

Second Chances

Winter really brings out your appetite; that innate need to pad yourself to outlast and protect from the cold. It invades your daily thoughts, and soon enough your dreams. Not that Kumatetsu minded the enormous ice-cream he was licking down. Though, it was the strangest thing. It tasted less like vanilla, and more like salt and fur. But he kept on licking it, only to find *more* salt and fur. His vision hazy, the bear's mind crossed from dreaming to waking, and in the aftermath of his nap he found his face buried in Byakko's armpit. The bakemono's eyes widened as he retched loudly, his throat convulsing as he prepared for a dry heave. "Oh god" he gagged, ripping himself away from the demon and making their shared blanket flap away.

The tiger grumbled as his fat legs became exposed to the cold weather, his mind stirring as he saw through the haze a very fat bear acting like he was going to vomit. "What the hell are you doing?" he mumbled drowsily, pulling the blanket back over his legs.

Kumatetsu gagged loudly, a hand to his throat and his flab jostling about as he continued heaving. Turning a spiteful look to Byakko, the obese bakemono waddled out of the demon's room to the kitchen, where he immediately continued to dry heave before turning on the tap and thoroughly washing his mouth out. "Ugh, it's too... it's too much to wake up to his nonsense" the tiger grumbled as he closed his eyes and settled back into his pillow pile.

It was hard to get back to sleep as he was forced to listen to Kumatetsu's continued retching, and also, apparently, the sound of brushing as well. "What the hell are you doing?" he loudly complained.

"Cleansing, oh god, cleansing myself of my damn sins!" came the strangled, angry reply. "Oh god I can still taste it!"

"Idiot" Byakko grumbled as he found himself frustratingly awake. With not much else to do he took the book he was reading and continued off where had left off from. "Whatever you're doing, did it require you to wake me up too?" he complained.

There was more retching, and then a gargle and a spit. Finally, the sound of water stopped and the bear returned. The weather and the impulse to hibernate hadn't been kind to him,

as his muscles had effectively vanished from his body. Everything about him was padded and soft; undoubtedly from him carrying at least an extra hundred pounds on his frame. The bakemono was now a big soft teddy bear who had taken to wear padded XXL clothing to keep him toasty in the weather. His sharp face was gone, and a softness had overtaken it, alongside two additional chins. He put his soft paws to his softer hips as he leaned over his belly. "Remind me to stop sleeping with you" Kumatetsu declared.

"I do, every day. I don't know why you bother when you already have clothing thick enough to keep you warm" the tiger pointed out.

"I'm a bear, we like to keep warm during winter. If we didn't we wouldn't need to hibernate a long time ago" the bear retorted, stretching a doughy arm.

Byakko snorted as he returned to his book, though he felt vaguely aware that his pit was damper than usual. "Whatever" he muttered, ignoring it and the idiot in front of him.

"Please, it's not like you don't enjoy it too. Don't think I don't know you get your sick thrills when you grab me all the time" Kumatetsu accused.

"I do it because it humiliates you" the demon explained.

"Yeah? And when I work out, your eyes are glued to me the whole time. Is that you humiliating me too?" the bear grumped.

"Yes" the tiger responded casually, a smug smile on his face.

"I know you're getting some sick thrill out of this fatass!" Kumatetsu said while raising his voice.

"And if I did, what will you do about it? Will you take something sharp and attempt to blind me so I couldn't look upon your fat ass again?" Byakko said with a foul smile.

"So you *ARE* looking for a sick thrill" the bear testily growled.

“If I am or I am not, I won’t tell you moron. It’ll be for your tiny brain to try and figure it out” the tiger insultingly answered.

“Like I’d waste my time trying to figure out what gets a sick fatass like you off. I bet you probably grind your gut against yourself, just to feel loved” Kumatetsu snarled.

“You’re angrier than usual I see. Clearly, this has been bothering you for a while” the demon noted.

“Because I don’t want some useless fatass demon objectifying me while I’m trying to train!” the bear retorted.

“You should be glad then that someone is giving you attention, instead of the usual revulsion everyone looks at you with already” Byakko countered.

“So you are doing it!” Kumatetsu barked.

“Like I’d waste any sexual thoughts or energy on you” the tiger snorted as he went back to his book, though he sounded guilty.

“Don’t hide in a book! I’m not done chewing you out for being a pervert” the bear growled. His fur flared, but his concentration was broken by a **knock knock knock** on the front door. “Damn, who the hell is it at... whatever this time is?”

Stumbling to the door, Kumatetsu grumpily rubbed his hands before grabbing the cold doorknob, and his frown grew as the door swung open. “The hell do you want lozen?” he demanded.

Outside was the boar of just that name, clearly dressed for the cold weather. As were, incidentally, ten of his students as well. “We’ve come for the demon Kumatetsu” lozen declared, albeit sounding hesitant.

“Why?” the bear sighed, leaning in the doorframe.

The boar ignored the fact that Kumatetsu’s gut reached the other side of the frame, blocking entry. “Because, after enough consideration, I’m starting to doubt the Lord’s faith in your abilities, especially during this time” lozen explained while stoically ignoring the bear’s mass.

“Hibernation hasn’t been kind this year, what of it? It’s my job to look after fatass, and so far it seems I’m doing a good enough job of it” Kumatetsu stated while picking his nose. “But look at you, thinking you know better than everyone else. Again.”

The boar bakemono’s face twitched, just for a second. “You know for a fact that I care deeply for the safety of everyone in Jutengai, even yours Kumatetsu. And in this time, perhaps a more capable and alert guardian is required here” he put rather diplomatically.

Kumatetsu rubbed his eyes as he switched to his game face. He bore his teeth at lozen, though he didn’t even realise it. The students did however, and a few of them backed away slowly. “H-he’s even starting to resemble the beast” one of them uttered.

“Quiet” lozen ordered, before staring down the bear. “I understand the arrangement you have with the Lord, but seeing you so out of shape, not to mention after the damage done at the inn-”

“Hey! Just because lardass tripped and broke the floor with his fat ass doesn’t mean a damn thing about how I’m looking after him” Kumatetsu snarled angrily.

“Listen Kumatetsu, regardless of how you feel, I no longer think you can handle this during this time. And you will find a lot of people in Jutengai will agree with me on that. So, until you get yourself back into shape, I ask that you relinquish the demon to my school” the boar requested.

“No” the bear answered.

“Then I will repeat myself much more firmly. Relinquish the demon Kumatetsu, or I will be required to use force” lozen warned.

“Is that why you brought all your students, eh, Izen? Too scared to take fatass from me alone?” Kumatetsu jeered with a narrow glare. “There’s only one way in Izen, and not a single damn one of you is getting past me!”

Izen and his students turned their collective heads to the left, and they stared at the ramshackle pile of steel that was Byakko’s room. “I do not see that as an issue” the boar stated.

“Oh, my my my, what an exciting confrontation, eh?”

Everyone present twisted their heads to the right, only for them to immediately kneel as the Lord slowly walked down the steps to Kumatetsu’s roof. Well, Izen and his students did, as Kumatetsu struggled to move his flabby body about the doorframe. “M-my Lord, what are you doing here?” the bear asked as he awkwardly got to his chunky knee.

“Well, you all seemed rather busy, so I felt I would wait until you sorted out your disagreement” the rabbit said with a gentle smile.

A smile he soon turned on Izen. “L-Lord, please let me explain I-”

“This is why I found you such a worthy candidate for my successor Izen. You have such passion, and always have the people of Jutengai squarely in your heart” the Lord remarked.

“What?” Kumatetsu blurted out.

“Oh yes indeed Kumatetsu. Izen truly does care for this city, even going so far as questioning my decisions for the sake of the people he cherishes” the rabbit remarked.

“Please forgive me Lord. I truly am concerned for everyone’s safety” the boar insisted, getting to his feet. “It’s just that given the weather and what Kumatetsu is like during it I-”

“And I do not even for a moment question your intentions lozen. Love, compassion, but above all else, willingness to question foolish authority are qualities a good lord should have. However, I will say that now is simply not the time for taking matters into your own hands” the Lord chided.

“I’m sorry, my Lord” lozen said as he hung his head in shame.

“I see no reason to apologize, as there has been no harm done. Not unlike your brawl in the marketplace some months ago” the rabbit chuckled.

Both Kumatetsu and lozen blushed at that, and they refused to look at each other. “Now then, don’t think I’m here simply to help settle your dispute. I am in fact here to see Byakko” the Lord announced.

“You wanna see fatass?” the bear blurted out.

“Oh yes. It has been some time since I’ve seen him, and after all this time I wish to evaluate how well his... “manners”, have been improving since he was put into your care” the rabbit explained.

“I-I mean, he’s doing fine. With it being winter we haven’t really had the energy to fight as much” Kumatetsu explained, and then wished he hadn’t.

“I’m certain you believe you are doing well, but I wish to hear it from Byakko. So if you would Kumatetsu, kindly wait outside for me, would you?” the Lord said from behind the bear.

The bakemono spun around, and then silently exited his house. The Lord tutted, albeit with amusement as he closed the door. He paid little mind to the state of the place, as such chaos was necessary to combat lozen’s well-meaning, albeit stuffy order. “Those boys, I truly made the right choice with them” he said to himself as he found his way to the demon’s room. “Hello Byakko, I see that you are doing well” he said politely.

The tiger looked up from his book for about, a second or two, before looking back down. “What the hell do you want?” he grouchyly demanded.

“I came to see you” the Lord explained.

“And now that you have, you may go” Byakko stated.

The old bakemono chuckled as he acquired a chair and placed it in the doorway. “I came to do more than that I’ll have you know” he tittered as he took his seat.

“I heard. You wish to see how I am progressing. You will be disappointed to find I haven’t changed since we made our agreement” the demon stated.

“Is that so? I dare say you’ve certainly become the bigger man in all this” the rabbit teased.

“Really? Even you would stoop so low as to insult my weight as well?” Byakko snarled.

“I must apologise, it was a low blow, I’ll admit. However, looking at you, I dare say I am starting to see a change in you” the Lord mused.

The tiger stopped his reading, his eyes hovering just above the book so he could stare at the bakemono’s feet. “What?”

“Well, you have yet to threaten me. Or attempt physical harm” the rabbit pointed out.

“I have better things to do now. And I am not so stupid that I’d threaten or harm you when your biggest fans are all within earshot of a scream” Byakko pointed out.

“I see. So, it’s all an act of self-preservation then? If I promised not to make a sound, would you try it?” the Lord asked.

“I am still not stupid enough to do that. Genbu would, because he is that stupid and gullible. But I am not those things” the demon asserted.

“Yes, I recall you saying that name. Genbu was an ally of yours was he not? And I recall another name? What was it...? It was... Suzaku, yes?” the lapin bakemono recalled.

Byakko paused momentarily, the gears of his mind grinding their way to the end of this conversation. “Don’t you have anything better to do than talk to me?” he asked huffily.

“Talking to the people of Jutengai is always the best thing for me to do” the Lord answered.

“I’m not one of *your people*” the tiger snorted.

“Perhaps not. Under the circumstance I suppose you still see yourself as a prisoner, yes?”

“I am kept under lock and key with an utter moron as my jailer. I am a prisoner until I escape and kill everyone for the insults and humiliations you have made me suffer through” Byakko said in a low, threatening voice. “I will **NEVER** be one of your bakemono. I will never become a weak, feeble creature milling around like cattle waiting for the slaughter!”

“You truly do have a lot of faith in your strength. Are demons that strong?” the Lord inquired.

“Some are. We fight eternally to earn our right to exist. We fight to dominant the weaklings and, to prove our superiority to each other. That is our way, and it is how we like it. We will never become peaceful, and... WEAK! We will never be weak like the humans and the fools in the Spirit World” the demon said with utter, burning hatred.

“A life of just fighting. I see” the rabbit nodded thoughtfully.

“Believe me. If demons made their way here, they would burn your pathetic city to the ground, and slaughter everyone here. I can promise you that” the demon added gleefully.

“That is quite the picture you paint Byakko. And yet, only you are here; no other demons are present. And if demons fight to survive each other and to prove themselves superior to each other... why are you still fighting?” the old bakemono questioned.

The tiger was quiet. He was hoping for some burst of passion; some kind of defiant retort to what he had said. And yet, after all that, he felt like he was the one losing ground.

“Because... because...” he stammered, trying to pull an answer out his fat ass. “Because I *am* a demon” he declared triumphantly. “I am a demon, and thus I fight! I will fight to prove I am superior in this new world, as I did in the Demon World!”

The Lord nodded against as he stroked his beard. “What an intriguing world you come from, to develop such philosophy. Almost makes me wonder if Kumatetsu had secretly been born a demon too” he said with an amused smile.

“Pfft, that weakling? He would have been torn apart by stronger demons before he even come of age” the demon snorted.

“Perhaps. He was quite the little hellion in his youth, so perhaps you aren’t giving him enough credit? What do you think of him, actually? Seeing as how you have lived with him for some time” the lapin bakemono inquired.

“He’s an idiot. Strong in his own right, much like his impressively thick skull. And as much of a coward as he is, he at least gives me a little challenge to satisfy my thirst for battle” the tiger answered truthfully.

“I see. Yes, I see” the Lord said as he rose from his chair. “Then clearly I made the right choice in your caretaker then, given you seem to have less-than-favourable opinions about everyone else.”

“I don’t think you can blame me for your city being full of weaklings” the demon sneered.

“Once again, I see.”

“Then you must see that there’s no reaching me. I am a demon, and that will never change. That is why I promise you this: I will kill everyone in this miserable city. And I will save you for last, so you can weep at all the lives you allowed me to take” Byakko said with despicable glee.

“That is a possibility, yes” the rabbit sadly conceded. “But, there are always branching paths of fate Byakko. One branch will lead to the annihilation of everything I stand for, with no one but myself to blame for my arrogance.”

“Your modesty disgusts me” the demon retched.

“Some find it refreshing” the bakemono commented, stroking his beard again. “Thank you for your time Byakko. Know I will see you again in a few months to see how you are doing” he announced.

“You will find little has changed during that time” the tiger defiantly declared.

“Possibly, yes, it is possible. But, if I am to be honest, I simply do not see that being the case” the rabbit mused.

Byakko narrowed his eyes, making sure to always keep focus on the bastard in front of him. “And why don’t you believe me?”

“Hmm? Oh, well, you’ll have to forgive my musings. It’s just... you’ve grown up in such a violent environment. I can’t blame you for needing to threaten and murder everything around you to feel secure. That’s just how demons are, aren’t they?” the Lord figured with piercing accuracy.

“And what’s your point?” the demon questioned, feeling less certain about things.

“Oh, I suppose these are simply the musings of a very old and very foolish old man. After all, I am so indecisive I cannot even decide on what sort of god I desire to be. But that is off-topic, so please forgive me for that. My point, Byakko, is this: Though you fight it again and again, and though you may not see it or you simply choose to deny it, being here in Jutengai is changing you. In ways that no doubt must unsettle and frighten you. Knowing only the ways of the Demon World, it must put you ill at ease knowing you are capable of thinking and feeling things you never did before. But, you don’t have to be alone with these new sensations. I’m sure you’ll find that if you allow yourself to open up to my people, they in turn will open up to you in return. You do catch more flies with honey after all. That’s a lesson Kumatetsu could stand to learn as well. Perhaps, down the line, you could teach him it?” the old rabbit chuckled.

And then he was gone, just like that. Byakko's jaw hung open, his throat convulsing as he tried to make some kind of retort. *"What the hell was that?"* he thought, thinking it over.

Did he honestly believe that...? Did he truly think that his speech meant anything?! He was a demon! He was a demon... away from the Demon World.... There were no demons here, just creatures that looked like them. The tiger stared at the floor, his mind going back to that night at the inn. Goosebumps spread across body as he recalled what Kumatetsu did. And how he himself when that idiot did what he did. His heart was racing so fast, just like it did that night. Why must it pound against his ribs like this? What kind of twisted spell had that damn rabbit put on him? It was... A TRICK! Magic! Clearly he hid some kind of hex in his words that weakened his resolve. It wasn't going to work! He was a C-class demon! He wasn't some fodder to be thrown to the wolves. He was Byakko! He was a SAINT BEAST! Ruler of the Demon City and master of Maze Castle's hunting grounds. He wasn't... he wasn't.... *"Oi fatass, I'm back!"* Kumatetsu called as he came back into the house.

The tiger blinked as he refocused on the idiot, who was moving the chair out of the doorway. *"What did the Lord ask you?"* the bear inquired.

"Stupid stuff, as typical of him. He keeps making these boring, pompous speeches at me" Byakko snorted.

"I wouldn't make fun of him. He isn't the lord for no reason" the bakemono warned.

"Whatever. Did you get rid of the pork roast?" the demon asked.

"Pork... oh, lozen? Great name actually, pork roast. Heh, yeah, the Lord got rid of him, so they won't bother us for a little while at least" Kumatetsu said as he staggered over to the pillow pile.

"What are you doing?" Byakko sighed.

"You're warmer than any kotatsu" the bear yawned as he got under the blanket, and snuggled in close. *"I... I don't know why. This is just... just... so comfortable"* he said with another yawn as he snuggled into the demon's side.

“I hate you, so much” the tiger growled as Kumatetsu wrapped his chubby arms around that big warm belly.

“Less hate, more... more... being warm” the bakemono whispered as he fell back asleep.

Byakko tutted as he kept reading, all the while, his jaw was fighting to keep himself from smiling.

That’s just not what demons did. They fight to survive, no matter what world they were in. They were strong. They were powerful, resourceful, determined, and enduring. So... why did he now feel like less of a demon?