin so she can indeed give his foul mouth a good and much needed scrubbing.
"P-please, my love!" The monk manages to sputter through soap spewing from his mouth.

Agitated, she finally releases his hair and stands back to glare down at him. Their hut, cozy and warm, is ever growing, just as their family is. With three children and the former demon slayer round with the fourth, they have already added on two rooms as well as one just for storing weapons. In the area sectioned off for preparing meals, however, while Sango was in the middle of cooking the evening's dinner, her nearly four-year old son came up to her and solemnly stated Suki (his little playmate from the village) refused to bare his young and slapped him in the face.

Her temper went from a cool zero to red hot murderous in less than a second. She gingerly spanked the child and explained to him why saying such things to a girl was very wrong. He was only a baby himself and had so much time before he would even have to worry about taking a wife and having offspring of his own. The weeping child seemed to understand where his mother was coming from and apologized, promising to also apologize to Suki in the morning. Hopefully, she would still play with him sometimes.

But, it all comes to a full circle. Ending with the monk spewing out soap and the demon slayer spewing out curses.

"And I swear, Miroku, if that boy inherits his father's 'cursed hand,' I will use the worst demon herbs out there and you'll be in the outhouse for a week. Argh, how can one man be so infuriating!"

Rinsing the horrid taste through her tirade, the monk in question finally settles away from the wash basin and stares at his pregnant wife.

"Please, Sango. Calm down if only for the babe's sake." He gives a little sigh, already used to her fluctuating moods while with their young. It's not like he didn't know what he was getting himself into when he finally begged the slayer to make an honest man out of him; not only had Sango proven herself to be one of the strongest humans the monk had ever met, but she also had the biggest heart. Even with moments like this, he would never regret building a family with her. "I'm sorry, my love. I swear it will never happen again."

Still red-faced, she gives a huff to blow her bangs out of her eyes. She opens her mouth to retort but no sound comes out. Her head turns with a jerk, one hand instinctively coming up to cover her growing abdomen.

The monk is on his feet by her side in an instant, the taste in his mouth immediately forgotten. His arms hold her close when the chill runs up his spine. A familiar chill, a warning that has saved his measly hide more than once.

"Demon," hisses through Sango's teeth. She starts to move out of his embrace, her automatic reaction to pick up her hiraikotsu and get ready for battle. She has to protect her family, her children, her husband, but more so, she has to protect the demon slayer village this time—she won't allow the ground to be littered with bodies again, to bury everyone she'd ever loved again.

Miroku's arms stop her, spin her to look in his very serious eyes. "No. Go signal the alarms, but you will not leave this house. Do you understand me, wife?"

She draws in a breath, he interrupts.

"Do you understand, Sango? Stay inside with the children." As easy-going as the former Miroku had been, the father and husband had moment like this, when it seemed he had a male complex to protect the women and children. His eyes are totally uncompromising.
Finally, her throat tight, she nods. The two, even five years after the hard years of constant battle were over, still move like warriors—eliminate the threat, protect the weak, fight the good fight—and part for the monk to face whatever may come and taijiya to sound the alarm bell on the side of their home.

Miroku moves through his home, ducks into his corner of the main room, picks up his now-dry ofudos and shakujo—the trademark jingle ominous. He's out the door and moving with purpose, closer to that oncoming demon aura.

In the five years they have resided in the village, more than fifteen families have come to join them in rebuilding. The whole compound is still protected by high walls made from thick logs tied together with the gate heavy and difficult to move for even a run-of-the-mill demon. It is in this direction the monk is heading, drawn directly to the approaching demonic aura.

_Not a mindless, low-level demon or a vengeful spirit. This one is dangerous and powerful._

Clatter as others open their shoji or door flaps to start congregating behind the determined monk. A heartbeat later and the warning bell goes off, the clang echoing through the sudden silence. Feet crunch in the fresh snow, weapons are ready, and the single, electric tension in the air is almost on top of them.

Coming mere feet from the gate, Miroku absently rubs the spot on his chest where the sacred sutras sit in his pocket before both hands grip the shakujo, and he takes one cleansing breath. _This state of existence is but a temporary one..._

Behind him, the slayers prepare themselves for the attack.

...Instead, there is a polite knock on the gate.

The monk starts and glances back at the other slayers crowded behind him with blades, scythes, knives, and all manner of weaponry at the fore. The closest warrior, Daiki, one of the better fighters hikes a brow at the monk in return. He shrugs without speaking and Miroku nods.

"Who is it?" He calls cordially.

"Akihiro, sir! I am a messenger of Lord Sesshomaru, ruler of the Western Lands. His guests, Prince Kouga of the Northern Wolf Tribe and his companion, Shippo, have entrusted me to find the demon slayer, Sango, and her husband, the Monk Miroku."

"How am I to know you are who you say?"

"...Well, sir. The Prince told me to call the monk a 'lecher the like of which have never been seen before.'"

Ten pairs of eyes swing to focus in on said pervert. With a self-suffering sigh, the monk merely replies, "you have found the Monk Miroku and his wife."

"And how can you prove you are who you say are, sir?"

The monk seems to consider this, "I suppose I could purify you on the spot. That would prove I'm a monk, wouldn't it?"

"I-I suppose so, but then I couldn't take a reply back to the prince, sir."

"Ah, how bothersome. Well, the demon slayers will let me through to receive your message. Please
do not attack or I will have to prove I am who I say."

"Understood!"

The demon slayers give the monk a look as if wondering whether or not he had simply lost his mind. Miroku held up a hand and gestures to the gate. Five of the muscular demon slayers put away their weapons and man the gate while the others remain armed, ready to strike at the first hint of trouble.

Calmly, the monk waits for the gate to crack open and slips through. His gaze true, he starts when there is no demon in front of him.

"Down here!"

Four and a half feet tall is a young lynx demon, smiling up at him with an absurdly baggy outfit. Standing tall, the little one lifts a hand in greeting, and gives a proper, low bow.

"Greetings, Monk Miroku."

A huge grin splits his face, "greetings Akihiro! My...what a powerful demonic aura you have!"

The youngster straightens with a grin, "actually, the aura is coming from the message. Lord Kouga's travelling companion sent a scroll, too. He just put a trick on it so other demons would let me be. Pretty smart, huh?"

The monk's eyebrow give an audible twitch, "Shippo?"

Little prankster! He knew the village would be up in arms. He was annoyingly cute when he was young.

"That's the fox." After a moment of rooting around in his oversized kimono, the lynx brings out two bound scrolls, complete with Kouga's seal.

"Well, then. I thank you for your hard work. My wife is making dinner if you would like to stay?"

The kitten's brown eyes began sparkling, "dinner?" He's already following the monk back through the gates, his little belly rumbling at the sound of food. He'd really booked it to get her as fast as possible since Shippo had been hurt with his arm bound up, and the wolf prince promised him some extra coin. Now, after all that running, he's hungry enough to eat twice his weight in food.

V

"LOOK OUT! WHAT IN THE SEVEN HELLS IS THAT THING!"

"...it—it looks like a cow, sir!"

"A WHAT?!"

Unlike your ordinary bovine, this one seemed to be incredibly dexterous, weaving in and out of firing arrows, spears, and demonic energy strikes. With a mild moo, the animal remains rigid and doesn't buck off the cross-legged old man perched on his back. Seemingly oblivious to the mass of weapons being fired through the air, the old sword maker gets closer to the Western Palace with ease.

Foot soldiers clamber around the battlements, armed and ready to fire as the bovine moves steadily closer.

Orders from the ground are keep the guards firing while Matsu shoves his way through demons at
the top most part of the castle; he squints at the oncoming figure and blows an irritated sigh. He turns to the closest demon at his right hand,

"Get the hell down there and tell those fools to stop firing at Lord Sesshomaru's personal weapons maker! If we harm him, the lord will have our heads."

The badger, eyes wide at the threat of the lord's wrath, hurriedly salutes and vanishes. The human turns back to the awaiting soldiers, their eyes on him for orders before the first wave would fly.

"Stand the hell down! We all know who rides a damn cow."

Some of the demon archers lower their bows with sheepish embarrassment. Soon the defenses knock off as the cow sails through the night. At Matsu's gesture, the group slits to allow the cow to light down, surrounded but safe. Oddly enough, the rider has slept through the whole thing, a snot bubble bobbing from a nostril in time with the unholy snores. His trademark hammer had become an uncomfortable-looking but functional pillow.

Loudly, Matsu clears his throat. "Totosai. Totosai-san!"

"Whup, whaa?" Rousing, the old demon blinks around and gives a sniff, "ah, this old back is aching from such a long trip."

The human general bows at the waist, his men following him in showing respect to the make of the most powerful weapons in history: Tensaiga, Tetsuiga, and Sou'ung, the circle of life, death, and conquest. However...it was difficult to remain in awe of a bird-like old man riding a three-eyed cow sporting a charred, dirty kimono.

"We are honored to receive you, Totosai-san."

"Hm, yes." His look grows absent, "and there was some reason I came all the way here..." He rubs his chin thoughtfully, and someone in the back groaned.

Under his breath, Matsu murmurs, "I'm sure there was." Straightening, he bows again and replies, "In the absence of our lords, please allow us to show you the hospitality of the West. Perhaps a hot bath and dinner may aid in regaining your memory."

"Oh! Dinner time, eh?" And a bath! Oh, how long has it been since I had a good bath... This thought accompanied by the little hanyou drawing water and heating the fire. It's enough to make the weapons-maker blanch and focus more on the promise of dinner. He climbs down from the bovine (earning a snort in annoyance she wasn't getting dinner after coming all this way) and shuffles through the gathered, bowing soldiers without a care of them. A miffed moo and the cow is lead away to feast in the stables.

VI

With the skill of a ninja, Shippo eases into his own borrowed room in one wing over from the family chambers. He knew it had to be the next hall over since there were four guards posted outside and further down that he could see with barely a glance. Only one guy was outside the row of studies and official rooms for administration, so that many guards more than likely meant those were the royal families' chambers. The fox stands by the window, looking out into the courtyard gardens two floors below. A group of children were in a corner, their tutor sitting with back against a tree while they wrote notes on rice paper using brush and ink pots. A few sport demon ears, markings, and fangs while others were more bestial with more animalistic characteristics, but woven intermittently in the fifteen or twenty were six humans, all learning as one.
Blinking, Shippo shoves away from the window and that scene, fighting off dark feelings of jealousy and pain. He's not a child anymore, and he knows the effect of harboring such ill-will, demons like Naraku were born. So, there's no point in lounging in those depressing thoughts and emotions, not when he has people out there that love him, want him to succeed, want him to be happy. Even...five hundred years in the future, someone had nothing but good wishes for him. He kneels by his bag of clothing, completely ignoring the sting in his eyes and blurry sensations. Real men did not cry.

An abrupt shake of the head snaps him into movement; he distracts himself by pulling out a set of clothing he used for sparring and concentrated enough to make his bag shrink to the size of a thimble, storing it in the high wardrobe's top shelf and out of sight. Here, in the Western Palace (of all places) there has to be somewhere quiet and away from everyone, somewhere he can actually move. Yeah, shouldn't be that hard to find, not if he follows his nose to the lack of strong scents. Mind made up, Shippo changes with the thoughts of stretching his muscles out now that he's completely healed and has some time to himself without Kouga around every corner. Sure, he knew the wolf felt bad and stuff, but really, Shippo had been travelling by himself for five years, not too long, but enough that constant people around him was uncomfortable—even at Miroku and Sango's house! In the quiet of his own (temporary) room, he finally feels like he can think.

Changed, he steals into the hallway, surprised there is no one really running about. In the past few days, he's noticed servants or guards or someone (anyone) always about, regardless of the time. Must be time to clean one of the other floor or something.

He takes a right out of his door and catches the faint scent of InuYasha...down the royal family's wing. It's a long walk down the huge hallway, the colors of the old Taisho hanging from wall to wall, for him to peek around the corner. Shippo looks and has to do a double-take. No guards there.

"Hm." His natural inclination for mischief takes over and he moves without thought (on how pissed off someone might be) down, catching more of InuYasha's scent from the fancy floor coverings. The hall turns and splits off into two sections, one that smells like storms coupled with something sharp and the other like cinnamon and youkai. InuYasha's smell is too faint here and Shippo chooses the right, walking right into the youkai. Again, no one is around doing work or going to another part of the castle. Creepily, the scents become fainter, covered with dust and old memories, abandoned. Maybe the last lord, InuYasha's father, walked these same halls everyday and no one ever came here anymore. Whatever. It's exactly what he was hoping to find.

The intermediate doors along either wall don't interest him (he honestly pays no mind). It only when he finds a sliding shoji door, so incredibly out of place in all these closing doors on hinges, that the fox pauses and gives a courteous sniff. The smell he catches through the door is the one he's been looking for and makes him pause: the scent of sweat, of straining muscles, of metal and wood.

He gingerly slides the shoji open a crack and points one eye to make sure no one else is around. Clear.

Before anyone comes along, the fox slides into the room with slinking grace and closes the door behind him.

The room is airier than his and more traditional with tatami mats and paper coverings over the
stone. Weapon racks line one wall with a carefully catalogued assortment of practice swords, wooden swords, staves of several sizes and weight, and more. The outer wall has another shoji, probably leading out into a private garden. But, clinging to the tiles and paper are distinct scents now that the kit is closer; he moves to the open wall and presses his nose closer to try catching a clear scent of who used this room.

Sesshomaru...and another inu, powerful, older...the General?

The kit takes a moment to inhale that scent and finally seems to relax a little in the massive palace. He takes a stance in the middle of the floor and stretches himself out, working his lean muscles in preparation for training. As he does, his vision is filled with pictures of Sango directing him with a sword while her pregnant belly got in the way, then he sees the old fox from school watching the younger kits spar with tricks rather than fists or weapons. He took his turn like the rest, but he'd wanted to learn to really fight, to take care of himself if his magic ran out or his tricks were ineffective.

Other slayers helped him when Sango got too big, and now he has the basics to hone.

Gracefully, the kit takes a position and moves against his invisible foe, Naraku. He's not a scared little kid this time around, not going to just hide behind a woman's skirts while the others do all the work; he moves with fluid grace at oncoming tentacles, ducks bouts of misasma, throws punches, chops, and kicks at damn saimiyosho (*not poisoning Miroku, fuckers!*) The battle is on.
Chapter Summary

It is time to get moving again

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

I

In the heart of the frozen forest, a peasant in plain kimono and hakama braves the icy winds and hauls a covered hand-cart behind him with surprising vigor. He has been travelling for days in the ice and snow, trekking across the island from the southern villages to the lands further north. Even though the path might be well worn from travelers across Japan, the ice give treacherous a whole new meaning and he has been travelling for what seems like a lifetime. His hands, squat but strong, have been numb for days and seem nearly frozen around the handles of his cart and are coarse from labor. Small icicles hang from his salt and pepper moustache to the tip of his impossibly long goatee and smack against his knees as he pulls with purpose. He doesn't even register the impossible cold and won't until late into the night when he finally stops to rest for a few hours.

The island may seem small compared to some empires, but in reality, travelling on foot will definitely give one perspective on how much land between kingdoms there really is. The span is unending when you're pulling a heavy hand cart over hills and through forests, over ponds and up the side of mountains. Not to mention how the next span of land might have any number of innocent peasants or villainous mercenaries—human or demon—lurking in every nook of forest, field, or mountain. How the two species can co-exist without an all-out civil war has always puzzled the peasant with the hand cart. Certainly the human out-number the demons, but the bakemono have power beyond the scope of human understanding. He eventually figured out the real reason, that while the demon world spanning the island might have some semblance of order, the human world is a mess of power-hungry mercenaries operating under the titles of ruler. Regardless of where one went, the ethical, powerful humans in command are few and far between. Even though the human emperor and some nobles attempted to maintain a semblance of honor in the treatment of the peasantry, the tyrants closer to the villages, coloring themselves as monarchs, have no such intentions. With men such as these, it is little wonder the peasants remain impoverished with high mortality rates and little hope for the future. Also, this disconnect allow the demon rulers to maintain more power and the demon subjects to terrorize at their leisure.

He, the one pulling the hand cart, has been in Nippon for over two decades, working hard labor and experiencing life outside his native home—one free of such monsters but with humans more like the corrupted daimyos than the peasant would like to admit. Initially, it had been hell the first few years, acclimating to the climate and people, for he was not accustomed to hard labor such as slaving in the rice paddy. Yet, over time, he had become a proud member of his small village; he had earned some respect from and gained a grudging amount for the people. It had been a long paddy to harvest during his time in this country and the peasantry painted a different picture than he'd once imagined in the homeland. Industrious and honorable, the majority he'd known were truly those of worth.
And yet...the burden in the cart behind him was his duty. He could not look back now.

His breath puffs out in small clouds as he glances at the stars to calculate where he is and which way he needs to go. For the first time since starting out early this morning, he allows the cart to come to rest and the heavy burden rests on the back two wheels that groan in protest. The night sky plots out his position and the long miles he has yet to go. The endless stretch of night looms in front of him, a profound sign for a simple being such as he. Back in his homeland, he cared little for deep thoughts or straying from the path of battle, like many of his kinsman and ancestors before him—the man he was only craved conquest. Living among these people may have softened his cold heart but has not changed his principles. He was and still is a man with an ultimate goal, and the heavy burden behind him is simply the means to a long-awaited end.

With a shift in stance, his feet coverings crunched in the snow but his extremities under the hide are numb to anything except ache from the hard journey. He will build a small fire, covered by the thick forest canopy, rest for a few hours, and soon begin again.

II

A place like the Western palace is accustomed to heavy traffic; from maids and servants scurrying to see to the daily running of the castle's affairs to visiting diplomats, politicians, and other royalty, the palace is constantly full of visitors. The nature of ruling a kingdom is the man/demon-powered needed to keep everything running. Even the several smaller villages, merchants, artisans, and farmer's alike, lying half a day's walk in the shadow of the grandiose castle received more than their fair share of business due to the castle's constant pace. The economy was good, which is why four villages kept up a constant bazaar of vendors willing and eager to offer their finest wares for travelers. Fat, ruddy children ran about in play or skipping lessons and remain proof of their parents' prosperity. All in all, the monarchy treated them well.

So business as usual; servants and cooks from the castle visiting for meats, furs, and other wares or just to visit the villagers themselves. It seems the West is beginning to return to normal day-to-day activity… Except, three days after the soldiers returned victorious, an extraordinary number of travelers emerge from all directions, passing through the villages to head directly for the palace itself. Caravans, wagons, flying carriages, beasts of a wide range have been steadily trickling through in groups. The more impressive parties travel in opulent style with lavish wagons covered in expensive silks baring the crest of their honored houses. Their benches are padded while advisors and servants march beside the procession. The workers and merchants bow lower at the nobility, trying to entice the wealthy into pausing long enough to spend some coin on wares or snacks. Many that catch the numerous booths or smell the wickedly delicious scents of cooking meat, seasoned fish, or freshly-baked bread halt their progress to partake of the goodies and stand to observe the impressive array of merchandise.

While the villagers may be in heaven, the advisors to the Western lord are in hell! Not only are they monitoring intelligence from all their spies, dragon fliers, messengers from the other lords, and waiting for word of survivors to crop up so a portion of the returned soldiers could be immobilized for battle yet again. However, even with these every-day activates in the life of running a massive kingdom, the returned army has also finally settled back into the normal routines, assuring the Western Palace as well-protected. However, the easy-pace of staff, residents, and visitors become a flurry of activity to house, feed, and tend to the mad surge of guests upon the palace. Less than three days had seen the palace settle down from the activities of war and those returning soldiers return to their usual duties when the mass began arriving, slowly at first. Noblemen close to the house of Taisho brought their families and personal servants at first (a few in fear they were no longer in the lord's favorites since none had received invitations for the youngest prince's inauguration! Certainly there has to be a celebration for the lords' victorious return...?).
Following had been political allies, heralds, and eventually messengers from the lord's elder brother and other distant kin to prepare for their arrival. The Lady Arikura's family was well on their way in her flying palace and in their own transportation to gather—ready to meet the prodigal son of Taisho. Since the inu youkai on the lord's mother's side would be arriving within days, the housemaids are in a panic to get the family wings presentable for royalty. For the first time in four centuries, the family chambers would be in full use and thus the many rooms needed to be aired out, dusted, beds re-made with fresh linens, and prepared to the taste of each family member—on top of normal chores and caring for the ever-increasing arrivals. The maids and maintenance pull double-time behind the scenes of the castle.

It seems half the island decided to migrate to the West without even a whisper of Lord InuYasha taking up the duties of his station after the impressive victory. Just the fact that the duo had joined forces to protect the land is apparently enough motivation to get the nobility talking!

However, a straight answer on the hanyou's impending status is kept vague by the lord's advisors and servants (who, in all reality, have no information about the younger lord's declaration of birthright since neither prince had left instructions to prepare a celebration). The castle's occupants are cleverly ambiguous about the younger lord, his past, and the single day he spent in the palace thus far. Rather than cause the West any embarrassment in the face of such important personage or shame their lord by seeming ignorant, the servants remain cheerful and eager to please their guests as well as welcome all newcomers without giving away too much information. This loyalty spoke of the honor of the house as well as the fairness of the ruling body; few other houses had such devotion.

Kenshin and Yao hadn't had to say a word about Lord InuYasha's status in the West nor had instructed the staff on what to answer; both assumed, without their lords in attendance, the servants would say nothing but praise. They had good people in the West; ones dedicated to the family for generations and had raised their children to be loyal as well. However, even with their team effort, the two advisors are busier than they have been since Touga had been alive.

The last time the West hosted such a huge event, it was Sesshomaru's return, and even then, the pup's reputation scared many of the nobility into staying home. It seems the deeds of a certain hanyou had earned the admiration (or curiosity at the very least) of the upper class as well as the many that claimed to be friends or past allies—and as of this morning, a dragon rider spotted the two lords about a day's run to the south-east. Hopefully the lords would make somewhat haste returning (the two advisors could only hope) since the visitors are getting restless with wanting to see the famed half-demon, just like Taisho in his approachable demeanor. Plus, the negative aspect to this many politicians gathering in one place—disagreements, bribery, brawls, utter destruction, and broken treaties always hover in the air to make matters more tense. Only the elder lord's presence could eliminate the majority of the corruption and violence. Reason enough to celebrate for the over-worked and somewhat harried advisors and staff.

Once the first few groups of visitors began talking about the celebration for the returning lords, Yao discreetly began getting preparations started for a welcome-home gala at the very least and Kenshin re-directed more soldiers to necessary posts around the palace as well as stationing more in the surrounding villages to form a barrier further from the main gates. Already had the head maid, Hikari, a no-nonsense lynx with huge circlet of keys at her waist, humbly approached Yao about hiring a few village girls for extra help, after all the banners baring the house of Taisho needed to be aired out and cleaned, food needed to be gathered from far and wide, more proper uniforms for servants needed to be taken out of storage, mended and cleaned, and invitations for other nobility needed to be made (simply to wait on the lord's desk until he returned). With her daunting list, Yao waved her off with confirmation. Meanwhile, Kenshin began with the prisoners that needed to be questioned as well as maintained communication with the other lords to test the
still-constant threat of invasion. What perfect time to target the enemy than during a celebration?

Yet, it seemed that many "friends" of the hanyou lord would certainly keep any possible threat to a minimum. The odd assortment of demons, hanyous, and humans gave color to the stogy dinners in the great hall with stories of previous battles and victories of the soon-to-be Prince of the West. Of course Lord Kouga and a handful of his wolves, the kit Shippo, and Myoga the flea demon are among the hanyou's allies, but those that had been helped by the hanyou along his lifetime had also come to see InuYasha finally get his due. The youngest, a lynx demon named Bunza, reminisced with Totosai about his training upon the craggy rock of the swordsmith's home, but the older demon kept trying to eat without the chatter or necessarily drawing too much attention to himself with all the noble brats around (since he'd forged the Tetsuaiga, damn snobs had been darkening his doorstep for a powerful weapon of their own. Too bad for them. Each and every newcomer to the weapon's maker got his normal lecture, not only about the necessary materials needed to forge but also the strength and heart of the wielder since his swords chose their master. Easiest way to keep 'em off his back.).

Even more, the army of the West is back in force, rested and ready for orders.

Aware of the excess of flurry, influx of visitors, and basically a mad cap of crap going on around him, Shippo pulls away from the activity and entertainments and keeps to himself. Other than a little mischief here and there (poor Kouga, the smell of feminine hygiene products from the last trick will never come out of his tail), he's been fairly hidden away from the bustle. Sure, his oddly sweet-smelling wolf companion could go to fights, teas, and the like, he was the son of the Northern lord, after all, but Shippo has had very little interaction with the upper echelons of demon society. With the scent of humans around him from his time from Miroku and Sango, he prefers to eat in his room and wander the forgotten corridors of the castle where few guards are posted and fewer people are about. He manages to see more of how the immense structure is laid out and where to find the best gardens to practice his fox magic without worrying about damaging something expensive.

Of course, he also found his way back to the training room that smells of Lord Sesshomaru and the deceased Inu no Taisho. He had kept a keen eye to the changing of the guards, figured out their schedules, and disguised himself to slip past when he needed to. Well, maybe he just changed shape to look like a guard in armor, but no one was the wiser and he wasn't snooping or anything, just going into one room in the family wing.

He could see why Lord Sesshomaru's scent is stronger here than anywhere else in the palace because, well, he liked it too. As long as he didn't get caught, no harm done.

Besides, he's healed up fine and working the kinks out of his elbow was necessary if he was going to start training with another weapon any time soon (other than regular old fox magic, of course). Not something he could learn at school, Shippo had already asked Sango to consider taking him on in weapons training after she gives birth from the next child. For the time being, he would just strengthen himself, mind and body. Not like he had to worry about anyone coming to look for him; the fox is, as he has been for the last five years, on his own.

III

Meanwhile, the dog-eared hanyou takes comfort in movement. He and Sesshomaru have been moving non-stop for the last two days, partially for his sake, but also because his snooty brother was apparently nosy as shit. The lanky bastard would pause at so many intervals, standing at the highest point (wherever it happened to be) and let his senses spread out—looking for more of those damn foreigners. Giving that disgusted expression a raised brow before the lord took off in the
direction he smelled trouble, the hanyou couldn't help but wonder if there was more Sesshomaru wasn't telling him about these guys. They'd already come across a few bands wandering around the forest, lost as fuck. Of course, BATTLE! He revels in the fight, not because he's a natural brawler (he certainly is, fuck you very much), but so his new senses and youkai can stretch out. He attempts to feel out this new him—to concentrate on the different power flowing through his half-breed veins. The possibilities seem to expand when he holds out Tetsuaiga's blade flat and the explosion of gold power flares out like a fan, not a huge, awe-inspiring burst like the Wind Scar, but a blow meant for closer quarters. It's, well, pretty neat considering Iron Reaver cut through 'em in the messiest fuck-all and the Blades of Blood needed too much of his own life fluid to work consistently. His more close quarters included up-close-and-personal hand-to-hand brawling or sword play. Something different like using Tetsuaiga and his altered youkai together was something so cool, he couldn't help but be impressed with himself. All-in-all, his enhanced awareness and power infusion are making him one bad-ass hanyou. Coming of age has its merits.

Just being the two of them, they didn't take any prisoners, but that many groups this far from the shore line still makes the hanyou suspicious. No way this many shitheads shoulda made it past the army, so something was definitely up and his brother didn't seemed surprised in the slightest to find more foreigners wandering about, and the tight-lipped bastard had only given him a half-assed shrug when he asked what else was going on here. Only after their skirmishes did the elder inu simply say more intelligence would be at the Western Palace. So, for the night they camped and the next day they'd be right on time to hang out in the palace before possibly heading out to spy along the country side. At least, the hanyou figured he'd give a quick wave to Shippo and the wolf, then head off to do a little spying of his own—not that he was sure Sesshomaru would give a fuck.

And so, night fell and their small fire throws shadow warrior in the field around them, the light dancing off silver hair. It was nice to have someone else do the hunting and eat with as the two inus chowed down on the boar chased with smoked fish. After their stomachs settled, the demon lord gives his brother a droll glance and stands effortlessly, walking further into the clearing out of the boundary of the fire. Buckles are undone and catches released as the expensive trapping of a daiyoukai are removed. Slowly, the demon lord set aside his armor and Bakusaiga, leaving only Tenseiga sheathed in his obi. A light pahhh and the fluffy tail is sealed away while the demon lord seems to gather his long hair together and bind it away from his face.

Stupidly, the hanyou just stares. Sure, he's seen his brother without any clothing (for three whole days!) but the hanyou has never seen him more naked than without all that hair framing his face. The style made his icy sibling seem younger, reminiscent of the blurry image of their father than appeared once after Sou'ungs was defeated all the way back to Hell.

A haughty brow lifts and the hanyou realizes he is not only standing but also staring. Obviously staring.

"Y-you look like him," he covers his ass gruffly, fiddling with the ties on his suikan's sleeves.

"Hn. Incorrect. You, brother, are closer to his incarnation," the demon lord taps the moon on his forehead for emphasis. Moving further, Sesshomaru pulls the Tenseiga, back to the hanyou, and falls smoothly into first position, high block. His arms are perfect width apart but conscious effort automatically straightens the natural kink in the back of his left knee—phantom pain always reminds him of a bokken or the flat of steel smacking the knee to demonstrate the weakness in his stance. He tightens the muscle in old anticipation and moves seamlessly into the next position. A twitch behind, an interruption in the flow of youkai, of movement. The daiyoukai, face hidden by his upturned arm, cracks a rare smile and dips with fluid grace for the upward thrust of next position. Red flutters at the corner of his peripheral.
Like a moth to the flame, or an inu to a bone, the hanyou's eyes are hungry for each stance; he is intrigued by having time to actually observe the style of his most formidable foe, the one he has not yet beaten. But, he's never had time to see each movement plain as day instead of with that crazy speed. Sure, he'd been fighting with Tetsuaiga for seven years, through all kinds of nasty fuckers, broken blades, new attacks, new weight, and loss of friends. No more distractions from his pack to keep the enemy off-balance until he could fire off the ending strike. Actually, for a while, Tetsuaiga was all he had in the world, friend or foe. With that mindset, he's been working on stuff like technique, positions and other crap like in his time alone (cause in some small part of his heart, before the bluster and fearlessness became his mask, the hanyou InuYasha wanted to be as fast and powerful as his cold older brother). He might have had to perch in a tree above some human samurai or near a midget training sessions to learn some of the fancy moves, but he could observe the positions and style as well as soaking up the critiques all students get. On his own, he tried mimicking the human way of the sword since there was nooooo way he'd be able to get close enough to watch a demon army without being sniffed out. But, what those humans could do, even the best they've got, couldn't hold a candle to how deadly the Lord of the West could make a blade.

When Sesshomaru began, twisting his ankles before moving into a pre-set position, the hanyou knew something was going down. His ears automatically perked as he recognized the stiff way his brother hefted the Tenseiga as the blow before death, the upward strike he'd only seen once and happened to survive. His mind flashes back to the coldest, most disdainful but determined look that came across his brother's face when Tokijin was hefted up and ready to impale him with finality. *Twitch.* Sesshomaru turns in the moment, jarring the hanyou to go for Tetsuaiga's hilt on instinct, but his brother's graceful attack swings around and the two are facing one another from a few feet apart, and the demon InuYasha is looking at in the now is not the same one at all. He breathes out, watching the perfect line from tip of Tenseiga down the arm and up to the next. One leg stretches out to the side while the tip is perilously close to the hanyou with the long arm and even longer blade, Sesshomaru's balance is precise on the soles of his boots.

With the fang a comforting weight, he hefts the weight with more precision than power, making his muscles lock into place. After a breath, graceful slide, change of the wrist upward slash; a certain way he uses his wrist and arm makes this a cut-through-anything move; only a second still to give InuYasha time to see the full picture before the next, defensive low, and the red trails his vision as the younger inu follows with a different gaze—an older one, sharp and calculating to absorb every muscle, every twitch. This is the older hanyou the demon lord picked up from the forest less than a fortnight ago—all the false bravado in his body couldn't hide years of torment and solitude.

With the last position, the demon lord sweeps the sword around to its' sheath and brings his feet together. He bows, actually *bows,* with eyes never leaving the hanyou.

Not one to be silent long, InuYasha's tongue starts wagging, "I've seen moves reeeal close to that from humans and stuff, but that style is different. The way you held your arms away from your body, and that swivel was wide. What do ya' call it, Sessho?"

*Sessho...Hn.* The demon lord calmly, instinctively caresses the hilt of the Sword of Heaven and physically steps out of the invisible circle that contained his progression, shaking off the feel of his father's ghost behind him.

"This style is one our father adapted once the Tetsuaiga was forged, soon after he met and mated Lady Izayoi. It is similar to the demon sword fighting techniques in general, but our sire had to alter his style for a fang twice the size and width of his other blades."

Blown away, the hanyou's eyes widen and both ears perk, "yer serious? He came up with a style
just fer Tetsuiga?" The hanyou moves to stand beside his brother, a foot apart, and pulls the sword without a transformation. Beside him, Sesshomaru gives a single nod, he pulls the Tensaiga and positions himself in the rudimentary pose.

"No offense 'er nothin' but...how come you know it? I mean you couldn't even touch it until recently, right? It used to shock the shit outta you." Watching the demon lord, InuYasha moves slowly to the second position and freezes, making sure he is doing it right. The flat of Tensaiga smacks the back of his left knee, making him wobble for a second. His heel digs in, making the back of the knee stronger.

Even through the night, Sesshomaru's eyes shine slightly with amusement. "And do you truly think it has always been as such?" His tone is mild but still a question. "Do you not believe I wished to protect your mother after his demise when other demons came for her life and yours?" Oh yes, he had wielded the Tetsuiga in the initial days following the Taisho's death—deterring all those that sought his little brother's life...a valid reason why his rule was never questioned and only few came to fight him for the Western throne. His utter lack of mercy made others truly fear him, perhaps more than they feared the Taisho.

Next position. Both demons move.

"B-but the black pearl..." the hanyou whispers while his arm is slightly tilted higher.

"Put there after you and your mother were forced from our home."

"Then—you always knew it was there."

"No. I only gave the fang to Totosai with instructions to hide it until the day you were prepared to claim it."

"..."

Again, this side of Sesshomaru makes the pang in InuYasha's heart thump with regret at all the pre-conceived notions of their past. How he wished things could have been different between them...

"And you have proven how much you have earned the honor of wielding this fang. Now, we shall hone your skill to be even more fierce than ever before."

The flutter of anticipation makes the hanyou's grin gleam through the darkness.

IV

Tanku gives his signature goofy smile while checking the healing injury of Advisor Xin's prisoner, the female with the strange and sad eyes. He is aware the female and her brother-in-arms don't speak the language but incessant chatter seems to soothe their hackles, whether they understand what he's saying or not.

For the past few days, he's come down to do what he can for the chained prisoners. He's helped bring sparse supplies, food, and maybe even some comfort. Sure, he might be young, but as a demon, the raccoon has seen and been in war since he was just a youngling—only shortly weaned when his parents were killed right in front of him. He knows more about war than Healer Kenshin thinks...and what this young raccoon knows better than anything else is that sometimes, the enemies have no choice but to fight. Sometimes, it's all about survival and not necessarily about what one believes in.

"There we are!" Chipper as always, the young healer finishes the wrap for the young female and
adjusts so he doesn't sit on his tail. The two are looking at him warily as he bring out three small loaves of bread, offering the food while he hungrily bites into the third—shrewdly realizing if he's eating it, they would be less suspicious of poison.

The male takes both loaves, sniffs them, and finally hands one to his sister. Silently, the three share an quite meal.

Finally, the female claps her hands together and bows her head, "a-ari-ga-to."

Delighted, the raccoon bows his head back, "anytime! I'm glad your wound is healing well. Hopefully, your people will petition for your release or something." He adjusts his pack and stands, the signal he is leaving them until tomorrow. "Just don't cause any trouble and you won't be treated too harshly, okay? I'll see you again tomorrow."

The two watch him leave, finally alone again. As the other healers also leave the prisoners to their own, the conversations start up again, many of the prisoners dejected at their incarceration. Badzar and Saranagerel exchange a look as one of their generals jingles his shackles for attention.

"The others are moving into place. It has been five moons since we have been separated and we will not have much longer to wait for our Khan to come to our rescue. We will bide our time and be ready."

The soldiers perk up a bit but unease is obvious throughout the dungeon.

"Who is to say our forces are still out there and haven't also been captured?"

"Or our Khan killed?"

"Maybe they raided a few villages and went home with the spoils."

"They could all be dead for what we know."

"This palace is a fortress of rock, how do we know they will be able to get through to free us?"

The general barks loudly, angrily, "SILENCE!"

Gathering himself, the older Mongolian snarls at the men's cowardice, "are you not men? Warriors of the highest rank? Were we not entrusted with this mission? Are we not here for a higher purpose? Cowards, all of you! To doubt our Khan like this, I am ashamed to be here with you."

Like a true believer, the general's words pour a soothing balm of belief over the downtrodden soldiers.

"Our Khan is brilliant in his plan. We will succeed where our Father and Grandfathers have failed. We will finish what they have started. We will win the day!"

Morale somewhat lifted, the general goes through the paces of the master plan quietly while the prisoners are left to their own devices, the intricacies again heartening the men that were despairing earlier.

Badzar, like a good soldier, listens dutifully. His sister, however, looks away.

"What is it you are thinking?" He whispers softly.

"..." Her eyes meet his and dart away.
"Do not believe what our traitorous sire tells you, sister. The Western Lord may be mighty, but we are also formidable. This plan will work."

Quietly, Saranagerel scoffs, "is that honestly what you believe worries me, brother? Do you truly have no heart for him? The man that created us?" Her eyes are suddenly angry, "he was abandoned by our people, left here to rot. If he would have returned, he would have been killed by the others for not dying during battle. Little wonder he stayed."

Furiously, Badzar's hand clamps down on her forearm, "do not let your feminine sentiments sway you from our mission, sister! That— that traitor means nothing to me. Nothing. He left us, sister, and our siblings. Our only allegiance is to our Khan now. Not him."

She swore, low and rough, surprising her brother with profanity. "It seems you are a fool, brother mine, to think the Khan cares about us enough to rescue us from this hell. He is no family to us. That man is our blood and you shame me for denying him so." She snatches her arm back and turns away from him to stare out of the barred window.

"He is the one that put us in chains, Saranagerel! We cannot make fire or water come to our command because of him."

"He didn't make us attack him either," she hisses over her shoulder.

"I should have never brought you along."

"I should have succeeded in drowning you in the wash water when we were children!"

"...you don't mean that. But surely you can see we have no other options than to stay with our own people and finish what we have started. That man may be on our side, but those he serves are not—they will kill us if they can."

*He's right,* a small voice in her mind agrees. *We are outsiders in a strange land.*

"Sister, these men raised us, taught us, stayed with us. How can we think of betraying them?" Voice softer now, Badzar looks ahead, hiding his own pain at the mention of his sire. "We owe them our loyalty if nothing else."

She sighs and brings her knees up to rest her weary head upon, "brother, I do not see how this will end for us and our people."

"Nor do I, sister, but I will be true to our cause until the end. It is all I know," the young warrior also sounds weary. "Other than that, I will protect you, sister mine. All we have here are each other."

Gently, he puts a hand to her shoulder and the stiff back eases a bit until she is leaning against him. Both take comfort in each other, listening to the others rail around them. Soon, the lords of the land would return and a celebration of their victory would commence. From there, the Khan's long standing plan would snap into action and the true battle would begin…

**V**

And fucking *finally,* the palace is in view.

To the gathered mass outside the gates of the West, the demon lords finally break over the horizon. The dragon riders had spotted the two moving close just a few hours ago and returned from their rounds to alert the advisor that the massive white dog was rampaging through the countryside. The
The massive white dog lifts his snowy head in time with the hanyou to release a victorious howl, a vindicating call. At that battle cry, the Westerners gathered outside raise their hands to cheer. Mostly, the loyal servants and villagers cry out with pride, but some of the aristocracy merely looks on.

At the head of the gathering, cold and calm Lady Arikura gives a sniff of disdain at the barbaric display—to her chagrin, a cry echoes from her back as Katsuo releases a throaty howl, startling her into a moment of fright.

Across the field, the huge dog huffs, rolling his red eyes at his elder brother's barbarism (he, as Lord, is required and expected to do such distasteful maneuvers). He gives a chuff as InuYasha rolls out with a full belly laugh and takes off at a rolling run, huge muscles working in graceful synch. The closer the two come, the louder the people cheer to show their support and more wildly the banners of the House of Taisho flare from the tops of the battlements.

The massive dog pauses before the carpets rolled out for them, head high. Another huff as Yao, flanked by three lesser advisors (while Kenshin voted, as usual, to ignore the pomp and ceremony and stay in the dungeons, checking on prisoners), comes striding right beside the royal carpet. All fall in a low bow to their lords, returned safely and victorious. Brothers united.

"My Lords! The West welcomes you home!"

More cheering again as Sesshomaru dips his muzzle down for InuYasha to jump down, Tetsuaiga resting on his hip, mane windblown, ruddy with health, and a picture of the young Inu no Taisho with puppy ears twitching in the wind. The hanyou gives a cheeky grin regardless of the scrutinizing glances and whispers coming from the visiting nobility (since this is, after all, their first real look of the Inu no Taisho's half-breed!). All the crap is nothing new, and he could probably give a lesser shit about them, but…probably not. InuYasha simply lifts a hand to Xin,

"Oi! Looks like we got back in time for a helluva party. Hope there's gonna be some good food 'cause I'm hungry as fuck for something other than what I can catch n cook over a fire."

A hale chuckle tackles the advisor from behind, a blessing considering he's been in a foul mood since his children have come to Nippon. "I am certain the West will have something to appease your appetite, Lord InuYasha."

In the blink of an eye, the huge dog shrinks in a burst of white light, and the demon lord is just suddenly in his bi-ped form, completely unruffled with full trappings on display and not a hair out of place. His usual mask of indifference in place, Sesshomaru is calm, undisturbed by the mass surround them on all sides. He scents the presence of his mother's kin as well as the cousins from father's family; along with InuYasha's familiar wood and spice, he feels oddly peaceful.

"As always, Xin, my brother demands sustenance after a long journey. I trust you have everything well in hand?"

"Of course, sire. It seems many have gathered to celebrate our victory over the invaders." A meaningful glance is traded nonchalantly between the two, the innuendo not lost on the demon lord.

"As is proper to welcome the Lords of the West. Gratefully, this Sesshomaru has your skills at his command."
"As is my pleasure, my lord," the advisor bows low again and the rest of the mass follows suit. Even Lady Arikura bows to her son and his half sibling.

Glancing around, InuYasha folds his hands in his sleeve, about to make a smart remark about all the bowing and scraping when there is an obvious tug on his long sleeve. With a blink, he glances down at the tiny, white-haired child standing just below his elbow, looking back up at him with wide golden eyes. A child's sucker is hanging out of the corner of her mouth and she pulls the sleeve closer to her nose, inhaling deep before looking back up at him.

In turn, the hanyou sniffs at her, catching the scent of inu.

"Hn. It is Katsuo's youngest," Sesshomaru stands closer, also looking down at the child.

"Oi, kid. What're ya sniffing me for?" The hanyou actually crouches down to put them eye to eye. She gives him a knowing glance and holds on to his sleeve. "Ah, I getcha. I don't smell like other inus or humans." He gives a shrug to the inquisitive look, "I'm made of both. see? So I smell like both."

The child's eyebrows squish together and then clear as she gives a nod in understanding and then those eyes go up to a new target for her attention.

Said targets immediately shift back in his hair; he knows that look in the kid's eye, that twinkle of mischief. Grubby, dirty little fingers pulling, tugging, twisting his sensitive ears…

"Don't even think about it, runt. No one touches the ears." He gave her the evil eye, ears flat, "sides, we need to find yer ka-san or something."

"Brother," Sesshomaru's voice above but when the hanyou glances up, he realizes the demon lord isn't talking to him. In fact, the bastard is looking out at a taller male in the crowd. The inu comes out on to the carpet, looking almost like Sesshomaru's fricking twin, all lanky and graceful with the half-moon on his forehead, spiky armor, and a fluffy thing. The only difference is his hair gathered in a neat tail…at least on the outside. When the male meets the demon lord's gaze, his serious expression melt away and his face splits in a wide grin, sparkling with genuine mirth. The taller inu even bring up a hand and claps Sesshomaru heartily on the shoulder.

"You look the same, little brother! All stiff and formal. You should relax some time or you'll be a stodgy old dog like Mother." And this guy laughs, actually laughs at the old bitch (who is fuming from not far away).

"Hn, as always, Katsuo, your temperament is...a refreshing change."

The older inu chorts, "don't hurt yourself trying to be nice, little brother," before he turns to the crouching hanyou and something in his gold eyes softens, causing crinkles at the corners. "InuYasha," he breathes, giving the hanyou a once-over.

Rising to his full height, the hanyou gives a glance at Sesshomaru's stone face before getting a good whiff of this Katsuo guy. Smells like Sesshomaru and the old bitch, so not his sibling per say…?

Gruffly, the hanyou gives a nod, "that's me."

"Brother!" The demon's eyes get a little watery and he strides upon the hanyou quickly, ignoring the step back in surprised retreat. Huge, long arms wrap around InuYasha in a tight embrace, pressing his cheek against the warmth of this inu's shoulder instead of the armor's hard plate. His nose is obscured by the scents of the long tail of hair just over the inu's shoulder. His ears, now
standing up with his surprise, flick when the warm air of breath brushes over them,

"How very honored I am to welcome you to our family, little brother."

Twitch. His claws bite into the soft meat of his palms, keeping him from being shaken by these very sincere words—words that are wobbly from this inu's mouth. The male seems like he is trying to keep himself together as well as he finally let InuYash at arm's length but keeping his biceps in a grip. The smile is softer, making his face strange considering how he resembled Sesshomaru and Arikura.

"I am Katsuo, InuYasha, Sesshomaru's half-brother, and ruler over the Inu Lands," a tug on his sleeve reminds the lord of his youngest pup looking up at him. He releases the hanyou to look down at her, not noticing InuYasha backs up almost into Sesshomaru. But, the inu's attention has is taken by the tiny addition to his brood. Her little face pulled in a frown, she waits patiently for her father's attention before lifting up her arms to be carried. "Ah, precious one, your ka-san will have both our hides if you don't stop running off."

The child easily ignores her chichue to look back at the hanyou,"It seems you've met my youngest, Emiko."

The toddler blinks up at the ears again and the twitching triangles slide meaningfully back in his hair.

To cover up the strangely embarrassing warmth in his gut, InuYasha merely gives a nod.

"There will be time during the evening meal for InuYasha to become more acclimated to the extended family. It has, however, been a tedious trip and time to refresh ourselves is necessary." Smoothly, Sesshomaru steps up beside the uncomfortable hanyou, giving the younger inu time to actually glance around at how many other silver-haired demons are a part of "the family."

"Of course," Katsuo's voice softens as the toddler in his arms lays her head against his shoulder, obviously practiced in ignoring the deadly spikes. "Hopefully, we will have time to speak during dinner, little brother."

"My time ain't that valuable, so not a big deal," his cheeks pink, the hanyou is at a loss for what else to say to this kind male. One of the few demons that has ever treated him with any decency.

The older inu chuckles again, those eyes softening in recognition. "Any time you have for me will be precious indeed."

"Keh,"

"Hn. You will not think such after half of day of Katsuo's ramblings over his brood." Sesshomaru, ignoring Arikura's obvious step closer to the royal carpet in an attempt to gain his attention, turns with a "come, InuYasha" over his shoulder. The hanyou gives a little wave and turns, following over his brother's left shoulder. He's so caught up looking around at the bowing nobles and servants closely that he doesn't notice Sesshomaru's subtle shift and is suddenly beside his older brother while entering the yawning gates of the Western Palace.

Chapter End Notes
This chapter was originally six months after the last posting and here's what brought it back:

I was washing dishes late one night when I had this figurative re-set. Standing at the sink one night, a sudden and strange cold wind blew across the kitchen and the pressure of youkai filled the small room; our favorite hanyou felt the need to come for a visit. Arms crossed, ears twitching, and that newly-matured expression from the story made him more real than my imagination ever could; it seems the damn well opened up somehow and let the hanyou visit me himself. The imagined conversation went something like this:

"I didn't expect you to come all the way here," plates first.

Snuffling as if the inu clears his nose of the stench of the twenty-first century, "yeah, well….Keh, seemed like yer not keepin' up yer end of the deal, wench. Lucky for you, the bastard can't come through to the future."

My hands still at the thought of Sesshomaru become this real, the blood drains out of my face, "thank God for small miracles, then."

He actually chuckles, not expecting a comeback against the scariest motherfucker in the Feudal Era, "not bad, not bad. Guess there's one thing we can agree on. But, I gotta say," the hanyou shakes his head a little, "he's not such an asshat now. I mean, I'm good with that, just so's you know."

He's blushing! I can hear it in his tone, a bashful admission. Cleaning off a glass, I quirk an eyebrow where he can't see, "I wondered how far you were going to let me go with all that."

"Oi!" Padding of bare feet over my linoleum, "it's embarrassing enough you had to tell all of it… I mean, even the…private stuff! I thought my asshole brother was going to burst a vein when he read it. 'This Sesshomaru would not say such drivel.' Or some shit like that."

I snicker but am still just as relieved the demon lord is stuck in the feudal era. "So you need a break from the intimacy with Sesshomaru. I'm okay with that, you know? There's a lot that happened after all that."

He groan, "didja have to say intimacy? You've already pansied me out enough, okay? Can we just do some cool fight scenes er something? All the middle stuff is boring as fuck." With this, he huffs, sitting down at my little island. While he watched, I pause long enough to move over the cupboard for a package of ramen. I know I've got at least twelve packs for impromptu lunches. He knows what going on and hums a little when I pop a bowl in the microwave.

"Boring but relevant. You started coming in to your power and combining you with Tetsuiga instead of the other way around."

"Like I said, boring as fuck."

"C'mon," I glance at his intent face, staring with determination at the microwave as the smell of chicken-flavored noodles filled the air. He doesn't look up. "There's a really great scene I want to cover, so some of it has to be next."
Growling in his chest as the microwave beeps down, "which scene?"

I grin. "you'll see."

"Whatever."

I have to laugh a little, too. Maybe that's why writing escaped me, the hanyou had become less real…?

"…I get it, you know." Watch the water warm cut through red sauce instead of the imagination behind me. "I've got to do something, and you're tired of waiting."

"Yup. That covers it. Just do me a favor and get something started. We'll come and fill in the blanks when ya need it." He takes a serious pause, "it's time for us to move again."

The microwave beeps, finished, and jars me. All the dishes are stacking nearly in the drainer, and the water was just running and my hands are pruney. I glance over but no one is at the island or standing behind me or checking the fridge. I was alone…with a warm bowl of ramen…

So, yeah. This is why I wrote this chapter.
In his wildest imagination, he had never conceived his rein would begin this way.

Toshiro, his great father, had long been a warlord, the leader of his pack for hundreds of years until time and violence forced him to become a general of the rogue army—a Taishou, the Inu no Taishou. With nothing but conflict and slaughter throughout the lands, occasionally making its way into the lands his sect of Inus called their own, Toshiro had little choice but to take up arms and fight against more than just a few enemies; the way of the clan was over and a new era begun: the path of conquest. The machinations of other elders among the numerous Shiro Inu and the discussion circles had lead them to push Toshiro into a broader scope for the future of their land and people. Rather than fight one after the next and the next, one leader would need to rise to maintain the peace.

For too long, the demon tribes of the West and North had run rampant with no regard to other demons or humans; law had to be established or chaos would continue to rain down upon the land. And Toshiro was brought to realize all this centuries before his son was to be born and sent out in the harsh world alone; once the demon came of age, the two could raise their army to bring order, unification, to the land. And come of age, the young Touga did. Nearly two hundred years of isolation, exile in which Toshiro’s older brother, the boy’s uncle, hunted the child into the ground in the name of The Great Trial. Finally, when the young inu appeared with a weapon of such awesome strength, one made out of his own fang and the evil soul of an enemy dragon, did the Elder Counsel decide he was ready to be returned unto his kinsmen.

Of course, as younglings do, the younger inu felt nothing but malice and betrayal at the hands of his family for abandoning him, for giving in to this barbaric custom; yet, as time wore on and he was more integrated into his clan's daily life, the goodness in him started to come through when his clan was attacked and needed protection. The weak should not be stomped under the might of the strong, and he, as a former weakling forced to be stronger or die, would forever pit his sword against oppression. Since his sire, the one he formerly despised for leaving him, spoke of the same ideal, to fight against the violence in order to unite the West so the weak would always have protection, Touga couldn't help but agree: the path of Conquest would lead them down the right path. He and his sire stood together in the fight for what should have been right.

However, the best of intentions, regardless of how certain his ideals, were distorted once Toshiro's favored second mate (the one he took after Touga's birth father, Toshiro's Beta mate, died) betrayed him with another demon in the clan.

From there, the female left their ranks and took the leader sanity with her.

This spiral of his father's downfall took decades and hundreds of demon lives to hit rock bottom and to shake the son out of blindness at his father's folly. In the beginning, the General seemed mad with the desire to conquer the smaller villages and tribes around his palace; he gave his army no rest from the constant battle sweeping across the land like a wall of fire, consuming everything in its' wake. Those that opposed the General were tortured and hung from trees to show the ultimate dishonor to their houses, and not even the women or children were safe from his wrath. He was insane for conquest.
And the returned, reinstated Touga had only been part of his father's house for thirty years when the madness began; as the second-in-command, he watched this utter destruction for fifty years, even aided the General in his quest for ultimate justice, until he finally had enough of the sickening slaughter. The younger inu took the lives of countless, innocent women and children while under his father's order, staining his hands so crimson that the blood could never be washed away. At night, the faces haunted his nightmares, drove the still-young inu to an abyss of emptiness even the Trial could not force upon him. For he had sacrificed his own morals and honor by following these orders, all to keep his father from exiling him once again; to his later shame, he betrayed those he intended to protect and this failure did not leave him, even to the end of his life.

The realization of what he was really doing came to pass after his nose grew numb to the scent of newly spilled blood in a village full of farmers, merchants, bakers, and families—those that depended on the ruling class to protect them from this very same fate—nothing more than the strong preying on the weak. The jarring realization came when the tang of metal didn't make him start with the cloying sweetness, and the tall inu stayed his raised hand for an important moment that would change everything.

A cowering family staring up at him, death incarnate with the sword Sou'nga clenched so hard in one massive fist that his knuckles strained, and something in the young but battle-hardened inu simply snapped. Nausea rolled through him in a wave as the mother put herself in front of her children and stared him down like the bravest, most honorable samurai; while she asked him for mercy for her children, offered her life in exchange for theirs, his knees trembled just once and the random thought flittered through the haze of blood: **what have I become, to kill this woman and her pup...**

His heart slammed against his ribs, a meaty thump that softened his resolve. **The path of the honorable ruler...**

"What are you waiting for?"

Toshiro's musty scent swarmed, drenched in old viscera.

"What it is that you are waiting for, my son?"

Fist tightens on Sou'nga and that damned sword whispered the same sweet words as his sire, the same lust for power and blood and the sweet feeling of control when the life or death was in the palm of his hand...it would be nothing to keep going on, to move through more until none in the land would stand to oppose them. They would ultimately succeed in the goal of uniting the West under one rule, of ending the chaos and gaining control over the lawless demons and humans that posed a threat to the whole land. All would cower at the might of the Inu Clan, for no one could beat them as long as the two and their army could stand.

**But there is might and then there is right. Haven't I learned this all before...?**

"Touga!"

Someone is breathing hard, too hard, and it is him. The muscles in his back tightened under all that armor and he-on his own- straightens. "...I will **not**."

Toshiro draws back, "What- what say you?"

And here, the traces of an honorable ruler that would make this young Inu the later Inu no Taishou of legend, makes it first appearance as he turns to face down the monarch that he had blindly followed with faith bordering on obsession. The younger inu, one that has cut his teeth in the wilds,
fighting for his life, pulled himself up to stand tall and give the full benefit of his eye to the other that sired him.

"I say I will no longer stare down into the faces of innocent people and raise my blade." The inu's eyes turned red and his youkai swirled, "I say I have brought shame upon myself and my title. I SAY I will no longer slaughter women and children!" He bared his teeth, upper lip curling in a snarl.

Toshiro, taken aback for only a moment, snarled back at his offspring, "you dare defy me? You dare when here I attempt to build your future kingdom! All of this has been for you, boy, and yet you stand against me. Traitor!"

"I am not traitor to you, dishonorable sire! It is you who have betrayed the people of this land, you who has shamed me in carrying out your perverted will and I, too, am unclean." A flash as Sou'ng glinted with malice, "I will regain my honor."

Enraged, Toshiro threw his head back to roar of rage; the true fight ensured when he also lifted his sword.

Young though he might have been, Touga had a lifetime of survival on his side. He knew little else than fighting and stood toe to toe, met blow for blow, and found his true potential in the earth-shattering battle against his own father. The elder inu charged him immediately following his disobedience, and unfortunately didn't expect the younger to stand his ground against a full front attack; yet, Touga would not be moved, would not waiver from his conviction. His powerful blade tasted Toshiro's blood; Toshiro's blade drew Touga's. The dance went on and on.

Around them, the weary soldiers darted out of the path of destruction, closely watching the action but not interfering—for these demons owed both inus their loyalty. Regardless of whom the victor proved to be, these demons respected power, and the winner would indeed be formidable enough to follow.

Of course, Toshiro was older, more seasoned, and a merciless fighter when the situation called for him to be so; Touga, however, was fighting for something more precious—to regain his honor and the right the terrible wrongs that had already been done by his own hand.

Long into the next day and even into the next night, the two when round and round from one end of the island to the other, passing by other villages, other territories, other demon colonies without pause. Father versus son, ruler versus follower, wrong versus right. The two combatants bled for their own agendas and ideals, yet through the whirlwind of crashing blades and powerful attacks, not word was spoken. The son no longer had interest pleading to his father's principles, and the father had no desire to convince his traitorous son to rejoin him.

Finally, as the sun graced the horizon to give way to night, the new moon following the day's descent, did the older dog finally give way to his numerous wounds, strain, and blood-loss. He thrust his sword in a finally attempt at a true killing blow, certain his offspring would not be able to dodge a lightning-quick move right to his mid-section; while a part of his inner self wept at the side of his mind at killing his child, the warrior roared in triumph at victory over a worth opponent. Yet, the younger dog, sensing his demise, powered by the lack of a moon, and the heat in his blood, moved just enough that the sword slid over his armor without penetration and the sword in hand came down with the full power of muscle behind it. The older dog's armor gave way under the strength of that blow, a moment frozen when the blade penetrated his body cavity, ran though ripe viscera to spill blood up his throat and out of the gaping holes in his body.

For the old warlord, the look in his son's eyes when the killing strike was delivered sealed his
long-held belief that Taishou would be the kind of ruler he himself could never be. The previous betrayal forgotten as agony of the blow was replaced by blessed numbness of on-coming death, Toshiro had the ability to smile.

Realization of this made the young Taishou pause amidst the pump of adrenaline and victory to realize he in effect just delivered the killing blow to a tyrant...that was also his sire.

His golden eyes widen with the recognition of what he has done, "Father..."

Cough, "and y-you, my son...The hon-orable ruler..."

Death swooped from the heavens to pull his soul from the shell of his body while Touga's heart hammered against his breast plate and tears threatened to eat his vision... For the weak, he had stood against the strong, and that would be his stance for the rest of his days. The new warlord threw back his head and howled in triumph and grief.

II

The palace uproar has died to a din since the Lords of the West have returned with less flourish and finesse than the royalty is accustomed to experiencing. Some are even a bit miffed at being ignored the moment the two returned, but the mass still falls in to meander back inside the palace where preparations for the evening meal would be underway. The family would be honored to a traditional dinner without advisors, politicians, messengers, and representatives cluttering up the table with business from all corners of the West. The tradition, one begun by Toshiro, the father of Touga, was one the family more or less assumed Sesshomaru would honor since his noble sire also called the family alone to his table on his eve returned from battle (even though Sesshomaru had never before called a gathering such as this and remained alone in the palace). Many were already planning what styles they would wear to the all-important meal.

While the rest of the mass follows, Sesshomaru and InuYasha take the center staircase with Xin following; ahead of them, Kenshin waits on the third landing. The brothers move in amiable silence, just their patter of boots and bare feet echoing between them since the others are far behind and the two advisors wait for their lords to start questioning the state of the lands before breaking the quiet. Yet, more importantly, the two take in this long-awaited sight, the sons of Touga walking side-by-side in their family home, returning victorious, united. It is a vision the late lord would have given anything to witness.

Right by the painting of Touga and Izayoi, Kenshin's ears twitch as he bows low to the returned lords, decked out in full plated armor instead of his usual casual clothing; when the fox moves to the side, a sashimono flares at his back, the Western banner indicating his allegiance. Sesshomaru appreciates the advisor's forethought. Beside him are two handmaids and two servant boys that bow right along with him and wait for the lords to continue up the staircase before following behind to serve the lords before the evening meal.

Itching with curiosity, the hanyou keeps his peace even though he is wondering how many shiro inus are gathered here and why so many just showed up. Keh, he doesn't remember seeing many of them with armor and swords trying to cut up some of those right bastards before they hit the shore. As a matter of fact, the "brother" from downstairs isn't one that came with the army, InuYasha is sure. So, what? They all just showed up after all the fighting is done? Not that he knows the whole story, but it seems cowardly to let it all ride on Sesshomaru's shoulders like that (not that the bastard needs a hand with a couple of thousands or anything). Yet, the hanyou's thoughts are bouncing with possibilities and questions. Sure, he was blown away seeing the mass of white-haired, golden-eyed demons crowding around the fancy carpet, 'specially since he'd never seen
another inu but Sesshomaru in all his time wandering the land, not to mention a whole fucking clan just laying around somewhere. His immediate reaction was to be ticked off as hell and ignore the lot of ‘em (probably too good to have a hanyou in their bloodline anyhow) since they couldn’t be bothered to come and fight against invaders and stuff, but he had a thought it might just be the whole trial bullshit that kept them away (maybe).

Of course he didn't want to seem like an idiot with Xin and Kenshin following behind them, so he kept the questions for Sesshomaru to himself, hoping they'd have some time before the evening meal so he didn't seem like a complete dumbass for not knowing some kind of traditions of the inu and embarrass the shit outta himself. But yeah, until he knew the whole story, he didn't want to see any of them following until he had some time to himself.

Sesshomaru, on the other hand, seems lost in thought, distant, as they come to the guards of the palace's family wing and a myriad of inu scents mix with his and InuYasha's. Eyes narrowing in displeasure (since the majority merely invaded without a by-your-leave, hn, an annoyance to tolerate), he keeps his face schooled as they move down the massive hall to his own quarters and the one already prepared for InuYasha at his express order. He had many items removed from storage, cleaned, restored, and readied for his little brother's use.

After Lady Izayoi had left the palace with her infant son, the demon lord had been inconsolable and angry at any nuisance. The pain he experienced passing her empty quarters had been too great, and he ordered everything stripped from the room and put away until he could distance himself enough to bare the scent of her, Father, and InuYasha on each piece of furniture. Now that the Trial was finally through and they could face some semblance of peace, the Western Lord found it fitting to restore the items used by their father and the lady for InuYasha's personal quarters. The ornately carved furniture, a new futon, and even some relics from their father's youth might go far in giving the hanyou a piece of their sire as well as an idea as to how much the General cherished Lady Izayoi. These items could not replace the two but may aid in easing some of the old hurts… not that any of it had for him.

And here, the lord stops outside the room that was her quarters and living space. His mind blurs for a few precious moments, wandering back to a simpler time when he stood outside this door, shoulder to shoulder with the Taishou, and waited for her to bid them entry.

"Ah! My mate and first son have finished for the day. Izumi, please, prepare food for my honored men and bring it with haste so they may find respite for the night." She could always sense them near.

And on this cue, his great father opened the door to her smiling face and her sitting room warm, welcoming. Her face lights up with a bright smile only for them while her hand rubs the protruding belly below her kimono….

"Oi."

Blink and another pair of golden eyes are staring directly into his own, not from a greater height like the Taishou, but from right below his chin.

"Sesshomaru?" Whatever the hanyou sees in his brother's face is enough to make the fearless inu hesitate.

The elder inu simply looks up at the edge of the doorframe to gain space from the ghosts, "this is to be your quarters, InuYasha, the one and the same that belonged to the Lady Izayoi while she stayed in the Western Palace."
The younger also turns to the door, more solemn and thoughtful than before. "Mother…"

"Hn. I…had imagined this may give you some piece of the past you have been denied. The furnishings from her rooms have been cleaned and restored for your use. Even some of Father's items, clothing and such, have been prepared for you."

Ah, there the ears perk. InuYasha clears his throat, "keh…That's—that's really great. Thanks. I'll take care of their stuff."

A small, imperceptible smile lights the demon lord's mouth. "Hn. It is now yours to do with as you please, little brother."

The two share a similar look that belays the necessity for words but still maintains a simple but effective bond through their shared loss and hopeful future.

"I will give you time to prepare for the evening meal." He gestures to one of the maids and a younger servant boy. "These two will see to your needs and prepare your bathing room. I will return when it is time to dine."

"That works for me. You know how me and food get along." The hanyou waves his brother away, "I'll see ya then."

The demon lord gives a nod to the maid as he turns away, and the two bow low in respect as he sweeps down the hall with his graceful strides; the other two maids follow him, leaving a very thoughtful hanyou to turn back to the massive door before him.

And here, he hesitates and lifts one clawed hand to lie right over the intricate carving of an inu with its' head thrown back in mid-howl. Never one to be tentative, the younger demon gathers his resolve, for fuck's sake, it's just a room—nothing special! Four walls and a futon so I don't have to sleep outside in a tree. That's it, just four walls, ceiling, and floor. No big deal.

"Sire?" The young maid, one that (like the rest of the castle attendants) had been utterly dying to see the lord's infamous younger brother, is gentle and somewhat afraid of raising his ire by overstepping herself. But, the dog-eared inu seems to have forgotten her and Hichiro's presence entirely and starts at the sound of her voice. When he turns to blink at her, she gets a glimpse of his handsome yet sheepish grin.

"Uh-yeah. So, I gotta get ready for dinner, I guess." Meaning, he expects them to bow out and leave him to it, but the maid gives a happy nod.

"Of course, sire! Please allow us to attend to you," she bows low and Hichiro scrambles to follow suit.

An ear cocks up, what the hell does that mean? Whoa, wait a second…is that some kind of come on? His face immediately heats with a blush.

"Hirchiro can start your lordship's bath, and if I may, sire, I will set out the clothing you choose for your dress tonight." She straightens with a kind smile and catches the Prince's expression. Not one she would have expected from an inu so much younger than she—the look in his eyes is skeptical, so very…old. In the moment of time, the maid feels just a little bit sorry for the young lord.

But, he shrugs off the expression in an instant, "sure, that sound all right to me. I mean, thanks, you know? I'll take all the help I can get."

A giggle escapes before she can bite it back.
"Sides, I've never had to wear that formal crap anyhow. Probably a real pain in the ass, ain't it?"

This time, her laughter tinkles down the hallway, "oh! My lord is so very entertaining! I'm certain we can get you presentable for the royal family, sire. I have no doubt in my skills." She glances down at the boy, "I think we've got this one, ne Hichiro-chan?"

The boy's tail wags and he throws himself forward in a bow toward InuYasha, "hai, sire! Miniko-san has the best style of anyone at the Palace. That's why Lord Sesshomaru chose her to be your attendant." He straightens with a shit-eating grin, "no worries at all, my lord!" The two attendants exchange a nod of confirmation; they would make sure everyone would be shocked at how handsome their lord would be entering the dining room!

The hanyou simply blinks at the two, grinning at one another with determination. This simple acceptance, this unquestionable loyalty to him, a guy they'd never even seen before, strikes the hanyou with a pang of nostalgia for his old pack. These two weren't cowed into serving him and didn't seem put-out about him being nothin more than a half-breed. They seemed pretty real, to respect him as part of the royal family (even though this 'sire' shit was already getting right the fuck on his nerves). They almost make him want to stay.

Mentally, the inu gives himself a shake. He's not going to make any long-term plans just yet.

While he is just staring at the daunting door, Miniko is busy with instructions to send the young Hichiro to get firewood to heat the lord's bath; when she turns back, the lord has not moved at all. He still stands in the same spot with hands hidden in his sleeves, back stiff, and staring at the door like he could see beyond the thick wood. Misinterpreting his inner turmoil, Miniko blanches when she realizes the lord must be waiting for her to open the door for him! Of course, the lord would expect her to jump to and she scoots quickly over to bow low before palming the door and swinging it open wide.

"As you please, sire."

The smell, not the initial look, is what hits the young hanyou first and foremost, bringing him to a whole world of nostalgia he reserves only for times he wants to feel safe and loved. The feeling wells deep within his being, beneath all the bluster and bad-ass, below the fighting skills and survival instincts honed in the wilds…

"Mother…"

A tremble shakes him from head to foot. "Oi."

The voice is quiet and Miniko looks up from her bow, "sire?"

Slight pause in which she glimpses at the young lord's face and straightens automatically; Miniko, young for a demon but still a little over three hundred, catches her breath not at his expression but as his eyes. The stormy gold resonates with misery in the candle light, at odds with his neutral expression. He is a youth filled with such strong emotions, with such pain and despair that she must fight against her nature. The nurturer in her wants to convey comfort in any way she can. "My lord…”

"No offense, but could ya give me a few minutes? Alone, I mean. Then, I'll lookit the clothes and stuff."

Miniko draws her hand back reluctantly, her heart aching for that soft tone. "Of course, InuYasha-sama. Please, allow me to get you something small to eat, perhaps? Then I will return and aid you
"Sounds good. Thanks." All still with that soft tone, but she cannot overstep herself further and bows again before leaving the sad young inu to take his first steps into that room and face whatever haunts him.

InuYasha, however, barely realizes he's spoken to the maid and doesn't even turn when she leaves. Instead, the images behind his eyes are blurry with age and painted with the color of memory. The door opened and floods him with the smell of his mother, so strong and real that he could almost imagine her sitting inside this room in a chair by a window so she could look out while doing needlepoint or pouring tea; this smell is more than just some ghost of a scent from old clothes or a once-owned hair pin. Even through the smell of cleaning cloths and many maids that prepared the room, Lady Izaoi's perfume and natural herbal smell overpower all others. Just like at his Aunt's home all those years ago, Mother's scent overpowered the jealousy and spite of the others in that household to make him feel safe. The times when she took him out to the woods with a packed bento, taught him herbs and roots, or just sat under a tree with him on her lap to tell stories, all the blurry memories rise with the clarity to strike him with the power of a fist in his gut.

Sure, he always kept the memory of his mother's tears at the forefront of his mind—always a reminder that not everyone would hate him because of his mixed blood, that there were some out there that could love him as much as she—but these memories were ones he hoarded like gold, kept away from any poison-spewing bastard or bloody brawls he'd suffered in his long life since she died. The ones that made him warm and loved, the ones that reminded him how powerful she had been to shelter him, the ones that made him believe she and his father had created him because they truly loved one another. How else could she stand to be that close to him otherwise?

"Tell me more about him, Mother. Tell me the stories again."

Perched under a towering elm, once reminiscent of Goshinboku, the tiny inu looked up at the gentle face, warming at her small smile. He sat on her lap, layers of her kimono underneath his bum cushioning him for his favorite time with her, when she would tell him stories after they finished the snacks she had made that morning.

Belly full, he contentedly snuggles deeper into his mother's embrace.

"Oh, more stories, ne?" Her singsong tone floated over him, a balm to his Aunt's screeching voice. "You've heard them all so many times, my son."

"Hai, but please, Ka-san. Please?"

She laughed softly and gently stroked his ears, "hai, hai. I cannot deny my sweet little boy. Perhaps I will tell a story you haven't heard often then."

"Yea! A story," and here he snuggled deeper and prepared to listen.

"Ah, this story begins long ago, when the West was still terribly overrun with demons and humans that meant to do harm to others. Such a long time ago for ones such as I, but only a blink to ones like you, Ya-chan. It was a time of unrest and your father was still young as far as demons are concerned, but he was still strong and brave with all the qualities of a leader. However, there was much bloody war in this time and many attempted to kill your father rather than be united under his rule. However, one of his foes was more dangerous than the rest, one that lives to this day still..."

While the story she told plays in the background, the hanyou's feet automatically take him through
the doorway and into the room. Not that he had personally seen the inside of many mansions (not even once that damn Monk joined their ranks), but he's almost certain this is more impressive than most, certainly more than just four walls, a ceiling, and a futon.

The space for this sitting room is huge, large enough for him to spar with four or five people at least, and the futon he can see in the next room is big enough for three, maybe four demons twice his size. He moves like a ghost, silently through the next doorway to look at the main sleeping room.

A wooden wardrobe takes up a third of one wall and is painted finely with scenes of a forest and animals through the seasons, all four doors are closed to show the full scene in action. Wolves frolic around trees, birds perch in the strong branches, rabbits cozy in dens, and more ornate details he can pick out. However, the source of the smell wafting through the room emanates from the covered chest at the foot of the futon, something he wanted more time and privacy to explore. Always another day.

He stands before the closed chest and takes another deep breath, allowing himself another moment to imagine his mother's hands stroking his ears in the absent way she used to, then his eyes open, and he finishes glancing around. By the window, pillows and small stands make a perfect place for tea that he had seen in his imagination; the place where his mother and father might have sat before retiring for the night. And the old man would have stayed here with her, at least some of the time, or why else would there be three sword mounts on the wall right above the futon?

Walking around now, the hanyou runs tentative fingers over the glossy sheen of the wardrobe without opening it. The scent is fainter than his mothers, more musky and male, one that has the undertones of old steel and the fine hint of blood. Father… This wardrobe has provided a more grounded scent to put to the picture and as an inu, this is much more important than any material things that might be behind these wardrobe doors. This scent, more real than the ghostly vestiges left on the hilt of Tetsuiga, twines around his senses like demon vines, crawling into his brain with more of a picture than he could have gotten from Sesshomaru's stories or kicking the ever-loving shit out of the old man's enemies.

Quickly, the hanyou backs away with that scent still in his nose, turns abruptly and walks out of the bedroom, closing that door behind him. Heart pounding, InuYasha blinks quickly to turn away the softness of his emotions and moves to stand by one of the windows in this sitting room instead, looking down into the courtyard of the palace.

Other furnishings escape his notice when the sound of footsteps and the swish of fine silk make one ear twitch behind him.

The smile that curves his features is anything but friendly, "Keh. Bet seein' me here reeeeally pisses you off, huh?"

"On the contrary," Lady Arikura stays outside the doorframe respectfully, "this is and has always been your home, young hanyou."

InuYasha doesn't turn around but looks at her over his shoulder; whatever is painted all over his face makes the lady laugh, a mirthless sound.

"Now, young inu. There's no need for that face. You have been returned to your rightful position and the universe has brought about what should be."

"Never thought you were in to divination, Ba-ba. Besides, I'm only hanging around long enough to make sure there ain't no other wandering assholes that need Wind Scarred to Hell. Then, I'm going
back-" going back where?

The lady's golden eyes narrow in scrutiny, and she seems to read his mind, "going back where, young hanyou? To the human village you have not visited in more than a year? Back to wandering the lands and laying your head on any rock or in any tree you are able to find? Surely the palace is a more suitable choice for home and hearth?"

"It ain't home t' me. This is Sesshomaru's place, not mine," he turns now to bare his teeth in an angry grin.

She lowers herself to chuff at him, "this is where your Mother lived with your sire in happiness. Had the human not kidnapped her, you would have been born here and spent some of your formative years; had you not gone through The Trial, you would have grown into a maturity here, learned to rule at your Father's knee with Sesshomaru at your side. Even though you have not known it until now, the Western Palace has always had a place for you."

"Coulda, woulda, shoulda. Like I already said, I ain't all that interested in titles and shit. 'Sides, Sesshomaru has say in who stays n who goes. His place, not mine."

"Believe it or not, this Lady does know her son and can guess at his intentions. He has offered you a place here or this room would remain closed off, locked away for the times when he and he only can come to reminisce about the past. Has my royal son not even offered you this room for your own?"

"...it's only for the short-term." Not that he owes her any explanation.

"Hn. Pity." The lady brings one manicured hand up to place a finger on her lower lip, "and here I was hoping for some decent opposition. It is the only reason I agreed to accompany my eldest offspring, Katsuo. I was hoping you may spar with this Lady once again and perhaps we could both hone our skill. Well, if you have no intention of staying, then I will have no one worth beating in the palace."

Ah, his eyes sharpen with a predatory gleam. "Didn't we already do something like that? Y'know, when I got through that, whatever n the hell move you tried to pull, and had this steel at yer head?"

Her smile is somewhat smug since the Lady knows she has the younger inu right where she wants him. "It would not have been prudent for this Lady to kill one that her son spent so longer awaiting to return. However, young hanyou, it has been quite some time since there was strain in battle for this inu. It would be…interesting… to see the extents of which you would be capable should you have some actual training. That would take some time, of course, but there is little doubt you could learn such techniques with some practice."

InuYasha huffs, his spine straightening, "oi! Y' gotta be fucking kidding me with this shit. I've added a shit-ton of new attacks to Tetsuaiga 'cause I learn fast and I'm good at adapting when I need to."

"Ah, but therein lies your weakness: when you need to. How quickly would you learn if your life or the lives of those around you were not in danger? How long would it take for you to learn the ways of the sword training just as you are?"

"Well, I—" well, shit. "I dunno. Never really had time for that crap, you know with trying to survive and all."

"Then perhaps you should attempt to find out. Simply so you know your own extents and certainly
you would wish to know what effects your maturation has had on your demonic powers, not just knowing you have grown a few inches. Logically, it would be better for you to find out here in a stable environment rather than when you are in the middle of a battle."

He doesn't have a good comeback for this observation, 'cause, dammit, the old bitch has a point. He's had some time in the last few days but not nearly enough to make him an expert in the new youkai generated by his body. But, fuck, then again, when did he ever have safety before?

Waving a hand at the old lady, InuYasha glances away from her. "Whatever. Look, Ba-ba, like I said, I'll stay while Sesshomaru makes sure we don't gotta go hunt down more of these Mongolians. I didn't say I was leaving right now."

"Then you would have no objections meeting tomorrow to begin your training. Very well, this Lady will make sure the training room is prepared and shall be available after the morning meal." Regally, Lady Arikura sees the maid hot-footing it down the hall with a covered dish. "It seems your servant is returning to dress you for the meal. Until then, brother of my youngest pup."

"W-what? Wait a minute-!" He blinks at the empty doorway, but the old bitch has already moved on. "I never said I wanted to learn from you, Ba-ba!"

Silence is the reply, broken as Miniko comes baring a snack before dinner.

III

Matsu, high upon the palace's battlements, is giving orders while walking over the side facing the sea. The young panther demon furiously scribbling while walking is nodding even though the human isn't even looking at him,

"—make certain we have an extra detail on the ground closest to the woods on the eastern sides and watching for ships on the cliffs. If these Mongolian bastards are anywhere near us, I want every man and demon ready to stand."

The panther's mouth moves while he writes, ready to stand. Finally the general stops and looks over his shoulder, "do you have all that, Kurohyou?"

Saluting his general, the panther rises to full height, "Ryokai!"

"Good. Get our men stationed before our lords begin the evening meal."

"Hai, General!" and away the panther strides, already planning his several stops to alert lieutenants of the changes in guard.

Matsu, on the other hand, comes to the battlement wall and looks out over the sea with his human eyes and tries to pick out anything on the horizon that could spell an attack waiting for them. As head of the ground troops and a seasoned veteran (for a human) in the art of war, Matsu has learned long ago to trust his instincts rather than his limited senses when it came to beings with powers beyond his comprehension.

Long ago, he had been just a simple troop in the Southern lord's human army and later a mercenary, a samurai for hire that cared about coin rather than honor; when the humans occasionally clashed with demons, be it roving gangs or troops from neighboring lands, he had learned to be efficient and ruthless in killing as many as quickly as possible, even young ones. Demon children would later grow up to be faster, stronger, and more powerful than he.

Back then, he had had little conscience and even less honor.
When the human group he'd travelled with got into a tussle with another group of demons known as the Band of Seven and were virtually obliterated, Matsu had been on the brink of death, lying on the battlefield, covered in his blood while the life slowly leaked out of him.

From the surrounding woods, the tall, lithe figure of Lord Sesshomaru, accompanied by a small child, came upon the massacre. At the time, he was dying and knew nothing but of the darkening sky above him turning into a storm, frantic thoughts of his death churning in his addled state, going through the mess that was his life and wondering where it all went so wrong, where he made the wrong choices. At one time, he had been a man of fairness and ideals. At one time, his family would have been proud to claim him as one of their own. But somewhere, somewhere, so many things had changed and when the pale haired Inu lord had come to loom over him, Matsu it seemed like a vengeful spirit had come to drag him to hell for his crimes. With fear, he watched the tall figure in white move through the numerous bodies, the expression on his face bland, not even touched by all the gore...

Finally, the horrible figure looked over him, and the Matsu of that moment clutched his knife, considering shoving it into his own gut to try escaping whatever was in store for him.

"Hn. Humans are so easily broken." The golden eyes stared down at him without pity or anger, without bloodlust or death, "is this your choice, human? What is it that you have to protect?"

Those words resonated a chord in the dying man, "...no one...has ever...given me something worthy...to protect."

Then, something out of a story of a man selling his soul to a demon, the figure's eyes narrow, "and what would you do, human, with something worthy?"

Blood spills out of Matsu's mouth, bubbling in the back of his throat, "I would die...to save it...from others like...me."

Apparently, that answer satisfied the demon lord.

A high pitched whistle broke the bird song while the human child comes behind the tall figure's leg, her eyes wide with the reality of death in the man in front of them. "Ano...Sesshomaru-sama...is he going to die?" She whispered, like she didn't want to offend him.

"Hai, he will die." The spirit confirmed without a twitch of emotion.

And there, Matsu felt it creeping closer. It was harder to breath, harder to blink. "I don't want...to die...until my honor..." but then there was nothing.

The human alive and well in the here and now recalls waking up on the back of the lord's two headed dragon, young Rin smiling back at him. "Sesshomaru-sama saved you! Isn't that nice?"

From that day on, he pledged allegiance to the House of Taishou and would give his life for the demon lord's commands. Every step he has taken since then has been to repay the demon's choice, to make himself worthy, and tonight is no different. With the massive family gathering, it would be ample time for an attack—why not when diplomats and the like would be here to take out in one go?

Perhaps he was just getting paranoid in his old age, but the body did not lie.

IV

"Where is that little squirt?"
Even though he is busy as hell, Kenshin raps on the door to the young kit's room and taps a steady staccato on the floor. Their first day returned to the Western Palace, he had conferred with their battlefield healer about a specific fox kit that had a shoulder and two ribs re-broken for healing, and from there, he hadn't seen the little guy except for meal times. Of course, the kit looked to be a sturdy sort, already hitting another growth spurt possibly, but the young's pointed absence during the welcome home ceremony hadn't been missed. Well, kits being how kits were, it was best he check there was no mischief afoot before he had to report to his Lord with the goings on in his absence from the palace.

A moment's pause and the healer pushes the guest room's door open wide, his eyes sweep over the room with a quick glance and his nose picks up a stale, old smell, nothing current. Of course his sense of smell is certainly not in the same league as an inu, but coupled with his instincts from countless "oh shit" situations, his combined senses rarely steered him wrong. At the moment, he is very pissed off to find the kit is not here.

"For fuck's sake, where are the god-dammed servants assigned to him?" the healer wheels around to the guards stationed halfway down this wing. One of them must have seen the young leave his room or have an idea where he may be. If not, then the young lord would be furious his kit has gone missing not to mention how angry Lord Kouga would be if his charge had left the castle without an escort. Powerful little shit for as young as he was but the kit was just that, not an adult that could take on some of the demons out in the wild. While he strode down the hall, Kenshin was already planning on who he would gather to send outside the castle to track the young one down if he couldn't be traced in the palace.

Two tanuki on either end of the hall look worse-for-wear, probably recently returned from the main battle but stand to attention the second he comes around the corner.

"Healer Shin!" The two are creepily always in some form of unison.

"Hey Hiku, Haku, I'm looking for the young kit that came with the Prince of the North. He is not in his chambers and Lord InuYasha will certainly want to see him soon."

The two give a long, slow blink, "not in his chambers? Healer-,

"- we haven't seen anyone pass-

"-since we came on duty-

"-this evening."

"Maro and Niranmaru from last watch-

"-told us the kit came back-

"-after the noonday meal-

"-and hadn't left his chambers-

"-since then."

"Not even-

"-Prince Kouga of the-

"North has come to-"
"-see him."

"We…"

"We feel kinda bad-

"-for the little runt, Healer."

Feeling his neck getting sore from bouncing between the twins, who finish each other's sentences at the most inopportune times, Kenshin raises a hand. "He may be a young, you two, but he is a kitsune, and one that had been at the academy for some time before coming to the palace. Did either of you check to make sure he hasn't employed any tricks?"

The two give him a blank look before shoulders tense at the very valid point.

"Son-"

"-of a-"

"-poxy-"

"-bitch."

V

There is an intruder, and a red rage boils up from deep when the scent leads him right to the very room he'd closed off a little more than two hundred years ago. The utter agony of loss made the memories too sharp to bare—more painful than the bite of steel or burn of flame—and the room had to be closed to preserve the last vestiges of scent and the ghost of his father.

Sesshomaru stands outside his dojo, his dojo, the one Father had commissioned for him as an attempt to sway him from leaving. The door is ajar slightly, not noticeable unless one knew the room was supposed to have been left undisturbed, and the scent emanating from it is the strong musk of elder dog demon.

Who would dare ... 

The swish of movement, soft breath with effort, the salt of sweat.

That little fox bastard.

"Die, Naraku."

Just a whisper, barely sound for his incredibly sensitive hearing and the demon lord would sigh if he could lower himself enough to do so. Steeling himself for the onslaught of memory, the demon lord reaches out to slide open the door.

The disturbance in the very air around him is enough to know something isn't right. Turning on the intruder behind him, weapon posed in threat and his youkai radiating from every pore, danger is triggered by the feel of a predator just suddenly behind him. The moment caused less than a breath of panic in the fox before initiating the deeply embedded instinct to survive; his time with the other foxes in the safety of the academy did little to cull the automatic responses that carried over from the days of Naraku. Maybe, it was the reason why he had such trouble making friends his own age there. The majority of the others had come from loving homes, sequestered in safety by their parents to make sure the cruelty of the world didn't touch their precious offspring. Very few
kitsunes his age understood what it meant to be alone in the world, in real danger, to be terrified for their lives, to feel the agony of an empty belly when there was no one to hunt for them. They just didn't understand the reality of life that Shippo did, even after InuYasha took him in. There were still times when he had no one but himself for comfort, for strength, and that instinct was too far buried in his psyche to fade, even in the Palace of the West. He had learned a very important lesson early on: survival meant never letting your guard down.

In the here and now, these instincts spin the wooden training sword in his hand for an upward strike even before he is aware of his body moving in that direction; Shippo brings the practice sword around in a smooth, seamless arch to land in a crouch at whoever found him. The sight at the shoji very nearly makes him shit his pants and the practice sword tumble from his numb fingers.

"S-Sesshomaru-sama!"

_Fuck_. Busted, possibly dungeon-bound. Trying to earn some brownie points (or so Kagome used to say), the kit drops to his knees to bow low before the cold Western Lord, playing into the dog demon by keeping his eyes diverted. His heart immediately speeds up, muscles tensing for whatever reaction might come his way. Regardless of InuYasha's new position in the West, the fox is no fool. The cold demon lord would have no lost love for a stray in his castle and probably even less so now that he found Shippo in his private wing. _Fuck, fuck, FUCK_. This could be really bad.

"What is the meaning of this, kit?" The cold voice flows like water over rocks, smooth and unruffled.

At a loss for a few crucial seconds, Shippo catches a breath, "Sesshomaru-sama… I was using this dojo for training."

"You are trespassing."

"Ha…yes, yes, I am, sire." Of course, he could have claimed ignorance of the family wing's rooms, but how else would he have entered if not sneaking by guards? Sesshomaru was no fool and would sniff out his lie immediately. "This room is out of the way, sire." Half-truths didn't stink of deception.

"Hn. Many rooms in the guest wing are "out of the way," to suit your purpose kit. Answer this Sesshomaru's question adequately."

_Shit_. Still bowing, Shippo swallows hard and has the abrupt vision of green acid whips dancing in front of his eyes while his quick mind works furiously. Is there any reason he could say to save him from whatever extreme punishment the demon lord surely has in mind? "I-I apologize, sire. I am deeply sorry to have come here and invaded the family wing of your palace."

Golden eyes narrow, "then why have you? Do not lie to this lord, fox."

Deciding to go with honesty, a small sigh escapes him and a different light comes into the kit's eyes where Sesshomaru cannot see. "The scent in here, sire…that's why I come to this room."

_Ah_. The lord's cold gaze changes an iota, lightens the hard gold. He understands the justification, how lingering power can make one feel safe in an unstable environment. Like the kit, Sesshomaru knows what it's like to be alone and powerless and even though he does not know the kit closely, he knows the youth's history.

"And you are aware the only scent remaining here is that of this Sesshomaru and his late sire."
Shippo finally straightens slowly, avoiding the demon lord's gaze so the inu doesn't take it as a challenge to his dominance. "Yes, Sesshomaru-sama." He sucks in a breath, "I swear, sire, I didn't mean any harm. I wouldn't have damaged anything!"

"Hn." The lord acknowledges, "pick up the sword, fox."

_Uh, come again?_ Something in the lord's tone stopped any stupid questions or denials that may have flitted across his mind; instead, he obeys and gingerly picks up the wooden sword from the floor without looking away from Sesshomaru's feet. If the feet suddenly disappear, the fox knows he'll be in deep shit.

"This Sesshomaru can understand you," the feet move fluidly, silently across the dojo floor, nearly floating, and come to rest by the weapons rack where a similar wooden sword, longer, heavier, more worn at the hilt, more beaten from use than the one Shippo is currently holding, is chosen. One that had been made from the donated branch of the demon tree, Bokusenō, due its durability, it had once been well used. Without looking back at the kit, the demon lord tests the weight and balance of the pseudo-weapon, fingers curling around the very familiar hilt. _Gods, had it really been so long…_.

"There are moments when the universe brings about plague and disruption, pain and death when there seems to be no reason for thus," the demon lord's voice was less cold, less emotionless than Shippo had ever heard before; the tone shakes him a bit. "When we do not understand what forces cause misfortunes to be heaped upon the masses equally. At these moments, destiny takes a hand in assisting the weakest to become strong, to teach that helplessness is simply an ill-equipped state of being. Hardships teach the necessity of preparing for the worst before the worst becomes reality. It is then that we achieve great strength, great power, from these lessoned learned and used."

Something strikes the kit, right in the heart. His breath catches, "T-Then I should have been ready for my parents to die and it wouldn't have hurt so much?"

That hoarse, trembling tone draws the demon lord to turn and face the youth down; he sees a wealth in the kit's face, something that is achingly akin to InuYasha, an age in eyes that should have been more innocent… The demon lord's face does not give anything away, "incorrect." Sesshomaru counters as gently as possible, "the tragedy you have suffered should have taught you to be prepared for the next fight, the next misfortune, to make certain there will be no others following in the wake, but also, that loss should have given you an appreciation for what you have still here. Pain, kit, is what proves your heart is strong, for if you were weak, you wouldn't have mourned their passing. Now that you have learned these lessons, you may start to truly move."

At this, Shippo blinks up at the towering lord in realization, meeting those cool golden eyes head-on for the first time in his memory. For some reason (maybe, just maybe because he was important to InuYasha or maybe because he was a little kid or something), the Lord of the West was trying to make him feel _better_. There is something very important going on here, something the fox may not fully understand yet, but he absorbed the advice like cloth absorbing water for later rumination.

"So," and here he clears his suddenly thick throat, "what do I need to do, Lord Sesshomaru?"

Gingerly, the demon lord replaces his old practice sword in the holder, the last place he left it, and he steps back from the memories that still haunt him. Easily, he moves again, eyes tracking the kit seriously as he comes a few feet, facing the child head-on. "Very simple, kit. You learn to walk the path of the honorable ruler," and turns to leave the dojo. At the door, he pauses, "dinner will be soon. Go and freshen yourself. InuYasha will want to see how you are progressing."

The kit stares wide-eyed at the lord's retreating back. On one hand, he's glad he hadn't gotten his
ass handed to him by the scary-powerful daiyoukai, but on another hand, he wishes Sesshomaru
had taken up that practice sword. Well, the guy never did like him, right? Not even in the days of
Naraku, but then again, why would he have even bothered talking to the kit if he didn't give a shit
about him either way? Who knew. Adults were fucking weird. But, as messed up as the encounter
had gone, Shippo's tail wilts as he wonders what exactly an honorable ruler should be made of.
How was he supposed to learn that path if he knew nothing about it?

Maybe, just maybe, Lord Sesshomaru meant for him to ask. Well, the kit wipes arrant sweat from
his brow and puts the practice sword back in its niche, still somewhat shaky from that narrow miss.
Damn, even tryin ta be kinda nice, the lord is still scary as hell.

Shippo carefully slides the shoji shut behind him as he leaves the room and creeps down the
hallway; Lord Sesshomaru is nowhere to be seen and his scent is casually trailing further down the
hall away from the guards. Unknowing of the others on the hunt for him, he spells himself to look
like one of the other guards and makes his way down the hall.

VI

Silk and steel slide over skin as the demon lord dresses in his most formal kimono and layers his
armor over the crest of the Inu no Taishou. The armor is brittle, older than he, and a laughingly
poor protection to his sealed form when his body is so much more powerful than the lacquered
plates and bits of spiked steel. Yet, Touga wore armor all his days and in keeping with this tradition
reminds Sesshomaru of better times; why else continue to wear it?

Behind him, the servant girl waits with the young boy beside her; between the two of them, his obi,
more formal than his normal yellow patterned, is stretched out between them. This obi is blood red
with golden flowers to match the white kimono with red flower petals patterned on the sleeve
(similar to his normal wear) and also bares the crest of his father's house—it had been taken out of
storage and smells of lavender to keep bugs from the fine material. Rather than have the two dress
him, the demon lord turns and the obi is laid carefully in his outstretched hands. He does not look
down while he weaves it in complicated, precise knots.

"Make certain the kit, Shippo, comes to the main dining hall," he orders the two. "I will complete
my own preparations."

Both bow low, "hai, Sesshomaru-dono," and scamper away, closing the Western-style door behind
them.

Alone with only his thoughts and away from prying eyes, the demon lord folds himself down on
the ground to close his eyes. Brief moments of meditation will calm his thoughts before walking
into the dining hall full of "family" vying to see InuYasha and probably attempt to make mating
since he, too, is now part of the ruling family and the heir to the Western kingdom should
Sesshomaru fall. With no offspring to succeed him, an alliance with InuYasha would be the fastest
way for vipers to get closer and closer to the throne.

"You must become accustomed to this attention, Sesshomaru," golden eyes so like own arch
knowingly, "for you are more than you have been yet, and this den of vipers will see you for your
weight in gold."

"I have no need for companionship or a mate. There is more to do in the West than worry about
bitches in heat and their whims." Blood oozed down his superficial injuries from sparring, none of
it made him flinch. He looked out across the field, outside the castle walls with the wood practice
sword sitting across his thighs. A ways from him, his father stood with arms crossed, his profile
partially hidden.
However, the general is making a valid point with his recently returned offspring, "nevertheless, you are recognized as my heir, to inherit the Western lands should anything happen to me, and this will make the worst in all come to the fore. Watch your step with the aristocracy, Sesshomaru. Even Katsuo can be swayed by his lady's requests."

Katsuo. Only in the last weeks has he met his half-brother, the result of his mother and her first mate—the mate she truly loved and lost. Too jovial for the Prince, Katsuo had been overly warm and accepting of him in a way that made Sesshomaru slightly uncomfortable. How could one be that anxious to meet a complete stranger, even if they did share a partial bloodline? Sesshomaru could put no credit in the other inu's sincerity. "Hn. He is not of my concern, nor his weakness to give in to the wants of a female. She will be his downfall," bitter over his mother's betrayal, the prince scoffs at his "brother's" simpering mate, one he'd only needed to meet once to have his fill of her.

The Taishou's eyes danced over to his son, softening ever so slightly at the youth's jaded outlook. "Our life spans are long and difficult, my son. Do no discredit the need for companionship in your first two hundred years of life. It is amazing how much affection can change a man's perspective," the Taishou's voice was suddenly wistful and the prince's eyes are comically wide at the change in the demon he knew as unyielding. He bit his tongue at calling his father a weakling as well and chose to stay his hand in this battle.

"For you, I want an absurd happiness," the Taishou continued with a smirk, "to make up for your first two hundred years of your life. If a warm female or male could give that to you, then I would count you blessed indeed. However, these court females are not it for you; their wiles and lies are not what I would have hoped." And in his sire's golden eyes, Sesshomaru sees the sincerity of truth...

"Nor I for you, InuYasha," breaking his meditation for a return to the here and now, Sesshomaru breathes deeply and stands, wondering when the appropriate time to talk with the hanyou about all this would occur. He slides Bakusaiga and Tensaiga by his hip with absent motions while he considers many things.

"Sire?" Yao Xin at the door, knocking gently. "The meal awaits you."

Is it already too late to have the servants bring his meal up to his room? *Ridiculous, this Sesshomaru is no coward to hide from his blooded kin.* He strides to the door just to prove that small voice correct and faces his advisor with his normal expression of distant boredom.

"The hall is restless, then?"

"Hai, milord," the advisor falls in a step behind the demon lord's long strides, eyes darting to the ceremonial kimono he hadn't seen the young lord wear since the ceremony to send InuYasha and Lady Izayoi away. Sesshomaru had pointedly put the clothing away after the heartbreaking goodbye for only the innermost family's eyes. The old advisor is quite surprised to see his lord wearing it once again.

"And your children?" The demon lord asks out of the blue, "How are they faring with kotodama magic?"

Xin starts at the question, "as well as can be expected, sire. They and the other prisoners have been watches closely for any hint of insurgency. One of our healers speaks their language and goes down to visit the injured daily; thus far we have no indication of a more in-depth plot against the West."
"Hn. Their silence means little when their army shows a pathetic attempt at subterfuge. Even if our reports are correct and the invaders have seen fewer births of Elementals, there are still thousands of humans with which to contend. This ploy will not succeed."

"Agreed, sire. They are on the shores somewhere."

Sesshomaru pauses slightly. "Yao Xin."

The Elemental gives a side-glance as he too pauses, "sire?"

"This cannot be easy for you, having loyalties on both sides of the battle. As you well know of this Sesshomaru, he understands all too well of the need for family." The demon lord turns subtly on his heel to face his advisor with the full force of his knowing eyes. "There are times when the heart rather than reason must take precedent; however, the consequences do not always make such decisions worthwhile." The taste of these words are bitter to the inu, but he stands by them, not backing down.

Sesshomaru...Do you not see that I cannot go back now? It is much too late.

"Well understood, sire." The Elemental bows slightly, and they resume long strides down the family wing. The two stop outside the room that is InuYasha's and the commotion going on makes both blink, breaking the obvious tension.

"GAAAAHHH! What in the seven hells are you tryin' ta do?! Rip my goddam ear off?!"

"-Sire, please!"

"Oooowww! For SHIT'S SAKE that hurts!"

"Lord InuYasha, I am so very sorry, but please hold still!"

"Are you fucking kidding me with this?! Get offa me! Enough already!"

"Oh please, sire. Hold still and it won't take but a few moments! I promise it will not hurt again."

"Like hell!"

Sesshomaru's normally blank expression cracks around the edges when a tell-tale twitch of his mouth belays amusement. He doesn't bother knocking (not in his own damn palace) but opens the door abruptly, ending the shouting match with his presence. The scene is much as he expected, InuYasha half-dressed, hair flying madly about with half combed without a tangle one and half snarled en mass, his fangs bare to the root and one hand with newly polished, gleaming claws, the other hand still dull with use. The servant boy is cowering by the tea table, polishing cloth still in hand and Miniko standing, exasperated, with a comb in one hand and an obi in the other. She goes immediately pale when Sesshomaru's eyes narrow on the scene. Hanging over the doorway to the bedroom is a red, silver, and black kimono, one that suspiciously does not have the family's crest emblazoned on the sleeves, chest, or back. A startling moment of realization reminds the demon lord where he knew that specific kimono from, and the sight makes him wonder why it was chosen out of several others that did bare the name of the dog demon clan.

With an audible gulp, Miniko apparently comes out of her surprise and drops to the floor in a low bow, reminiscent of the kit's earlier display.

"My lord-!"
"Goddamn it, Sesshomaru, what the hell-"

"Silence." One clawed hand comes up to rub the bridge of his nose in mock irritation when he is really resisting all urge to snicker and piss off the hanyou even more.

Said hanyou huffs and crosses his arms over his bare chest, hakama hanging dangerously low on his hips.

"Miniko, I will assist InuYasha in his preparations. Yao, we shall be to the stairwell shortly," with this dismissal, both bow to their lord and back out the door without cracking a smile while Hichiro stays where he is cowering, pointedly averting his gaze.

When the door closes, Sesshomaru finally sighs, and the hanyou arches a brow at him. "I wasn't trying to be a pain in the ass or nothing, so don't-

"Your brother is unconcerned. Sit down so Miniko's work will not be in vain." Sesshomaru moves smoothly, "Hichiro, finish your lord's claws." Too late, he recalls InuYasha's disdain for third-person while out of company.

The demon child stands quickly, trembling slightly and rights the overturned stool for InuYasha before kneeling, tail hanging limply on the floor.

Eyeing the devices of torture in his older brother's hands, the hanyou's glance is wary, "is all this crap really necessary? I mean, dammit, what do they care about some half-couth mongrel anyhow? I sure as hell ain't putting on shoes, so why's everyone on about my hair?"

The blink almost transformed Sesshomaru's expression before he could school it into neutral lines, "shoes are not necessary, InuYasha; however, as dog demons, grooming is important. Hn, I cannot imagine you a coward for something as simple as a hair brushing."

Ah, the younger inu's spine snaps straight with the subtle barb, "are you outta yer fuckin' gourd, man? Who would be scared of a comb? Seriously?" He's already moving to plop his ass down on the stool to let the demon lord do his worst.

"Before I heard your caterwauling from down the hall, I would have thought no one." Sesshomaru replies easily as he takes up faint smelling oil to run through the tangles before easing the comb through.

"Keh, I wasn't hollering that loud," the hanyou grumbles while Hichiro works at polishing his other hand; the kid pauses noticeably at this but hurries back to polishing his lord's claws. "She just got ahold of bad knot right by my damn ear. Hurt like she was pulling hair by my left nut." He shudders in remembrance.

"Painful indeed," in less time than he would believe, the oil did its job and made the comb flow through silky white hair, almost as straight as his own. "Is this the kimono you have chosen for the night?" An abrupt change of subject, but Sesshomaru is determined to attempt integrating his sibling into castle life in as many ways as possible. Subversively trying to make the younger inu feel comfortable in their father's home, to keep him from leaving without pushing any of the hanyou's many buttons, the demon lord's ultimate goal is to welcome InuYasha home…for good. Unlike he at that age, InuYasha has no desire for more power; no, the youth wants things that not even he realizes he wants: a home, comfort, belonging, family…

"Yeah. It's pretty close to the Fire Rat, so I pulled it out of that old wardrobe." The hanyou pauses,
as if hearing something in Sesshomaru's tone. "It's fine, right? That one smells like you, not the old man. I didn't think it would be a problem."

_How ironic._ "There is no problem should you choose to wear this clothing…however," Sesshomaru's hands still for a perceptible moment, "that clothing is from my exile. I should not wish to burden you with such a thing."

Ears automatically perk, a slight twitch indicates the hanyou understands too well.

"Oi. Hichiro, beat it, squirt. Ya did a good job anyhow."

The little demon looks up with wide, scared eyes, "thank-you, sire! But, Miniko-san, InuYasha-sama… M-Miniko-san didn't mean to-"

The hanyou waves a shiny hand at the kid as he stands, ears barely grazing Sesshomaru's cheek in the process. "I know she didn't mean anything by it. Wadda think, I'm an idiot? Now scram. Find something to eat. Tell Miniko to get some chow too. I ain't gonna need nothing anyhow. 'Sides, she brought some food, so that means she's on the good-to-go list. Ya get me?"

The youth brightens instantaneously now that he knows Miniko will not get in trouble, "Hai, my lord. Arigatou!" Bowing with excitement, the young demon didn't pick up on the pall in the room as he closes the door behind him, visions of Bean Buns and noodles are instead dancing in his mind.

Alone with his brother, his upper body bare, InuYasha feels that strange fluttering in the pit of his stomach when their eyes meet this time. The air between them suddenly becomes heavy, weighty with things unsaid, things undone…

Trying to backpedal, the hanyou takes an almost imperceptible step back and looks to the hanging kimono, words, explanations, _anything_ tumbling out with an obvious desperation. "I can wear something else. No big deal. My fire rat has already cleaned itself and is hanging up-"

"There are many kimonos in the wardrobe," Sesshomaru interrupts smoothly, advancing for the step InuYasha retreated, "this one, however, is unbefitting your status. Perhaps you may use it during other times, but tonight is your introduction to our family, your kin. The crest of this family should adorn your clothing." Sesshomaru's hand twitches slightly, the only indication of his inner struggle to stop himself from reaching out, an act against his very nature. "Come."

Behind Sesshomaru's back, InuYasha lets out a quiet breath and crosses his arms over himself instinctively before following. His hair tickles the bare skin of his lower back above the waist of his hakama while he walks and isn't helping his hypersensitive nerves ignore things his body recently realized it could want. His own claws prick at his biceps to maintain control while Sesshomaru moves through the bedroom easily and opens the tall wardrobe, releasing the smell of lavender and camphor with hints of shiro inus. The folds of silk, satin, cotton, and wool all have a story in themselves, more clothes than he's ever owned in his life, hell, more than he's ever seen anyone own.

Sesshomaru's hand settles on a hanging kimono, one that is also mainly red; however, this kimono bares the family crest on shoulder while the back has an exquisitely stitched inu howling at the moon. Subtle piping and stitching in silver and blue would make the hanyou stand out without the gaudiness of some female kimonos. Yes, this would do.

Overcoming InuYasha's suddenly shyness, the demon lord presents the kimono, under layer, and obi, waiting while the hanyou finishes dressing and adds Tetsuaiga at his hip. As his brother
straightens in the new clothing, hair moving like a curtain of silver, the demon lord closes his eyes for only a moment—just enough time to take this moment in. For two hundred years, I have waited for this, yearned for it. InuYasha…

A whoosh, a breath, and the hanyou is suddenly, alarmingly, close, looking up into Sesshomaru's face with concern, "Oi. Sesshomaru. What's wrong?" and then a softer, "what is it?" Innocent eyes still; the hanyou doesn't realize the unfamiliar emotions swirling in the debts of the lord's formerly cold heart.

"Brother…" very easily, slowly, as if approaching a spooked animal, the lord wraps his arms around InuYasha, "how long I have waited for you to come home."

The shuddering breath from them both seems to shake the uncomfortable feel of new clothes, new surroundings, new relationship, the things making InuYasha edgy. Regardless of all that crazy shit being over, the fight, the Heat, the god's dammed Trial bullshit…even after it was all said n done, this proves Sesshomaru's intentions. The embrace is almost desperate, and the hanyou can appreciate his brother's need of closeness, of family. All of it makes some tight knot in the center of his chest ease.

"Yeah…" the hanyou finally pulls away to look up into the mirror of his own gaze and read what's doing. He smirks, "not like we're being girly over here or anything, but you shoulda just braided my damn hair if you were gonna be all touchy feely, y know."

"Hn. Why point out your overly effeminate features more when you are so concerned with appearances, little brother."

"Nani?! Effeminate? Oh, that's rich. Who's got the pink markings on his eyelids there, asshole?"

"And who has the womanly puppy dog ears?"

"My ears aren't girly!"

"I believe 'cute' is a rather womanish sentiment."

"You-are-a-dick."

"Incorrect, most members do not have my height or girth. You should remember that." Smoothly, Sesshomaru starts for the door while the hanyou gapes at him.

Finally, InuYasha throws his hands up, "the second I think I got you figured out, and there you go making an obscene comment. Geeze, who knew you actually had a sense of humor."

"In time, you may learn that I am a great deal more than what I seem," standing by the door, Sesshomaru gives him an arched brow.

Moving to the door, InuYasha crosses his arms in the unfamiliar sleeves, relieved that horrible awkwardness is over.

"So, you gonna prepare me for what I'm walking into tonight or what? I mean, food is food, but is there anyone in particular I should be looking out for? Anything I shouldn't do?"

Shortening his strides to maintain their side-by-side approach, Sesshomaru's eyes slide sideways, "do as you please; however, refrain from using the Wind Scar or Kongōsōha inside the palace. Most enjoy the walls standing in one piece."
"Keh! Like I'm that dumb..." at Sesshomaru's look, he really has to think about it. Well, maybe if someone pisses him off enough.... "All right," with both hands up in an 'I come in peace' gesture, he concedes, "no attacks while I'm inside. Well, what about all these inus around? I mean, do you have any other brothers than me an Katsuo?"

"No, this Sesshomaru has no other siblings but for you and, unfortunately, Katsuo."

"Not a fan, huh? He seems like he's all right though."

"He is incessantly cheerful."

"Oh. Well, ain't it a change from the two of us? We're both a little fucking sadistic, you know. It's different to have a nice guy in the family."

"His pups are also tiresome."

"Wadda ya expect? They're pups. They're too stupid yet to know better."

Sigh, "other than he, Father's younger brother and sister are still among the living and have had quite large litters so you will have the pleasure to meet many cousins and older relations through bloodlines. It will prove to be an eventful evening."

_The old man had siblings?! Why the fuck didn't any of the stories have that detail?_ As they see Yao Xin and Kenshin at the head of the stairs, the hanyou give a half-shrug, "Long as there's some good food, it can't be all bad, right?"

"Do not say this until the night is over. You are only inviting the inevitable. Simply refrain from eviscerating any of the cousins. The servants tell me it is difficult to get blood out of the carpets."

"Lookit you, gotta ruin all my fun." InuYasha pauses for a moment and has to say _something_ about that earlier embrace, "hey..."

Sesshomaru's head turns with a raised brow.

"Meetin' all these people is cool an' all, but you realize I don't give a shit about any of 'em. You are the only family I've ever wanted to impress, and that ain't going to change. You know that, right?"

The omission is not one the demon lord expects during their back and forth comradery, but instead of ruining the sentiment, Sesshomaru meets InuYasha's expression with a rare smile.

"My lords," and both advisors bow low.

InuYasha, under the false bravado and witty one-liners, steels himself for the next few hours of new faces and scents, of being the center of attention instead of hiding in the back, of meeting people that may not want to give him a good stoning for once. Maybe it won't be so bad, maybe it'll be shit. Maybe, regardless of his scent being all his now, some of 'em still might have a problem with him being a half-breed. Well, Sesshomaru didn't say a thing about not taking anyone outside and beating the ever-loving crap out of 'em in the snow.

That thought makes him feel better, and at Sesshomaru's side, he descends the staircase without trepidation.

**VII**

The sea and the wind are as unforgiving as any other element of nature; even the great Khan can do...
nothing to control the harsh waves and gales blasting against the meager cover of a few bare trees in the night. The people of the cold lands are accustomed to harsh terrain and terrible weather; they are accustomed to training their bodies to brave the worst conditions; however, every living being has its' limits. Many of the others sustained injuries from the previous battle or grow ill in the frigid, snowy cold and lack of movement. The majority are sparsely covered and buried under the frozen ground to keep the West soldiers from sniffing them out.

The original plan was definitely not to wait for an all-out attack on the Western Palace, but to take advantage of the army's fatigue with fresh soldiers waiting and prisoners inside to take out the main powerhouse of Nippon's four kingdoms. Once the West fell, the Khan would finally have a food hold in the land itself, a place to bring more of their people to start an expansion across the island. They could finally conquer the great land their ancestors dreamed of owning.

Of course, stealth is crucial to the mission; however, the Khan and his generals did not account for many other, powerful demons to be within the Western Palace so soon. His plan, brilliant in its simplicity, does not account for the gathering of hundreds along with those already in the palace. Thus the waiting would commence until their course is righted once again and victory would be within their grasp. On the positive note, however, it would give ample time for the many others in palace to move. The plan would be even more ingenious than originally intended. Like a disease, eating the body from the inside out, so would the many attack and claim….

For the many insults, injuries, for the honor of their ancestors, they would be vindicated.

VIII

Of course, the large hall is boisterous with sound from the large collection of inus, servants, children, and a hodgepodge of family friends gathered at the biggest table the hanyou has ever seen.

Instant. Fucking. Head-ache. Of course, he tunes out a lot of the smells and sounds coming from the main body of the palace, easier to do when he was in his room (keh, his room. Whatever.) However, he is new to such powers and the prolonged overload to his senses weighs heavily. Not just from his ultra-keen sense of smell and taste, but now his sense of power, of youkai, of spirit and soul, are like a separate muscle in his body—he feels something within him flex, just like the muscles in his thighs when he runs or his biceps when he swings. All these new sensations connect to an awakening nerve in the center of his being, shaking him. There is too much, too many others downstairs to process at one time, picking out the scent of Kouga, Shippo, and even Totsai's goddamned smelly-ass cow. The young inu-hanyou needs to breathe deep and shove it all away as hard as he can. He cannot lose himself, not when there is no more Kagome to bring him back from the red haze of rage. He's been a leashless killer.

Terribly embarrassing, even within the constraints of his own mind, he feels a crazy kind of panic at the unknown—a feelings that claws up from the pit of his belly to try and lodge itself in the center of his chest. Breath is wrung from his lungs, the viscera trying to seize on him. Calm the fuck down, shithead. Sesshomaru's here and a ton of other, powerful fuckers that could probably take you down without dying. An-an' if they just don't fucking like you, well, the hell with 'em all! You just get your Fire Rat and give 'em a nice "fuck off" before you leave. Yeah, that's a pretty good plan.

Well, there, that made him feel better now, and with a sweeping gaze over the crowd, he could breathe a little deeper, ignoring Sesshomaru's glance in his direction. So many of them here. I never knew there were more than just me and him...well, then his bitch of a mother. But, there must be over a hundred! Where the hell have they all been...?
"Holy hell," he mutters under his breath, one ear perks while the other flops over unconcerned, 'I'm followin' yer lead. Don't leave me alone, got it?"

Sesshomaru's eyes slide sideways once again, waiting for another subtle illumination from InuYasha's claws, one that was faint but obvious to anyone standing close. "You will sit at your brother's right hand."

It is then that the musicians and criers call out the Princes of the West, giving them the signal to cross the threshold and silencing the noisy brood. Heads turn, fans flutter like the wings of startled butterflies in flight, expensive and elaborate kimonos glint with previous jewels embedded, ornate headpieces threaten to take out an eye of anyone in the vicinity. There are more well-dressed females and males in this room than the hanyou has ever seen in his long life, even in his mother's own court or any of the prestigious kingdoms he has been in his travels (not that his travels were really to visit any hoity toity rich fucks or anything). This gathering was, well, pretty impressive.

Of course, the congregation moves to bow respectfully (some noticing, that the younger prince is oddly enough without foot covering…?) until the two move to the head of the table, a table with piles and piles of mouth-watering dishes. The more he sees, the wider his eyes get as InuYasha takes the empty spot beside Katsuo, not taking time to marvel at the fancy furniture with legs and a seat rather than traditional floor tables. He stays standing as the assembled guests and family rise from their respectful bows, and the majority of eyes fall on him rather than Sesshomaru. The automatic gestures take root and his hands hide in the long sleeves of this unfamiliar kimono while his expression fights for neutrality; the patches with the family crest weighs heavier at his shoulders, chest, and back with implied meaning.

"Abomination!"

"Half-breed bastard."

"Should have been drowned at birth."

"Whore of a mother."

Addressing the crowd, Sesshomaru's voice reverberates in the quiet, "as custom, begun by our sire, the Inu no Taishou, demands, those here gather celebrate for reasons twofold: for the victory against the invading Mongolians, a scourge that has come to our shores before in an effort to take what was rightfully won by this Sesshomaru's sire and himself." The reference to the last battle, one the current lord took great pleasure in partaking, causes a spark throughout the crowd. The soldiers at the door straighten at the mention of the still pending conflict, "However, more importantly, this feast is celebration for the return of this Sesshomaru's little brother, wielder of Tetsuaiga, victor over Naraku, Ryukotsusei, and countless other evils, one who has proven his honor time and time again. He is here, returned to the family on his path to be an Honorable Ruler like his sire. This Sesshomaru proudly welcomes the champion of the West, youngest son of the Inu no Taishou, Lord InuYasha." A demon of few words, the lord's graceful hand gestures to the puppy-eared hanyou.

Again, that moment of panic threatens to overtake him when the applause and calls are deafening; more inus than he's ever seen in his life are clapping like they are banishing spirits, with strength and sincerity. So many faces are openly warm, openly welcoming… the hanyou sucks in a breath (remembering some of the old lessons from Mother) and gingerly bows to the table in a rusty move, for it is against his nature to bow to anyone (but damn it if the tips of his hair aren't close to getting in the food). He doesn't forget the whole, "walking the path of the Honorable Ruler" bit since his brother does seem to be pretty fucking obsessed with all that shit, but his only intention is getting through the next few hours without totally killing someone or spilling food all over himself.
So far, so good.

However, he glances furtively around as he straightens, and does see the few with disapproval in their eyes and mannerisms, ones to watch out for. InuYasha has no misconception that everyone in the royal family would approve of him or welcome him with open arms. Naw, real life just ain't that way and not even Sesshomaru is scary enough for ingrained prejudice. Realistically, it's never good to stand with a manipulative bastard at your back, next thing you know, you've got a sword shoved in your guts and cussing your own dumbass choice. So, his need to know and recognize the ones that might be the grinning enemy. By sight, he details four inus and several servants giving him the scratch. Shit, just by the look of the crowd, he's the only half-breed here anyhow.

"All present shall feast to celebrate his return," Sesshomaru continues as soon as the deafening roar calms and takes his place, signaling the rest to do so also. InuYasha is relieved Yao and Kenshin are across the table from him as trusted advisors with Kouga and Shippo right beside Kenshin while Katsuo and his brood sits to the left rather than someone he doesn't know. To make it even better, Baba is waaaay down the table, halfway or abouts, and not looking very happy to be so far from the head.

As servants step up to gather a plate for their guests, Katsuo fixes his attention to the stiff hanyou, "ease down, little brother. A feast is to be enjoyed! Besides, didn't anyone tell you that your face might stick that way if you keep frowning?"

Slightly, an ear cocks in his direction as InuYasha can't help but smile a bit, "keh. Maybe it's my favorite expression."

"I sincerely hope not. God's forbid you would end up like Sesshomaru! A smile would probably crack open his face."

A ghost of a memory flashes in the hanyou's mind, that half smile, so rare, and only for him… InuYasha blinks abruptly, almost trying to physically backpedal. "Yeah, well…considering Baba over there, I can see he gets it honest."

A burst of laughter rolls out of the older inu as a servant bows to him and lays a plate laden with raw meats, fruits, vegetables, and bread in front of him without asking his preferences. "I suppose you have a valid point, InuYasha. A smile from the likes of my mother would probably shake apart the ground. Let's hope it never comes to that."

"Just the ground? A smile from baba might make shake up the heavens," he counters with a smirk.

"Sire, what may I serve you?" InuYasha starts, looking at the animalistic demoness by his other side, her eyes demurely on the floor.

"Oh, uh, well…" he glances over at the plates in front of him, a little weirded out she was just standing there without saying anything for a while, "I haven't really looked much, but howz about some of that dumpling soup there? Oh, hey that rice looks okay too. I dunno, maybe some noodles and some of that chicken stuff too, that smells pretty good, and…is that some kind of bread? Man, I love bread."

While he speaks, the demoness hurries to comply with his wishes, piling rice and noodles, then chicken and vegetable concoction, and several pieces of different breads before setting the plate gently before him. She hesitates while his mouth literally waters,

"My lord, this is not very much…are you certain there is nothing else you would like to sample? I would happily get another plate with a few different delicacies for your approval…?"
Slowly, the hanyou's gaze moves from the food to the demoness, the demoness who is offering him more. More food, a full blooded demoness asking him. This hit pretty high on his "Holy Shit" level of good things happening.

"Well, I..." Under Katsuo's watch, he hesitates, "I'll think about it."

"Oh my! Of course, sire. Forgive me for rushing you," she belts out, looking terrified at offending the new Prince of the West and bows low.

"Naw, I just want to give this a try, then my stomach'll figure out what to try next, okay?" he gives her a half-smile that is unknowingly innocent and charming at the same time.

The demoness beams at him, "absolutely, InuYasha-sama! I will serve you whatever you desire and when! If you would like to talk to our cooks about a dish or have them make something specific, I am certain any one of them would be honored to create a concoction to your taste, sire."

"Keh, that ain't necessary. Don't need to bother 'em for me. Long as nothing is too spicy, I'm good." He hunkers down, picking up the set of fancy chopsticks next to his bowl, eyes darting around discreetly to see everyone else picking at their plates as they banter back and forth, the room becoming dull with conversation and the sound of eating. None of that, however, gains Lord Katsuo's attention; he only has eyes for the new addition to the Western Palace and openly watches the hanyou with soft eyes.

The hanyou feels his cheeks warm in embarrassment and turns his attention to his plate; when in doubt, stuff your mouth with food, "so, Sesshomaru said you rule the inu lands. Guess yer pretty much older than the two of us." He bites into the rice with gusto, gruff nature coming to the fore. "I do rule the inu lands, little brother," the elder laughs, "and, yes, I am somewhat older than the two of you."

"It's funny. I been all over this island in my life, but I ain't come across another Shiro inu aside from Sesshomaru and sure as hell not a whole colony of 'em. I mean, damn. I didn't know there were this many living." His eyes skim over the congregation again, falling briefly on Shippo and Kouga.

Katsuo's voice draws his attention back, "Very few know there are this many in existence, InuYasha-chan. The Elders, yes, but other than for their record-keeping, the majority of shiro inus remain in our ancestral home, hidden by magic. They do not wish to journey out in to the human realm and join other demons or humans. Your father's side of the clan and my mother are among the few exceptions."

"The old man's clan? So the shiro inu were divided?"

With a sweep of his arm, Katsuo gestures to the assembled, "a majority of this table is the descendants of your great-great grandsire's clan, together and living among other demons. However, once your father, Touga, finished the work of your grandsire and united the West under one rule, many of the old clan decided to return to their ancestral home. It was too...difficult...a change for many. We are a solitary people, finding comfort in our own kind."

The hanyou stills, one ear quirks in question, "I don't get what yer trying ta say."

Katsuo's eyes show a hint of shadow, his normally jovial expression fades around the edges, "at one time in our history, the Shiro Inus were a separatist clan, InuYasha-chan, and a convergence with other demon clans was...frightening or intimidating. As demons, our people have great strength and skill in magick, but we are very beautiful while many other types of demons are
hideous, and these attributes make our worth ten-fold. This lead to some of our people kidnapped
and forced into marriages with other ruling clans, or our children abducted to be sold into slavery.
Your father had his hands equally full of warring and rescuing."

"Really? I never hear those stories about him, or about any of the others, I mean. Allz I know
about the old man are stories of the bastards he's taken down or the battles he needed to win in
order to bring the West together. Or, shit, a few things Totsai told me about his swords." Mulling
over these things, the hanyou finishes off his soup while Katsuo partakes in his bloody feast, eating
neatly, thoughtfully.

"There are many tomes of his stories in the library here," Sesshomaru interjects smoothly,
"something to take up your time, little brother."

As if I could read well enough, the hanyou glances over but wisely remains silent on the reading
topic. "Keh, well, we'll see." His eyes dart over to Katsuo, "so, when the old man decided to unite
the West, the clan just broke up or what? He was the main guy until other demons and humans
started into the mix?"

"Well, while he was busy finishing this palace and fighting, many of our brethren fought with him,
others determined the shiro inu should be left to the current ruler's own devices— thus a powerful
spell that could hide the people and lands from all those without a link to the bloodline."

"But…the old man wasn't really into magick was he? I thought he was more, you know, up front
and personal when he wanted to kick someone's ass." Confusion furrows InuYasha's brows.

"Do not mistake who the current "ruler" of the inu clan was, little brother. Father was but the
general. My mother, however, was the true blooded ruler and a powerful sorceress." Sesshomaru
slips a piece of rare, raw meat onto the younger's plate.

Curious, the hanyou takes it in his chopsticks, nibbling at it while a slight flashback of his fight
with Ba-ba in that tower reminds him of the good ole' butt-kicking. Well, at least some of it made
sense now. "So that's how come Katsuo is the go-to guy now, right?"

The elder lord pats his daughter's head before turning back to the hanyou, "it has been almost a
four hundred years since Mother has given up her title to join the Council of Elders—of which, I
assume you are familiar."

InuYasha's chewing pauses, his poor belly growling. His eyes slide to Katsuo.

A knowing look passes through Katsuo's golden eyes, "I see that you are, little brother."

"Yeah, well…. You probably already know why I ain't been here before anyhow—first sons and
hanyous, right? Seems like you'd be the first one that would ask." Was there more of what
Sesshomaru has? Man, he wasn't normally into the raw stuff, but damn if it didn't taste good. True
to form, he doesn't dwell on the whys or what-for's.

"Indeed. I have also had the honor of such a trial before I stepped up to take the ruling power over
our people." Katsuo chews thoughtfully on his own feast of raw meats, "it is…difficult…to adjust
to this life after surviving on wits and strength alone," and those golden eyes mirror an inner pain
the hanyou can totally get. ".…Should you ever need to vent, InuYasha, I am always here for you—
now that I am finally able to be."

The offer is so heartfelt, InuYasha is taken back a bit; the need to do so, to let all the events of the
last few weeks rush out of him like a torrent, strikes him out of the blue—a strange want
considering the circumstances. The hanyou has trusted a handful of people at best and the idea of just telling this older demon all his woes is just fucking odd.

"I appreciate the offer. Maybe sometime, I'll take you up on it." Non-committal but polite; Mother would be proud.

"Father!" One of his pups called to his sire, and Katsuo's attention is taken up by his own.

Going back to his food brings his gaze to Shippo, his little kit trying to grow up and watching the table further down with those jade eyes. Something about his looks makes the hanyou wish he'd insisted the kid stay with him when Kagome went home for the last time. It had amazed him, seeing how much the little shit had grown in what was a short time for a demon like he was. And that…. That had been when he was batshit in the demon blood.

_Holy shit. I remember what happened…_

Blinking to himself, InuYasha realizes in that moment, he'd been pissed off about the sonsofwhores that tied his little guy up and beat the crap out of him for no reason, that, with the blood still pulsing in his half-human veins, he had to work around the huge fangs in his mouth to speak. He'd had to calm down because Shippo still reeked of fear, even when the ropes were gone.

Shaking off his thoughts, looking at the fox in the here and now with an expression slightly akin to Sesshomaru's empty face, something in the hanyou's chest lurches. "Oi. Shippo."

Seemingly lost in his thoughts, the kit starts and looks up.

_Maybe he should just stay here for a while, something about the way he looks ain't right. It's not just age on him…_ but they hanyou hardly realizes the same thing happened to him as a child—the air of experience taking over childhood innocence. Without Kagome to keep him young, without Naraku to give him purpose, without the pack to keep him safe, Shippo had fallen to the wayside. It had been a good call at the time, but the repercussions are right there in the kit's face.

"Glad you made it back. I was worried about you, you know." Shippo crosses his arms in a familiar fashion.

"Keh. Don't be stupid, I've been taking care of myself longer than you've been alive, shrimp. Glad to see yer arm is healed up, though. How you feeling? They been taking good care of you here?"

"Healed up without a problem," the kit shrugs. " an' I'm bored as hell, but it's an all right place I guess." Jade eyes dance to Lord Sesshomaru for only a second, but enough for InuYasha to catch, his right ear twitches.

"Huh," with a half-assed shrug, the hanyou gestures to Kouga beside the kit, "blame that smelly pelt, kiddo. He gotcha here too late for all the good stuff. Y' missed a helluva good battle-"
Shippo's face falls a bit at this "-but there'll be another day. A bunch of other days. This ain't gonna be the last one, I'm sure. Next time, kick it in gear, you know?"

"Oi mutt-face! We were hoofing it as fast as we could! Seriously, man, I'm not as fast as I used to be when I had jewel-"

_Wham._

The raucous around them goes abruptly silent; the cracking of the table fades but various pieces of food thrown from their places settle around the gathering and the floor. The coldly calm demon lord turns his gaze to the Prince of the North, his fist lying beside his plate and the sting of youkai
makes the young ones shrink away.

"It seems your memory is faulty, Prince Kouga," with deceptive calm, Sesshomaru's expressionless face gives nothing away. "This Sesshomaru has already warned you to watch your manners. Blatant disrespect will not be tolerated."

The air drops drastically, and Emiko huddles closer to her father, golden eyes narrowing with an adult's understanding to the situation. Her father, however, straightens, giving the Prince of the North a cold stare; be he of good humor, he is still Lord Katuso of the Shiro Inu, and the dishonor to InuYasha is also a personal affront to him. Matters of honor were not to be taken lightly.

The wolf pales slightly, this display put on before a huge group of the aristocracy is no laughing matter, and one wrong move could force the Demon Lord's hand at eviscerating Kouga just to maintain face (not to mention he should have known better than to get too comfortable around a bunch of stuffy inus).

"Brother." The word tastes strange, but the hanyou's determination to keep everything on an even keel takes over his immediate reaction to jump at the demon lord over Kouga again. The last time was enough of a pisser.

As expected, Sesshomaru's gaze slides to the side while his body remains facing the wolf. Muscles tense, he is ready to spring at a breath.

"I don't need to tell you that Kouga is a personal friend and his humor is...well, he's an asshole. Pure and simple." Keeping calm doesn't mean InuYasha isn't sweating on the inside with the rest of these uppity inus watching, waiting. "That doesn't mean I don't respect him for standing with me against some evil fuckers—more than once he had my back." The hanyou eases his cup up to take a drink like he didn't have a care in the world. "I'm sure it won't cost you anything to let him be who he is. He comes to your table like any other warrior."

The young wolf is taken aback, blinking at the hanyou with an uncomprehending air. Sure, they gave each other a buncha shit, and sure, he always stood with InuYasha against others that came at them (mostly in the attempt to gain Kagome's affections, but later because he saw, just as the hanyou did, the difference between might and right), but he never expected anything to come of it. Sure as shit didn't think it would make itself known in the here and now once the trial was over, Prince Kouga might just be on the right path of his own sire, of making allies where it counts.

With all this culminating, their past and possible present, Kouga straighten, looking at the hanyou in a new light.

"Your brother, Lord Sesshomaru," the wolf interjects before the demon lord can rebut, "is one of the most honorable warriors I've ever met. In my life, that's sayin' something since I think my father's wolves are the hardest, most seasoned fighters in the North.... Lord InuYasha, though... I've seen him bleed for the weak, sire, and that by Kami, is a show of his true strength."

The wolf prince turns to the hanyou and gives a small bow from his seat, "InuYasha, I haven't really said it before, but I'm honored to know you. Always have been. I coulda been like some other snotty royalty and cared only about myself, but fighting with you against Naraku, well, that changed me. For the better, I mean." Huffily, the wolf turns his nose up and crosses his arms, very uncomfortable saying these personal things as males are supposed to be silent strength. "Not that I don't still think yer a pain in the ass and too fast to jump into battle. You are, that's just how it is, flea bag."

Gently, the aura of anger from Katsuo eases down as the hanyou bares his teeth to the root in a
nasty smile.

"Keh. I ain't taking offense, ya smelly pelt. Just 'cause you don't have the balls to jump up don't mean I have to cower."

Someone gasps further down the table and covers a child's ears.

The demon lord blinks, almost delicately, and fully turns to his elder brother with an expressionless mask, one hand gracefully sweeping to encompass his brother and the wolf in one gesture.

"Do you now see what this Sesshomaru is subjected to, brother?"

Abruptly, the elder lord also blinks before busting out laughing and this sound immediately makes Emiko relax against her father's side. She beams at the hanyou around her father, and the air begins to ease.

Chapter End Notes

So, this is the last chapter I have finished (sigh) and I will need some time to get the muse back. Thank-you all for the comments and kudos, hopefully I can get started on the next chapter ;)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!