

## Even Though I Am a Demon

“HAA!”

**SMASH!**

“HAI!”

**SMASH!**

“HIYA!”

**SMASH!**

The sun was high in the sky, and sweat dripped through Kumatetsu’s hair as he eyed the broken pots around him. Though his shoulder has almost recovered, he was still practicing swordplay with one arm. With more focus than he would usually show, he struck at his training pots with a practiced eye. **SMASH!** Water poured from the broken clay, and the bear took one fragment and poured it over his head, his bangs covering his eyes as he appreciated the cool water. Pushing his hair back, he- “Hello Kumatetsu.”

“AH!” the crimson bakemono yelped, jumping back from the Lord. “Si-sir! Would you please stop doing that?”

“Think of it as training, Kumatetsu. Learning to expect the unexpected is quite an important trait when you’re ruling a city” the rabbit chuckled as he sat down on a pile of bricks.

Kumatetsu, maintaining respectful (and paranoid) eye contact, couldn’t help but notice the ornate black katana the Lord had brought. The blade’s sheath was wrought with intricate gold stylizing, and it also.... It also.... “That sword isn’t bound” he pointed out, noticing the lack of rope tying the guard and the sheath.

“No. This is a special sword, Kumatetsu, for it is the only sword in Jutengai that cannot be bound” Soshi explained, pulling on the grip to reveal the sheen of polished metal. “I have come to lend you this sword” he added.

While not one to look a gift horse in the mouth, the bear wasn't exactly that stupid. “Why, sir? Why are you giving me it?” he queried as he felt something off about the weapon.

The old rabbit's face seemed to sag, as if attempting to truly reflect the age and wisdom of its owner. His fingers tapped along the sheath, almost guiltily as he turned his head. “I... I've brought it for you, because I have something to ask of you. Something I do not think I could ask anyone else in Jutengai” he answered slowly, eye contact resuming.

The gears turned in Kumatetsu's head slowly, and his face became hard and wooden. “That's a sword used for executing people, isn't it?”

“Yes” Soshi nodded. “It is the only surviving executioner's sword of Jutengai's troubled past. It is a blade that has tasted blood, and can never be sealed because of it. I have brought it to you with an honest request that you be the one who will execute Byakko” he said gravely.

“You can't ask anyone else to do it? Why do I have to be involved in this?” the bear demanded.

“Because...,” the old bakemono began, and sighed wearily, “it is because I cannot ask anyone else to do it. It is not because of your previous bond with the demon, though that does give you more right than anyone else to be the one to put an end to him. It is because I know you will not boast about it. I refuse to allow Byakko's execution to be considered a moment of honor or grandiosity for anyone; I cannot allow a death in my city to be celebrated! Only this way can it remain the grim moment it must be. You are the only one I can trust to treat this awful affair with the stoicism it demands.”

The ursine bakemono swallowed, the implications both alien and all too damn real for him. He knew what taking that sword meant, but could he even put a word to what using it would do to his soul? His hands trembled, and yet, he still held one out to the rabbit. “Fine. I'll do it. Only to finally put this past me” he decided.

“I knew I could trust you, Kumatetsu” Soshi said gratefully, and he handed the blade over. “Now, you must keep this weapon a secret from anyone. No one can be allowed to know you have it, or that it even exists. You are to train with it in equal secrecy, to learn its weight and length. The blade is longer than what you are used to, but I expect you to be ready for when it is time to take Byakko’s head.”

“I’ll train night and day” Kumatetsu promised. “But I won’t enjoy any of it.”

“That is why I could only ask you to perform this grim deed. Train well, for you only have a spare few days left. Starting today it will take six days to prepare matters. Train well and steel your mind in what time you have” the rabbit warned, and was gone.

Looking about cautiously, the bear pulled the long blade free, the metal shining in the overhead sun. Kumatetsu’s reflected eyes stared into his own, and they narrowed. Raising the blade high, he brought it down with a silent grunt on the last pot he had. There was no noise beyond the gentle splash of water as two perfect halves fell to the ground, alongside the column the pot had been resting on. Despite it just being stone and pottery, the bear felt a chill from how simple, and how easy it had been. His grip on the weapon tightened, and in this vast universe, he only now truly understood why everyone’s sword had to be sealed. “The past must have been a crazy scary time” he muttered to himself, and sheathed the blade. “Nobody needs this kind of power” he added.

He also wondered; wondered... how was he going to get home without anyone seeing the damn sword?

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It was pleasant and sunny out, and with some aid lozen was able to sit outside on the verandah, enjoying what little outdoor time the doctor had allowed. At least out here he could still instruct his students, albeit not physically. They had all gone for today, and with his wife having taken the children shopping, the boar was quite alone. Truth be told he was somewhat glad to have time alone with his thoughts as the events of yesterday kept creeping back into his mind. “*Where on earth had Ichirohiko picked up thoughts like that?*”

Not once could he ever recall ever saying that killing someone could be seen as true justice, no matter how much they could seem to “deserve it”. Nobody deserves to die, he knew that. Even the worst of criminals can at least spend their days rotting in a cell, in the hopes

that one day they may realize the error of their ways. And if not that, they can at least be separated from those they may wish harm too. But an execution...? The boar looked to the trees, feeling harmony with the gentle swaying of the branches. History had told that in the distant past Jutengai had been ruled by a bloodthirsty lord, who used fear and power to cow the citizens into obeying his will. He would execute and torture those he perceived to have defied him, or simply for his own amusement. Izoen recalled the Lord showing him the torture room in the depths of the palace. And though the evil instruments rusted from disuse and the march of time, he could almost hear the screams that would have echoed through the place. The old lord was deposed by the people, brutally murdered in a coup that left Jutengai damaged for years until new leadership took up, leading to the eventual harmony under Soshi.

But it begged the question, really. Would a being you can accurately call a “demon” be an innocent soul? Regardless of actions, could anyone with that title truly be beyond redemption, and be the sort who “deserves” death? He was crass, and selfish, and arrogant, and greedy. And gluttonous too. He acted like he was sin incarnate, but does that mean he “deserved” to die? Chasing his children had been the final straw, and yet he had played into the demon’s hand. Getting so heated up he foolishly accepted a fight from a creature far stronger, and much more enduring than he was. Stories tell us no matter the odds that Good always triumphs over Evil. But if you’re the sort who blindly believes stories, then it’s good, at least, that your end would undoubtedly be swift and painless. His mistake though had been retaliating over Ichirohiko’s parentage. He had given into Byakko then, and created this whole mess in the first place. But how did the demon find out? Even the Lord was convinced Ichirohiko was just a young boar, and yet the demon knew? How? “Greetings Izoen, I bring a message for you from Lord Soshi.”

The golden bakemono surfaced from his thoughts, and he looked plainly at the hare bakemono who held a sealed envelope to him. “Thank you,” Izoen said, taking the letter, “please give my regards to the Lord.”

The lapin saluted, and was off. The boar eyed the gilded letter thoughtfully, and he stared up at the gently swishing branches again. His doctor had forbidden him from breathing too heavily, lest he tear his stitches, so he gave a short exhale before opening the envelope and finding two letters. Taking the larger of the two, he began to read.

*“Dear Izoen,*

*I hope this missive finds you in good spirits, and of stronger body. It is with a heavy heart that I request your appearance at the palace on the date of the XXth of XXXX at 9pm, for the execution of the demon Byakko. This is non-mandatory, as stated prior, but your appearance*

*will be welcomed as the witness for the demon's end. Given your injured state, we will understand if you do not wish to labor your body too much with travel. If, however, you find it your duty to be present, then please sign the second letter with your seal, and I will collect it during my next visit with you. If you wish to have it back sooner, then feel free to have a proxy bring it to the palace in due haste. If you accept this invitation, transport in the form of a sedan chair will be provided to ensure you are brought to the palace in a safe and secure manner, to avoid aggravating your injuries. We await your decision with appropriate pause and care.*

*Soshi, Lord of Jutengai"*

The boar rested the letter on his lap, and he investigated the second one, which looked to be a RSVP notice. He flipped it over several times for any more information, before lozen looked more to the rustling branches, the letter pressed gently on his lap as he considered his choices. Five days was a lot of time, and yet... it felt like no time at all.

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A horse and a weasel enter a dungeon. This isn't the setup for a joke, though they considered their assignment one. The equine had the lead, being of a brawnier sort and also kitted out in armor for this occasion. The mustelid took up the rear, clearly not wanting to be here nor be holding a tray of food. "I can't believe that demon eats better than most bakemono I know" the weasel complained, eyeing the succulent turkey legs on the plate.

"It was the Lord's call, and who are we to correct him? Besides, I heard the demon isn't long for this world, so call it the Lord's pity that he should eat well before he won't have a head to eat at all" the horse grunted as they reached Byakko's cell.

The tiger had many more chains applied to him now, to the point it almost looked as if he was trying to metamorphose into the most heavy metal butterfly in the world. He didn't even bother opening his eyes, or change his expression in the least. "Dinner time demon!" the horse called, banging on the cell door.

Byakko remained still, and defiant. The equine bakemono snorted, and he took one of the turkey legs. "Better eat up while you can monster" he laughed, tossing the single leg into the cell. It bounced off the demon's head, leaving a greasy patch in his fur. "The Lord is showing pity on you before you die in four days! You should be grateful we're even bothering to feed you at all" the horse added haughtily.

Byakko slowly opened his yellow eyes, red blood vessels pulsing as he stared blankly at his captors. Raising one hand as far as the chains would allow, he started pushing it forward, the links breaking with ease. The tiger's gaze intensified, and the two bakemono suddenly found themselves short of breath. "R-right," the equine stammered, "get in there and give the demon his food" he commanded to the weasel. "I will be back later to make sure you did it right" he added and scurried off.

"W-WAIT!" the mustelid squealed, now feeling very alone. He took a nervous glance at Byakko, who seemed to be attempting to murder him through eye contact alone. "Forget this!" the coward cried and ran off, tossing the food tray away as fear carried him off.

The tiger lowered his eyes to the turkey leg on the ground, and he took it, eating in quiet as he closed his eyes again. Four more days, huh? Four more days of never having to put up with these weak, pathetic, sniveling cowards again. To think they prided themselves on their fighting prowess, and none of them could even look him in the eye. Only that damn bear ever did, and he proved as cowardly as the rest of them. That coward has grabbed his bite wound out of pure, terrified instinct. "Coward" Byakko spat as he licked the bone clean, and then started to chew on it. "Gutless, coward."

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lozen looked towards the small woods that made up his property, and he watched the still branches. There was no breeze today, showing stagnancy. He turned to the small table next to him, where the Lord's letter still waited his reply. The doctor had confirmed that as long as he did not agitate his injuries, he would be fit enough to leave home so long as he was careful and had reliable transport. lozen frowned, feeling the recurring annoyance he had of being mollycoddled by everyone. He may have been injured but it's not like he was completely indisposed. And yet even his own students felt they'd rather not have him around while training, finding it too distracting to focus on training and making sure the excitement was not too much for him. If not for Jiromaru and Ichirohiko, he probably would have gone insane from boredom. Ichirohiko though... He seemed to have learned his lesson, and yet... the boar couldn't help but feel the lingering resentment and contempt the child was keeping below the surface. Perhaps it was the human in him that made it impossible for him to let go? Or perhaps he was failing his fatherly duties? It seemed impossible at times to train so many students and to manage his children, even with their mother around. "Good day Lord" he said pleasantly, not even bothering to look to his right.

“My word you’re starting to get good at that” Soshi chuckled as he stroked his beard. “What gave me away?”

“There is no breeze today, so I heard you on the wooden floor” the golden bakemono explained.

“I am very pleased with your progress, though disappointed too. Pretty soon I’ll only be able to have my fun with Kumatetsu, who really does make the most amusing faces” the rabbit chuckled.

“I heard he hasn’t been seen for two days now” lozen commented.

“I’m sure he has his reasons” Soshi mused as he sat down in a vacant chair. “It is very traumatic to know your friend will be executed in just three days’ time.”

The boar nodded slowly, vaguely recalling Kumatetsu’s bitterness of what appears to have been the “end” of their turbulent friendship. “Whatever their relationship is sir, it isn’t like him to run away like that.”

“Very true, very true. Much like yourself, I am certain he is no doubt wrestling with some very complex emotions” the old bakemono remarked.

lozen spared himself the knowing look the rabbit was undoubtedly sporting. Somehow he always seemed to know what he was thinking, sometimes even before he thought it himself. “Our last discussion has given me some pause. I have lived my life following the idea that justice cannot exist without morality and compassion, and knowing that even the most heinous must be given a fair trial so that justice can be served. We bakemono have injured each other in the past, and we have seen to it that a fair trial is given to judge intent. So I have to ask, genuinely, why was Byakko not granted one? It’s taken me a long time to realize this has been playing on my conscience, and yet, judgement has been passed on him regardless. Why?”

“Jutengai’s laws become murky when its citizens take it upon themselves to settle their differences through illicit street brawls. Do not think I have forgotten the brawl between you and Kumatetsu some time ago, nor what we discussed there. I did say I would take responsibility in regards to Byakko’s actions. Byakko is not a true citizen of Jutengai, and not

subject to certain privileges we bakemono enjoy as he is, technically, my prisoner. However, his right to a fair trial was waived due to an agreement between he and I” Soshi explained.

“You made a deal?” lozen pressed.

“More of a list of rules and responsibilities. I believe in redemption, lozen. It is why I have granted countless second chances to Kumatetsu. I know he is an utter lout, but, beneath that sour surface of his there is something special; a leader, a courageous figure, a true warrior. Maybe it was Kumatetsu’s potential that deluded me into thinking I saw the same in Byakko. I gave him a chance to join Jutengai of his own free will. Why did I do that though? Maybe, I did it for selfish reasons. To prove to myself that even a demon can change in the city I created. With age comes wisdom, and obscene arrogance as well, it seems. I wanted my people to see that even the worst individual can become their best self, and I was so very, very wrong” the rabbit sighed, shaking his head.

“Sir, I have always trusted in your judgement, so I will abstain from commenting on that. But are you telling me that the demon is to be executed because he broke your agreement?” the boar queried.

“Hmm? Oh, yes! I distracted myself, didn’t I?” Soshi chuckled. “Among other things, we agreed that if he broke any of the rules, he would be executed. He did well, though he failed the one rule I wished with all my heart he would never break” the old bakemono said as he looked at lozen with sorrowful eyes. “That one rule being that if he refused to be sorry for harming anyone. I hoped he would never break it; perhaps to save myself from seeing within him a blackened heart that cannot be sorry nor can regret its own actions. I was afraid to think that the only thing inside him, was a remorseless monster.”

“He would not apologize... for harming me?”

“He refused outright. Though, in my selfishness I did give him multiple chances. I feel a true fool lozen, for placing my trust in a being who was clearly beyond redemption from the start. I allowed a monster to live in my city for so long, and all the while I cheerfully ignored the threat he posed. I am sorry, really, to have failed my city so.”

There was truth in the Lord’s words, and yet... why didn’t lozen feel vindicated? He was against the demon roaming free from the start, and especially against him staying with Kumatetsu of all people. And yet, from what little he saw, the demon didn’t seem intent on

causing trouble until only recently. Was he... actually trying to defend that beast? "He could have simply been a cunning manipulator" the boar suggested.

"You think so?" the rabbit asked mournfully.

"Maybe. It is... hard to really say, sir. He was peaceful, relatively, for quite some time. His actions now could have been him showing his true colors at last. I don't think anyone could be blamed when the demon hid his true intent for so long. He was luring us into his trap" lozen continued, though he hesitated to say he believed it himself.

"I must thank you for helping me to put my conscience at ease. Truthfully, I am hoping that the next few days disappear quickly, just so the whole affair can finally be over and done with. It pleases me not to have a death in Jutengai, especially one I ordained. The guilt of calling for the act, I feel, will be with me even at my ascension to godhood. I am loathe to think that I may lean into becoming a God of Murder, but it would be hard to be any other kind of god with such a sin on my soul. I do not like to call it justice, but after what Byakko did to you, and his inability to feel remorse for it, I don't think any other word would be satisfactory."

*"Besides a butchering?"* a dark part of the boar's mind thought. Chasing it away, he remembered the letter, and the original purpose of this visit. "I have been thinking about the execution as well. And after listening to you sir, I feel it is my duty to not just act as a witness, but to also bear the burden of sin as well. Because of me the demon will die, and thus I should bear the guilt of allowing it to happen" he vowed.

"I am glad to hear it. Worry not about a pen, your words alone are all I needed to hear. I will see you in three days, and together we may bear the burden of sin for what must be done. Rest well lozen, and please do not blame yourself for this. This is all Byakko's fault, not yours" Soshi said soothingly, and was gone.

"Is it?" lozen wondered aloud, and he watched the still branches start to twist in a newborn breeze. Something was bothering though. The slightest niggle from the lord's explanation. "He wasn't sorry, was he? But how can you really be sorry when you can't say it to the one you hurt?"

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Several miles outside of Jutengai, Kumatetsu had set up a small camp to be away from everyone, though sadly that didn't include his feelings. It had been insane of him to accept the sword, as much as he figured he could handle it. But now that he had it, and now that the days were draining away, his feet were starting to feel a little chilly. The bear looked around his camp, noting the large gashes left in the ground. It was haunting to see how powerful and effective a drawn sword was, especially one of this caliber. At night, when he was trying to sleep, he swore he could hear the blade was calling out to him. To use it. Or perhaps to become one with it? That had been a nightmare, probably.... Kumatetsu gave the sheathed weapon the side-eye, not trusting it one bit. "I'm going crazy" he muttered.

It had been frustrating getting the swing right. The blade was longer than usual, and he kept putting force into all of it. That would be enough to take Fatass' head, but it would help to not make it go splat too. He was getting closer though, judging by the thinner gashes left in his most recent attempts. A little bit more and he should be able to focus all the force into just the tip, it just needed the right angle. "Hello Kumatetsu."

The crimson bakemono jumped a little, surfacing from his thoughts to find Hyakushubo and Tataru watching him. "How the hell did you find me?" he demanded.

"People had been talking about your disappearance for days now, but we figured if you did vanish, you wouldn't go far" the monk answered plainly.

"Plus we just followed the sound of your grunts. You're really loud when you train" the monkey added.

"Yeah, well, I had to get out of town. Take some me time" Kumatetsu shrugged.

"Nothing else?" the pig inquired, eyeing the ornamental sword leaning against the bear's tent.

The ursine followed his eye, and hastily grabbed the weapon, hiding it behind his back. "You didn't see anything" he said sharply.

“We didn’t see you with an unbound sword?” Hyakushubo remarked. “Kumatetsu, I know you’re frustrated, but this is-”

“It’s not like that!” the bear protested. “The Lord gave me it.”

“He gave you an unbound sword?” Tatara observed.

“May I see it?” the monk requested.

Kumatetsu sighed and held it out for his friend to take. Hyakushubo held it delicately, eyeing it over carefully. “I recall seeing something like this in an old text of Jutengai’s history. This was one of many swords used for executions” he recalled. “The Lord asked you to execute someone...? Oh, I see” the pig said grimly.

“What?” the monkey demanded.

“He asked you to be the one to do it, didn’t he?” Hyakushubo said in a small voice, handing the blade back.

“Yeah” the bear nodded, putting the sword aside.

“WHAT?!” Tatara demanded.

“The Lord asked me to be the one to off Fatass” Kumatetsu disclosed.

The simian bakemono’s face blanched. “Oh.”

“That’s very surprising, Kumatetsu. Could he not ask anyone else to do it?” Hyakushubo asked.

“No, nobody else. Said he didn’t want to let anyone brag about offing him. I get it, but the more I think about it the more messed up it all is” the crimson bakemono frowned.

"It leaves a huge mark on the soul to take the life of another, regardless of who they are. Are you sure you want to live with that?" the pig asked.

"I don't think I really have a choice. Fatass was my responsibility, and he broke the rules the Lord set for him. Best I can do for him is have him go out as cleanly as I can" Kumatetsu concluded.

"When is he getting offed?" Tatara interjected.

"Two days. Which is why I've been practicing with the sword so much. I gotta make sure the cut is clean enough to kill him in one strike" the bear grimly explained.

"Do you want us to be there with you?" Hyakushubo inquired.

"No. I don't think the Lord even wants you there. Probably doesn't want anyone there" the crimson bakemono figured.

"I wouldn't either" the monk nodded. "I can't imagine how much this is weighing on his mind too."

"He seemed more than happy to call it" Kumatetsu grunted. "He had me stand in the dungeon to see if Fatass might say sorry about almost killing Pork Roast. He wouldn't, and the Lord immediately just went "Okay well then I gotta get ready to cut your head off then"" he paraphrased.

"Not specifically like that, I would assume. Also you really need to stop calling lozen that, or people might think Byakko rubbed off on you" Hyakushubo warned.

"If it bothers him I will, but this is a big mess and I'm the one cleaning it up. It's not like lozen's being any help either" the bear complained.

"That would be due to his life-threatening injuries" the pig pointed out.

"Anyways, Fatass is my problem to deal with, nobody else's. And it's not like I *WANT* to do this, cause I don't. I just want you guys to know I'm not doing it because I'm going to enjoy doing it" Kumatetsu alleged.

"We didn't say you were" Tatara countered.

"Other people might. Not like I care what they say, but, a part of me is just pissed off about this. Fatass coulda had a good life here, and instead he decided to be a big blubbery baby about. What does "being a demon" even mean?" the ursine bakemono complained.

"Some people are terrified of giving up their identity; the core of their being. Byakko may have just been terrified of the idea of losing who he was" the pig theorized.

"Yeah, well, it's not like he had it bad anyways. But it's all gone wrong, and I gotta clean it up. I really should have just found a pupil, would've been less of a pain in my ass" Kumatetsu grumbled.

"You may be right there, Kumatetsu" the monk sighed. "It is getting late, so we should be heading back soon. Do you want us to bring you any supplies tomorrow?"

"Nah, I got everything I need here. I'm just going to keep training and come back just before the execution. Don't want anybody else finding out about the sword, which you guys didn't see, right?" the bear demanded.

"I did not" Hyakushubo confirmed.

"I just saw you swinging a large stick about" Tatara said half-heartedly. "You really are lucky Kumatetsu, no bakemono in the Lord's reign will ever get to boast they got to use an unbound sword" he added cheekily.

"I severely doubt Kumatetsu will boast about that" the pig said in a manner less of a statement, and more like a threat.

“Trust me, I won’t be bragging about ANY of this” the bear vowed.

“Don’t overdo it Kumatetsu. It’s bad enough to damage your soul without also breaking your body as well” Hyakushubo warned. “But, if you need support after the execution, we’ll be there.”

“We will?” the monkey remarked.

“We *will*” the pig repeated firmly, and was off with Tatara in tow.

The bear sighed as his friends dwindled into specks, and he looked back at the sword. It hadn’t moved since he had put it down, and yet.... “Don’t look too excited,” he said to the inanimate object, “I’m not going to enjoy this, and neither will you” he warned.

The sword did nothing, though the paranoid part of the bakemono added “yet” to the end of that statement. He was going to be much happier when it was out of his keeping and this whole mess was behind him. *“I wonder if I’ll miss Fatass?”* he thought to himself. *“As much as a pain in the ass he was, there were those really small moments where he was actually... fun, to be around.”*

It wasn’t much of a deep thought, though somewhere in the deep recesses of Kumatetsu’s mind, he acknowledged how alike the two of them had been. Though one was more of a slob than the other, clearly. Could he go through with it though? It would be like killing a part of yourself. An annoying, grouchy, self-centered part of yourself, but he had his moments. “Damn it Fatass,” he said quietly, “why did you have to ruin it for both of us?”

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It would soon be midnight, and while Jutengai slept, there were four souls who found it too troublesome to sleep. In the house of Iozen, the boar was slowly moving through his shadowed house. His cane **tapped** gently on the old wooden floors as he found sleep difficult. Finding a chair in the living space, Iozen stared listlessly into the distance, idly catching the shifting shadows of the room. Tomorrow he would see justice was done, and he could not shake how wrong it felt. The demon had left deep wounds, ones that would leave scars for the rest of his life, and yet they seemed to mean something more. Despite everything, even his child being chased, it was his paternal instincts and foolish pride that

had drawn him into battle with Byakko. And that's what bothered him: He had treated the demon like he treated Kumatetsu. "Was I truly that foolish?" he whispered to himself.

He could have petitioned the Lord about it, forced additional restrictions to ensure the demon wouldn't be able to chase or harm the people of Jutengai. He could have done so much more, and yet in the heat of the moment, he was goaded by Byakko and paid for it. Pride. It was a funny word really, and only now in this moment of reflection did it really occur to Izoen what it meant. He had been so prideful he truly DID see himself as the guardian of the city, didn't he? And yet, he couldn't even protect his child until he had already been captured; and he couldn't protect anyone in this injured state. *"In a ways, speaking with the Lord, I was right. The demon is a manipulator, but not a liar. He toyed with me, using my pride and anger against me. I was so easily duped by him, and still felt it was easier to blame him than my own weaknesses."*

Was that it, though? Or... was there something else? The shadows shifted, casting themselves over the bear as he sat in thought. *"No, it was worse than that, wasn't it? Below all my rage, I think I was... afraid. Afraid people would lose their trust in me. Respect? No, I didn't fear that. I feared the demon would be right, and if I refused the town would live in fear knowing I wasn't brave enough to stand up to him. They don't trust Kumatetsu, and how could they be blamed for that? I never trusted him to watch the demon either, and I feel no joy in being proven right over that."*

Kumatetsu.... He did say he was sorry, and knowing how little imagination he had, it was no doubt sincere. Izoen breathed slowly, and he had to admit, the bear did do his best to control the beast for so long. But whatever caused him to go mad was still his responsibility, and he failed. That wouldn't disqualify him from running for Lord, but how could the people trust him to keep the town under control when he couldn't control one raging demon? *"Because Byakko is strong, stronger than any of us. Even if Kumatetsu and I fought him together, I can't say we'd win. It's almost sad he is so prideful and arrogant. If he was capable of change, I can't even imagine how useful he'd be to Jutengai- Oh...."*

That was an odd thought, and for that moment, Izoen finally understood the Lord's plan somewhat. *"I see. But it's too late for that. He will die tomorrow, and once I recover it will be like he never came here. I won't allow some scars to deter me from doing what I can for Jutengai. I can't regret every action, although the scars will forever remind me of what giving into pride and anger can lead too. My pride has blinded me for too long, and has caused me to start looking down on others too. After the execution, I think it would be best to console Kumatetsu. Despite everything, they were something resembling friends...."*

The night was long, and was going to be longer yet. It was hard to tell if lozen could rest tonight, not when his conscience was wide awake.

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Outside of Jutengai, Kumatetsu lay in his tent and watched the dying embers of his fire. Fatass was due for the chop tomorrow, and he was the one who was going to do it. His shoulder felt much better, and would be usable when it was time. "Damn it Fatass, why did you have to mess everything up?"

Of course, it wasn't *JUST* his fault, was it? The bear turned in his knapsack and growled. It's not like his sudden 180 was his fault, that was obvious, but he never even bothered to really find out what was eating at the lard butt. It was just such a damn pain to have him whine and blubber and complain and grumble about EVERYTHING! And the biggest pain was the asshole was at least getting better, but then suddenly he started going on about being a "true demon" and it all went to crap. He coulda listened better yeah, but every time Fatass had a tantrum, he never took it calmly, he just got angry and shouted back. *"Maybe Fatass was right then. Maybe we didn't have anything since all we did was shout at each other. I can't even remember if he ever smiled. Not his jackass smile, but a real one. Was he ever actually happy? Even around me?"*

The real pisser though? He got waaaaay more chances than Kumatetsu ever had. Way too many, and he couldn't even be happy with that. And yet he seemed so hell-bent on spiting everyone, even when doing so was going to get him killed. *"I guess he really hated it here. Not like he ever gave it a damn chance. Not like he could ever accept giving it a chance. He wants to be a demon, and that's it. Guess demon means "angry asshole" the way he acts. Why does he have to be such a damn baby?"* the bear thought, then thought some more. *"Why else? He was stuck in a prison and had to be watched all the damn time. I couldn't let him out of my sight and he couldn't go anywhere without me. I'd be angry too if I was far away from home and treated like crap."*

Huh, that actually felt like some real big brain stuff there. Hyakushubo would've been proud of that one. Maybe, if Fatass just had someone he could trust in, and to trust him back, he wouldn't have fallen into being a huge asshole? "Not likely. He's asshole all the way down" Kumatetsu decided and rolled over, the last flame of his campfire expiring.

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Soshi looked out from the balcony, his ancient nightshirt billowing softly in the wind as he gazed upon his beloved city. Tomorrow, the city would change. He knew it well enough. The execution, despite being private, will be spoken of for quite some time. It wasn't a guess, but cold hard fact. He should have intervened sooner in the fight with Izoen and Byakko, called it off somehow. If only he had heard of it sooner. Sadly, only hindsight is 20/20, and everyone had been lacking it that day. "Everyone will be where they are supposed to be tomorrow, at least" he said to himself.

For Kumatetsu and Izoen to both grow, they needed to play their parts in the execution. One to prove he can face his responsibilities and duties with a clear conscience, and to see if the other can see beyond their foolish pride to see what was important. Byakko was but a pawn in all this, and- Ah, of course. The rabbit rested his cheek on his hand. Someone else was going to have to learn not to treat living beings as mere tools and playthings for the sake of teaching. And yet the metaphor was so apt, really. Pawns, though weak, had such great potential. Byakko could have released his, if only he were willing to give things a chance. Hmm, another funny thought, really. Byakko needed someone to give him a chance, much like how he needed to give others a chance. "Tomorrow, we shall see" he whispered, and went back to bed.

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Deep in the cells Byakko didn't know the time, and while his body craved sleep, he remained awake and alert. The guards had been *ever so kind* to remind him of how many days were left until his execution, and despite the satisfaction of spite, he couldn't ignore the emptiness inside him. Without his excess weight he could feel that ravenous call for energy he had endured in his early days here. His body was howling; demanding to have replaced what was lost. That snot-nosed brat had been his last chance to restore his energy reserves with their Reiki, or maybe it was going to be Yoki? It was hard to tell what that brat would have become when it comes to human darkness in this world. But now any chance he had was gone. The demon grit his teeth, grinding his jaw as that realization meandered through his mind. Suzaku's punishment.... Why? He still could not understand how one mistake could have caused him so much pain? It could have happened to anyone. But, maybe, if he just got his power back he could find his way back. It wasn't impossible, surely? He couldn't forsake the world he called home for some half-baked, shallow alternative. He was a demon, that's all he will ever be. So why did Suzaku do it? They were demons. They were the Saint Beasts! The four (really three) most terrible demons to rule the Demon City. He must have had his reasons, surely?

Byakko hung his head, and emptied it of all thoughts. Whatever the case, the nightmare was going to be over soon enough. And if luck would have it, he would be able to tear his way through the Afterlife so he could demand answers from Suzaku himself. What other choice did he have? *"The bear?"*

The tiger stirred, and wondered if he had truly thought that. That moron was a laughing stock to his race, an inferior being in a race of inferior beings; inferiority squared. And thankfully he wouldn't have to see their miserable mug again. It was baffling how he had survived to adulthood, but then, he had only achieved that physically. He was an adult-sized toddler, endlessly throwing tantrums. He had been an amusing distraction at least, but he would distract no longer. Byakko was going to go through Hell to get back to Suzaku, and nothing was going to change that.

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The moon was high in Jutengai, and though it lacked a clock tower, some could feel the grinding of seconds under the Wheel of Time. And among the shadows was a bear in a cloak, moving through the back alleys as he ascended the city. Kumatetsu was being as cautious as he could, following the instructions that had "mysteriously" appeared in his camp early this morning. It had even suggested he hide the sword with his blanket, which, admittedly, he hadn't thought of himself. But even through the fabric, he felt the presence of the naked blade, and his pace hastened in a bid to cut down on the time they'd spend together. Thankfully he went unnoticed, or rather, unremarked upon as he made it to the back of the Lord's castle, where the rabbit was waiting for him. "Thank you for coming, Kumatetsu" Soshi said dourly.

"Let's get this over and done with sir" the bear responded with similar grimness. "I just want to go home and sleep in my... couch, tonight."

"I'm sorry, truly I am, to have burdened you like this Kumatetsu" the lapin apologized as he led the way inside.

"I don't wanna think too much about this. I just want to get rid of this sword" the bear grunted.

"Has the weight been troubling you?"

“The weight of its sins, maybe. I remember sitting around the table with the others last winter; we talked about how a bakemono could become a demon using our godhood ritual” Kumatetsu recalled.

“What interesting dinnertime conversations you and your friends must have Kumatetsu” the rabbit frowned.

“It’s not like that! But, after spending time with this sword, I realized something sir: You wouldn’t need to ascend to become a demon. Why would you go through all that effort when you can just become one inside?” the ursine bakemono philosophized.

“You have gained tremendous insight into the ways of the past Kumatetsu” Soshi said with a soft smile. “Our actions can become a mirror to our soul. And as we scar the flesh of others, so to do we maim our own souls. I can’t imagine how terrible it must have been back then.”

“I think I’ve got an idea already” Kumatetsu said quietly. “Did you ever try the sword, when given the chance?”

“No, I confess. I was much too afraid to. I had already seen what needless bloodshed had wrought, which was why I had everyone bind their blades. I simply could not stomach the carnage my fellow citizens inflicted upon each other. You cannot wield a blade with good intentions Kumatetsu, remember that well” the rabbit warned.

“I’ll keep it in mind” the crimson bakemono nodded. The many turns of the palace soon came to a cold dungeon room, where a set of black clothing was laid out. “What’s that?” the bear asked.

“It is an outfit we have prepared for you. The top has a hood attached to it that you can wear if you so wish. Otherwise, it is intended as both an executioner’s outfit, and the black attire one may wear to a funeral. See it how you will, but you are required to wear it per tradition. I will give you time to change, as I have another engagement to attend to. But do not take too long, as you will be escorted to the Execution Chamber shortly. Now, please excuse me Kumatetsu” the Lord bowed, and in a blink he was gone.

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The moon was high in Jutengai, and though it lacked a clock tower, some could feel the grinding of seconds under the Wheel of Time. And in the dim light of a lamp hanging by his front gate, lozen waited for the sedan chair to collect him. Today had been unbearable for the boar, to the point he had chosen to wait it out in his bedroom. But now two elephant bakemono were marching neatly down the moonlit road, a sedan chair with an enclosed carriage between them. "Sir lozen, we have come to escort you to the palace" the lead pachyderm declared as they reached him.

"Thank you. Please do not feel you have to go slow on my account" the golden bakemono said as he gingerly stepped into the enclosed seat.

"We will make good time yet sir" the hind elephant vowed, and they marched off into the night.

The trip was quite pleasant, and despite the occasional bounce from his carriers adjusting their positions, they made it to the palace in good time. lozen departed from the chair, and his carriers marched off in tow, leaving him alone. "Good evening sir" he said plainly.

There was a disappointed sigh, and the rabbit stood by his side. "You really don't make doing that fun anymore" he sighed.

"This isn't a night for merriment, sir" lozen said woodenly.

"Ah, yes, of course. It seems in my old age I lost myself a little" Soshi chuckled modestly.

"Before you become a god, you must teach me how you do that trick" the boar remarked as they walked through the front door.

"Oh, where would be the fun in that lozen? I had to discover how to do it, and I believe you should too, as well as many other hidden talents you may have. How was your journey? Not too rocky I hope. That sedan chair had only been fully restored late this afternoon so I feared something may have been missed" the lapin fretted.

“No, it was quite comfortable. Though I only say that given my injuries. When I have fully recovered I have every intention to walk, as I have done before” the golden bakemono answered.

“I’m sure the people of Jutengai are appreciative that you choose to walk among them, rather than ride above them” the old bakemono remarked, the conversation changing.

“I never claimed otherwise, sir” lozen grunted, his discomfort rising.

“Apologies if that made you uncomfortable, lozen. It’s just that it is important that a Lord should never decide themselves above those he considers lesser, lest he start thinking himself above other things” Soshi asserted.

“I never thought any other way, sir. Though I do not think myself above others to come here, by your request, on behalf of the city. Tonight the demon will die, and I must bear the sin for it” the boar vowed.

“I knew I was right in choosing you to be one of my candidates lozen. Your sense of justice and humility are next to none” the rabbit smiled.

“I wouldn’t say that, sir” lozen said quietly.

The procession took them through the bowels of the castle, into the cold and dark stone that spoke of old and unpleasant times. They entered an antechamber at the same time Kumatetsu, dressed in the clothing of an executioner, was likewise guided in by an antelope bakemono.

“You?!”

“You?!”

They stared in disbelief. “Sir, why is Kumatetsu here?” the boar demanded.

“I was about to ask why you’re here lozen” the bear growled.

“Because this moment is for the both of you” Soshi said plainly, now standing between them. “lozen, Kumatetsu is here to fulfill his contract with me as Byakko’s caretaker. He is here to take responsibility for failing his duty of care with him” he explained.

“Way to put it nicely sir” the crimson bakemono grumbled to himself.

“And Kumatetsu, lozen is here both so he may confirm Byakko’s death on behalf of Jutengai’s citizens, and so that he may have justice done for the grievous injuries he sustained from Byakko’s vicious assault on him” the Lord continued.

lozen’s heart beat harder, and suddenly it was quite hard to look at either of them. “I wasn’t the only victim that day” he guiltily said to himself.

“The both of you have every right to be here, and thus I have extended to you both the privilege of it. Now, please enter the Execution Chamber, so we may put this sorry chapter behind ourselves” Soshi commanded.

The chamber was, to put it plainly, evil. Oh, it didn’t look it, what with its old and darkened stone, and the raised area that resembled a macabre stage. No, it was the gravity of the immense sin that took place here, and the patches of stone that bore bloodstains still as red as the day they were shed. This was an evil, evil place, and Kumatetsu and lozen’s hair stood on ends as they walked through it. “This is for us lozen” Soshi said, gesturing to a pair of chairs before the stage.

“You are to man your post on the stage Kumatetsu” the rabbit added.

Kumatetsu nodded, and ascended the steps of the raised area. So this is what they did in the old days, huh? How far we have come to be so much more civilized than murderers who made a show of death. He couldn’t help but notice how redder the stones were here, nor the large stone with a noticeable bowl-like dip in it. That was where the head went, didn’t it? They would kneel down and wait for their head to be lopped off. And on either side of it were holes; probably where they tied the ropes or chains or whatever they used. What a sick joke this all was.

"This is a sick joke" lozen scowled.

"It's hard to believe so many lords of Jutengai would make a performance of execution, as if ending someone's life was meant to entertain them" Soshi added in disgust.

"I can't imagine how anyone could be so bloodthirsty" the boar remarked.

"It is, unfortunately, much easier than you think" the rabbit sighed. "Still, at least our consciences can rest easy, knowing justice will be done tonight" he added.

A lump in lozen's throat limited his speech, so he chose to say nothing and sit quietly as a lynx bakemono in a black robe appeared by the Lord's side and whispered to him. "I see, thank you. Tell the guards to bring Byakko in" he answered.

The feline bowed and scurried away. "Kumatetsu, it is almost time. Please stand to attention for the proceedings ahead" Soshi called to the slouching bear.

"Yessir!" Kumatetsu called, standing straight and keeping a firm hand on the execution sword.

It was easier this way, wasn't it? Make light, goof off, just to avoid the reality of things. But he had no other choice, besides miss every time. He could do that, but he won't. This has to be how things are; nothing will change it. The bear pulled his hood on, and waited as the door on the far end of the stage opened. A heavily armored pachyderm of some kind entered, pulling a very thick chain behind him. Byakko, gaunt as ever, kept a straight face as he was pulled in, a second chain following him attached to another heavily armored bakemono. Soshi took to his feet and stood before the stage, and to the demon forced to his knees before him. "Byakko, it is with a heavy heart that I must condemn you to death for your vile actions, and your refusal to show remorse for them. Your punishment for violating our laws will be your beheading" the Lord declared, though there was a nervous shudder in his proud voice.

The rabbit returned to the seats, and both lozen and Kumatetsu were frozen like statues as Byakko was taken to the chopping block, willingly. He didn't struggle in his bindings as his

head was brought down on the stone, though he did give the side eye to the one in black by him. Their smell was familiar, and the tiger managed a grim smirk in the knowledge that somehow, the dumbass had been conned into doing the rabbit's dirty work. "No spine still, insect?" he whispered loud enough for Kumatetsu to hear.

The crimson bakemono stiffened, but held his temper back. He knew better than to take such bait. Byakko snorted derisively, and so he shut his eyes and relaxed his body, his hair falling away and exposing his neck to Kumatetsu. "No need to be fearful, lozen" Soshi whispered to the boar, who had his eyes closed. "Soon justice will be done, and his crimes against you will be resolved."

The golden bakemono's hands tightened into fists, and he grit his teeth as his heart pounded in his chest. "On my mark" Soshi called.

Kumatetsu's heart was beating a mile a minute, and yet he took the blade from its sheath, and he could hear its yearning. It hungered to take the demon's head; it was so loud he could feel it screaming in his head. It was using his own voice! "Raise your weapon!"

The evil sword glinted in the light of the torches. The bear swallowed, his fur soaking in an unseasonable amount of sweat in a room that felt colder than ever. It was like there was no warmth in the room, and yet that damn demon wasn't even shaking. Did he even understand what was about to happen?! "STRIKE!"

Kumatetsu's muscles hesitated, the blade not budging an inch. "DAMN IT!" his heart screamed, and forced the blade down.

All time, all space seemed to stretch on for infinity. There was nothing but the blade, and its target. And yet it felt infinitely faster, moving at a speed nobody could stop.

"WAIT!"

The blade missed the tiger's face by an inch, bouncing off the stone floor without a single mark as Kumatetsu looked to the left. The Lord looked as well, surprised at lozen out of his chair, his arm outstretched. He seemed at a loss for words, as he didn't even seem to realize whose mouth that word had come from. "I-lozen?" Soshi stammered.

Everything he had been bottling up. Trying to rationalize. Trying to ignore. It was all coming out, he couldn't stop it! He couldn't stand to stop it! "Sir!" the boar said louder than needed. "Lord, I have always lived my life trying to understand what true justice is. To live my life by my morals. But this?! This isn't justice! It's a slaughter!"

Kumatetsu pulled off his damp hood, his mouth hanging open as wide as Byakko's was. "This is most unusual, lozen" Soshi remarked, though he didn't sound too surprised.

"It's not sir. I've been fighting this for so long, but I cannot allow this to proceed! It was my fault that things escalated. I allowed that demon to get under my skin and injured him. He only retaliated because of *my actions*! And furthermore, you decided to kill him before he even got a chance to apologize to me! Actually, you decided to kill him before I even had the chance to apologize to him! I have always taught my sons that when you hurt someone, you must take responsibility and look the person you hurt in the eye, and apologize sincerely, with all your heart. *THAT* is just! And I can't sit here and watch him die when you mete out justice unevenly. Why is my crime excusable, but his isn't? This whole mess is my fault, no one else's!" lozen declared, his voice filling the room.

Soshi blinked rapidly, but said nothing as the boar hobbled to the stage, staring the utterly gob smacked Byakko in the eye. "I'm sorry Byakko, for harming you. I take full responsibility for what happened that day and regret every second of it" he intoned, his hands placed together and his head bowed.

The demon shared the rabbit's rapid blinking. What? What was happening? **WHAT WAS HAPPENING?!** "You... BASTARD!"

Pulling himself up, Byakko's chains strained against him, the lighter ones snapping while the thick ones were bowing inwards. "YOU BASTARD! HOW DARE YOU RUIN THIS!" the tiger screamed, breaking free of his bonds and lurching forwards. "I'LL KILL YOU YO-" **WHUMP!**

The demon's eyes crossed, and he slumped forward, the rabbit appearing behind him with his hand raised. "Dear me what a spectacle" he tutted. "lozen, if you had any objections, you really should have raised them sooner" he chided, and gently nudged Byakko with his foot. "This won't do. I refuse to have him executed while passed out like that. Guards, please return Byakko to his cell while we sort this out. Kumatetsu, please go along with them so that you might keep our prisoner calm when he wakes up in about... twenty

minutes, I should think? It was a light hit. Hmm?" the Lord muttered, noticing the stationary guard. "Yes, the two of you just standing there! Just carry him back to his cell, he won't bite. Kumatetsu, if you would?"

"Ah yes, sir!" the bear saluted, following the two nervous guards carrying the tiger between them.

"I'm sorry sir" lozen apologized.

"Well, I am sorry too lozen. You are right; perhaps I was too hasty. I should have, at the very least, waited long enough for his rage to subside, and your wounds to heal. Still, I do hope Kumatetsu is able to quell his anger, as he definitely won't be too happy once he wakes up" Soshi remarked, though he kept his smile to himself.

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Kumatetsu was crouching in front of Byakko's cell, not keeping his eyes off the demon for even a second. He hadn't said much after lozen had stolen the show, which was just typical of him. Of course the golden child would wait until the last damn minute to finally say something he shoulda said a week ago! He had every chance! Still.... The bear tilted his head and glanced aside, just for a moment. Still... at least he did say something, anyways. Otherwise, he really would have chopped Fatass' head off. He could still hear the lingering cries of the sword screaming in his head. But they were slowly being drowned out by something else; something he had noticed during the latest demon tantrum: *"What did lozen ruin?"*

How long had it been? Must've been long enough, as Sleeping Ugly was finally waking up. He had been given one thick chain to keep him bound for a short while, but given how he broke through the ones at the trial, a short while could very well be equal to five seconds. "Good nap?" Kumatetsu said as Byakko opened his eyes.

"What happened?" the tiger said, his words slurred as he got into a seated position.

"The Lord knocked you out again" the bear answered bluntly.

“That damn rabbit!” Byakko seethed, before his memory came back. “THAT DAMN BOAR! I’LL KILL HIM!”

“Before you do, how did he ruin this?” Kumatetsu pressed.

“What?” the demon demanded, a vein in his temple throbbing in rage.

“I was there next to you. You said he ruined this. I wanna know why” the bakemono restated.

“Why do you even care? You were the one with the sword!”

“Now I’m the one without the sword. If you’re going to die anyways, you might as well tell me. No point not too” Kumatetsu pointed out.

“It’s none of your business!” Byakko bellowed.

The bear was way more focused than he had ever been, his stare like a thermal lance attempting to cut through all the bullshit in front of him. “Why are you here?” he questioned.

“Because I refuse to feel remorse you stupid grub!” the tiger growled.

“No, why are you in Jutengai?”

The demon stared in disbelief. Out of everything he asks, and it was that? Was he not satisfied the first time? “I already told you why! How can you be so dense yet have your memories pour from your mind like the cheap booze you drown your pitiful sorrows in!” he snarled.

“Oh, I remember what you told me. But, now that I think about it more, I think it’s absolute horseshit” Kumatetsu spat. “You boast how much of a great hunter you are, and yet you got

ambushed? I've watched you, you don't let anything past you, at least not easily. I want the *REAL* story."

Byakko's head dipped, hiding his expression save for the tensing in his upper jaw. His body seemed to hunch up, as if he was trying to resist something. The bear narrowed his eyes, and waited patiently. He caught a sharp intake of breath, then the tiger was at the door, roaring with his all his might. Kumatetsu's fur blew in the intense gale, but he didn't move, and his expression didn't fade. Byakko huffed hard, staring into the permanent, piercing look of the bear. "You're going to die soon, cause I know you're not going to apologize to lozen when he walks in here. You might as well tell someone why you're actually here. And if you do, it might as well be the only person who gave any sort of damn about you" the crimson bakemono said calmly, ignoring the fact the demon had broken quite a thick chain just by moving.

The tiger's jaw opened and closed repeatedly, and suddenly the demon seemed much smaller than he had ever been. Maybe he always seemed small, despite being so tall to begin with. "Why?" he demanded.

"Because I wanna know why, without any of your bull crap. Believe it or not I'm not going to forget you after this, so you can at least do me the favor of answering one of my questions before I have another go at making sure you never talk again" Kumatetsu said, never losing his stern tone.

Byakko sat back, matching the bear's stare. "It won't change anything" he warned.

"I'll take my chances" the bear said back.

"I don't understand you. I rejected you, and you me. And yet you keep trying as if it'll make a difference" the tiger sighed. "Fine!" he decided loudly. "Fine, if it'll get you to stop staring at me like that, I'll tell you. I lied, only a little when I explained things too you" he began.

"I'm sure you did" Kumatetsu snarked.

"Do you want me to explain, or not?!"

“Fine, sorry, go on.”

Byakko snorted loudly, but continued. “It was true some humans came to Maze Castle; scouting, I believe, for the Spirit World. One of them, infuriatingly, was very skilled with magic. They used a spell that confused my senses. I track my prey with hearing, smell, and sight, and that spell managed to confuse all three. I stalked an illusion for an hour, until I found out that my comrade Seiryu had found and killed those damn humans before I could” he snarled.

Kumatetsu nodded, and noted how Byakko’s claws were digging into his legs hard enough to draw blood. He was actually shaking, and his expression seemed torn between rage, and... something else. “Su-Suzaku was... enraged...” the tiger stammered, his jaw trembling. “I don’t.... I don’t understand why” he said, baffled. “They died in the end and yet, and yet he acted as if I had let them escape!”

The demon’s expression slowly changed, twisting from anger into... regret? Kumatetsu was never much of a face reader, and yet even he could read the tiger pretty well. “He was more furious than I had ever seen. I don’t know why! I didn’t do anything wrong!” the demon uttered.

Byakko shook his head, as if he was trying to shake free his thoughts. “Genbu would have fallen for their illusion too! The only reason Seiryu wasn’t fooled was because his damn icy winds made it easy for him to find the real intruders. Why did Suzaku single me out like that?!”

The bakemono realized he had been cut from the conversation, as the demon was now off in his own little world. Byakko’s tone kept changing, growing desperate and confused. “I didn’t do anything wrong Suzaku! Why did you steal my power? Why did you banish me?! I don’t understand. I DIDN’T DO ANYTHING WRONG!” he screamed, slamming the ground with his fists. “I DIDN’T DO ANYTHING WRONG! I DIDN’T! I... I didn’t...” he said, his voice and jaw shaking.

“Suzaku... why...?”

A shiver ran up Kumatetsu’s spine.

He had never heard so much pain get stuffed into three letters like that....

Byakko shuddered, his gaze distant. The bear blinked hard, taking a step forward. The prisoner sobbed loudly, then looked to his hands. "Wh-what?"

Why were his hands so damp? Unghuh? Something fell from his face, splashing on his open palms. Byakko shook as he reached up to the tears sliding down his face. "What is this?" he whispered, wiping them away.

But the more he wiped them away, the more flowed out. The flood raining from his eyes was unstoppable. The demon sobbed louder as he pounded the floor again. His claws raked the floor, his sob turning into an agonized scream as he flailed about the cell, before collapsing in front of the door. Byakko's tears pooled on the stone as he struggled to get up, his hand clutching at his chest. "Why? Why does... it hurt so much?" he whimpered, gripping his chest tightly.

His breathing was ragged as he clawed at the space over his heart, and he seethed as the ache only grew. "It hurts!" he moaned, before somehow seeing Kumatetsu for the first time. "He-help me!" he whimpered, struggling to the cell door. "I can't stop it. It won't stop hurting! Please! Make it... make it go away! I-I can't... bear this!" he moaned, an imploring hand reaching through the bars.

This was... not what he had expected. The bear had no breath in his chest. Seeing Byakko cry like that, the pain in his voice. It was suddenly thirty years ago, where there was an orphaned bear cub getting the ass kicking of his life. He had such a defiant look, but once he was alone the tears came flooding. He could never stop them. And every time, there came a kindly white rabbit out of nowhere. He would kneel down, and embrace the young cub, to be with him until the tears would cease....

Kumatetsu knelt at the door, and through the bars he embraced Byakko, awkwardly. He didn't know what to say, he just knew this was where he needed to be as the demon sobbed into him. It was really awkward, but he gently patted the tiger's enormous back while ignoring how wet his shoulder was. It went on, for a while, until the last of the demon's shuddering went away, and his sobbing quieted down. He was the first to pull away, his eyes red and still marred by the odd tear. He was quiet as he retreated into the cell refusing to look at Kumatetsu. "You're welcome" the bear said sarcastically.

"I have been damaged a lot in my long life, but... I... I have never felt anything like that. It was as if my heart had been impaled by something, then ripped out of me" Byakko shivered. "It was the worst thing I've ever felt."

"Grief."

"What?"

"It's called "grief", Byakko. It's feeling sad. You felt, probably for the first time ever, sad because of what happened to you. I don't blame you. The way you put it, it sounds like your "friends" just wanted an excuse to get rid of you" the bakemono snorted as he sat against the opposite wall.

"Impossible!" the tiger snarled. "We were allies! We were friends!"

"You were their friend Byakko, but I don't think they thought the same. We pick bad friends, it happens" Kumatetsu shrugged.

"We conquered the city together! We ruled together!"

"And then they decided they wanted less people to rule, probably. They betrayed you so they could have more power for themselves" the bear countered.

"Betrayed...? They couldn't- They CAN'T!" Byakko protested.

"You know it's true, don't you? That's what this was all about, right? You've been lashing out cause you've been bottling it all up for months. All the anger and pain and grief because your friends betrayed you. That's why you kept lashing out all the time, even at stupid stuff. I'm not a smart guy Byakko, I leave that for Hyakushubo, but I can at least tell when someone's got a bug up their butt about something. And yeah, I say I hate blubbering, but I think it's alright this time. Getting backstabbed blows, and you gotta blow off some steam afterwards. At least you get to bounce back and find better people afterwards. It's how I found Tatara, and Hyakushubo too" Kumatetsu recalled, a fond smile on his face.

“Why aren’t you mocking me? I cried like an infant and you’re not mocking me?” the tiger demanded, a bit offended.

“I’ve been there Fatass, and it sucks to be there. Sometimes you gotta cry, cause otherwise people will wonder if you even have a heart. I kinda wondered if you did too, but at least now I know you do. Guess demons and bakemono aren’t so different after all” the bakemono chuckled. “Sucks how you’re probably going to learn nothing from this though.”

Byakko shot him a glare, but there was no power behind it, resigning him to stare at his feet. He had known crying, distantly. Many weaker demons would cry before their lives ended, but that was typical. And yet, his life wasn’t in immediate danger, and he too cried. He had known all his life that being a demon meant being powerful, and yet... he too could cry and feel something more than anger and hunger. He had lived for over three hundred years, and he suddenly felt like he hadn’t lived at all. “I see our guest is, thankfully, under control” a jovial voice called.

Kumatetsu stood to attention as Soshi and Izoen approached, the boar seeming rather stiff in his walk. “Yeah, he’s alright. He’s uhh, calmed down after his tantrum” the bear answered.

“I see that. This is the calmest I think I’ve ever seen him without copious amounts of chains being involved. Still, I am happy you have managed to cool his temper, as we all need clear heads for this next part” the rabbit explained.

“Look, you might be wasting your time here sir. I don’t think he’s going to say sorry to Izoen. I mean hell, his apology pissed him off plenty” Kumatetsu warned.

“Still, we must follow the rules, Kumatetsu. For without rules we are nothing but beasts. Byakko, Izoen has apologized to you, as we all know. Are you willing to apologize back, so we may clear this bad blood?” Soshi asked.

Byakko stared at them, and he managed a contemptuous glare at the Lord. Kumatetsu sighed quietly, why should he expect any... different? The tiger was slow, but he walked to the cell door, and got onto his hands and knees. “I’m sorry... for what I did” he uttered, sounding pained.

It was hard to tell who was the most surprised there, but the Lord was the first to turn it into absolute delight. "I truly do not know what caused you to change your mind Byakko, but I am so relieved to hear you apologize. It would seem that perhaps your apology must have moved his heart lozen" he mused.

The bear wanted to protest, but he kept his big mouth shut, letting the others talk while he kept a careful eye on the demon. "I am... not sure how I feel here sir, but I am glad that there will be no death tonight" the boar grunted awkwardly.

"Yes, indeed. Well, you best get on home then. No doubt your family must be waiting for you" Soshi remarked.

"Yes, sir. Thank you" the golden bakemono said, giving a stiff bow, and gave a passing glance to Byakko before leaving.

"I too have something I must do. Kumatetsu, please stay with Byakko until I send a guard for you" the Lord said, and smiled.

Now, if Kumatetsu was any good at reading lips, he might have spotted a silent "thank you" from Soshi before he left, leaving the two alone. "What changed your mind?" the bear demanded.

The tiger snorted, and seated himself so he could rest his head in his hand. "I think, amongst other things, that I didn't want the last thing you saw me do before I died was cry so pathetically" he answered.

"Anything else?" the crimson bakemono pressed.

"Some other time... Kumatetsu...."

The bear's eyes widened. "You... you used my name?!"

“Don’t get used to it. For all we know this will be the last time we see each other. I’m a dangerous demon, and I don’t think the rabbit will want me anywhere except in a cage. If I hadn’t forsaken my pride, I could have faced my death with dignity” Byakko said grimly.

“Then let’s shut up. We can save talking for later” Kumatetsu decided.

“Good” the tiger sighed.

He had been drained of energy ever since Suzaku had burned out his Yoki, and yet, this drained feeling he had was of a different sort. Emotionally drained. That was a new one. What else was he capable of? That was something to think about while they waited in silence until the guard came.

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Surprisingly, there were no chains for Byakko this time. He merely followed Kumatetsu like a shadow to the comfy room the bear remembered from his visit before Fatass’ execution was called. The Lord was waiting at the table, which had on it a latched metal ring, much like a collar. “Please, be seated both of you” he requested.

The demon sat noticeably close to the ursine, and his eyes were immediately on the metal ring. “So, what happens with him?” Kumatetsu asked, straight to the point.

Byakko grunted, and hid the unusual pleasure he felt from the acknowledgement. “Well, given how Byakko has fulfilled the requirement for our contract to continue, I see no reason why he shouldn’t be returned to your custody” Soshi began.

“That’s awesome” the bear chuckled.

“But?” Byakko spoke up, not taking his eyes off the collar.

“Ah, yes, there is a “but” in all this” the rabbit sighed and tapped the ring. “Even if you have been absolved, given how both you and Izen injured each other mutually. However, people

will still be fearful of your presence Byakko, given your habit of flying into a rage at the slightest provocation” he scowled.

Kumatetsu also glared, especially at the little smirk the tiger had. “So what are you planning to do?” the bear demanded.

“This collar here is another relic of Jutengai’s distant and very ugly past. It is a slave collar, designed to control the actions of the wearer through a specially crafted master ring. For the safety of my citizens, it will be mandatory for Byakko to wear this collar.”

The room went quiet, save for a sharp inhale from Byakko. “Yo-you can’t do that!” Kumatetsu protested.

“I believe as Lord of Jutengai, I very much can, Kumatetsu” Soshi retorted.

“But it’s not right sir!” the bear insisted. “You’re asking him to throw away his freedom! Asking him to be treated no better than a dog! How can you- What are you doing Fatass?” he stammered as Byakko’s hand reached over the table.

The demon sighed as he grabbed the collar and put it around his neck, the ring sealing itself into one solid loop. “I’ll deal with it” he grumbled, sitting back on the cushion.

“Bu-but you’re....” Kumatetsu blabbered.

“Thank you for your maturity and understanding Byakko. As for you Kumatetsu, you must wear the matching ring at all hours, to make sure you keep Byakko in check, especially when around he citizens. Think of it as a probation period, for the both of you. With enough time, and good will, we will, hopefully, no longer need the collar” Soshi explained.

“Guess I got no choice” Kumatetsu sighed. “How do we now the collar even works? It looks old as hell.”

“It has been tested previously, just to be certain. If you wish to see it for yourself, then please, give it a try” the rabbit offered, a golden ring in his outstretched palm.

The bear swallowed, and took it. The ring fit perfectly on his finger, and it looked practically new. He gave a side eye to Byakko, who was staring intently at him. "I'll... try it out later. It's really late, and I should be getting him home" he decided.

"As you wish Kumatetsu. But remember, never let the ring off your finger or out of your sight" the Lord warned.

"I'll make sure it's on me night and day" the bear vowed.

The old rabbit nodded sagely, satisfied with the answer. "Good. Then we can consider this meeting concluded. As a side note, I will add that the collar can resize itself to its wearer, so it will not strangle you Byakko should you put on a large amount of weight again" he explained. "Normally I would not need to include this, but given how your weight tends to fluctuate, this is to put both of your minds at ease.'

"Ah, thanks for the warning" Kumatetsu nodded. "Come on Byakko, let's go."

The demon got up, and while his body headed for home, his mind was a lot further away.

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The two took the back route home, though it was too late in the night for it to matter. And the second they got home the bear immediately pulled the ring off his finger and stuffed it into his pocket. "Welcome home Fatass" Kumatetsu chuckled.

The demon was silent as he returned to his room, and a look of regret crossed his face as he saw all the torn up books still littering the place. "I don't get you" he uttered. "I threw our relationship in your face, and yet, here you are welcoming me back."

"Eh" the bear shrugged, collapsing onto his couch. "We both acted crappy to each other. I never knew how bad you were hurting until you had to show me how bad it was. Whatever you said, I'm not going to take it to heart since you were only saying things to piss me off. And you really did piss me off. But look, tomorrow we can start fresh and get back to pissing

each other off mutually. And I don't care what the Lord said. I'm not going to be using the ring on you unless you're stepping out of line on something. Or, I dunno, for stuff like getting you to stay here so I can leave the house without you for once. I really don't like it, but you agreed so, hey, what can I do?"

"Drink yourself stupid?" the tiger suggested.

"Later. I'm beat and I really want to sleep on my couch after camping for a week. You should sleep too. After what happened you're probably real tired too" the bakemono yawned.

The demon mumbled something, and collapsed onto his pillow pile. After everything he did, he was forgiven, just like that. Well, they could forgive, but... it was going to be a long time before he could forgive himself. He was a demon, and a demon is strong. They take what they want. A demon can also cry, and feel sorrow, and grieve over loss. This was going to take some time to think about. He was granted a stay of execution, so, maybe... a demon can learn, too.