

Heart to Heart

Day had broken, but only just. And yet, Kumatetsu, whose capacity for sleeping-in was the stuff of legends, still woke up with the barest peaking of light. Something was off, prompting him to look out the window to find Byakko sitting on the stone bench outside. Yawning loudly, the bear rose, finding himself still in his clothes from last night. Thankfully not the executioner's getup, which he traded out as early as he could. Still, he found the demon wearing what appeared to be a blanket when he got outside. "Where'd you get that?" the bakemono asked.

"I've always had it" Byakko responded, pulling it out to reveal it was his old robe.

"Man, you lost so much weight it's huge on you now" Kumatetsu chuckled, feeling a bit more awake. "But why are you out here? Nobody should be up at this hour."

"Sleeping was proving difficult, so I came outside for some fresh air. I was in that cell for so long I had forgotten what real air smelled like" the tiger said wistfully.

"Yeah, look, I'm not going to pretend I know what that's like, okay Fatass? But, I dunno, sorry?" the bear offered.

Byakko stared at his captor...? Friend? It was difficult to explain, so he just sighed instead. "Stop, please, this is embarrassing for both of us" he grumbled.

"Hiding your feelings won't do any of us any good Fat- Byakko. Last night was probably a shock for you huh?" the bakemono figured, taking a seat by the demon.

"The second in my life, after my banishment. Nothing else ever bothered me, not even when I saw the charred remains of my former tribe" the demon recalled.

"So your family are all...?"

“Dead. I don’t mourn them. Out of all the demons of my tribe I was the only one with any real power and potential. None of them were capable of what I could do. They were weak, and the weak are destroyed” Byakko asserted.

“No wonder you got such a big head when you were special” the bear scoffed.

“Special means you survive in the Demon World. It means you have the talent to climb the hierarchy, and the skills to survive it. There is no room for pity or sympathy or empathy when your next day could be your last. I could have stayed, but that would have made me weak, and my tribe even weaker. They’d be relying on me all the time; staying pitiful as they cling to the powerful. I could have ruled a bunch of weaklings, but I chose to take my chances and seek to increase my power and reputation. It was worth it as I joined with Suzaku and Seiryu... and Genbu clung to us so much he became a Saint Beast by proxy. We were unstoppable, conquering the Demon City like it was nothing. Maze Castle became our home. And then... it became our prison” the tiger said bitterly.

“It sucks how you guys seemed so close, and then first chance they got they, uhh” Kumatetsu began, but caught the angry look on the demon’s face. “Sorry.”

Byakko sighed bitterly as he looked vaguely off into the distance. “After everything that happened, I could not understand it” he said distantly. “I spent so much time never understanding why Suzaku did it. Or, I think I refused to accept the idea they had used and betrayed me. We were comrades in arms, and I trusted them as my closest friends. And then, they cast me out for something that didn’t even seem to matter much. I took my anger out on anyone I saw fit too, you especially. And yet, you took me back. I don’t understand that. If the roles were reversed, I would never have forgiven you” he admitted.

“Because you’re not me, Fatass” the bakemono smirked. “I get angry. I yell, I chuck stuff, I won’t talk to you for at most a day, but in the end it’s never any skin off my nose. You grew up knowing being angry and violent gets you what you want. I grew up learning that being angry and violent gets you nowhere” he explained. “Y’know, it’s no wonder you hate us when we’re everything you learned to hate.”

“Hate means you were worth the effort. I had contempt for your kind. There’s a difference” the tiger insisted.

“Why do you hate us, specifically? Because we work together? Because we care about other people? I mean screaming and calling us weaklings can’t be all there is” Kumatetsu figured.

“It’s because I felt you wasted your time on pointless things. Practising chivalry, of all things” Byakko retched. “You fight with swords you never draw! You beat each other with your scabbards when you could be killing each other to prove your superiority. Your kind clearly has hidden strengths, more than any human has. If you organised you could amass an army that would wipe humans from the face of their world!”

“Maybe we just don’t want that” the bakemono shrugged. “What good is wanting more when we got enough here?”

“Where I come from, there is no such thing as enough.”

“And that’s your problem; you’re not in the Demon Realm. God knows I wish you were sometimes so I don’t have to deal with your complaining. But here in Jutengai, you don’t have anything to prove anymore” Kumatetsu pointed out. “You are probably the strongest guy here and for miles around. Isn’t that enough?”

The tiger exhaled slowly, leaning back on the bench as his eyes continued to remain distant. “I am a demon” he remarked.

“Yeah, I heard you the first million times you said it, usually before you attempted to break something I own, or me” the bear countered.

“I am a demon, that’s all I’ve ever known. I rejected your culture. I rejected changing my ways. So how is it, when I was so certain I was myself, I could feel grief, and sorrow? I refused your kind, and yet acted like the weaklings I so despised. I have lived for so long, and yet I only shed my first ever tear last night. How can that be?” the demon wondered.

“Look, I don’t think I’m the right guy for this. The Lord or Hyakushubo maybe, but I don’t track with all the mushy stuff. But, if I had to guess, it’s cause you could always feel those things. You’ve just been an asshole all your life you never figured someone else could out-asshole you. You cried because something bad happened to you, and you’re finally able to, y’know, emotion it out. I dunno, I don’t know what goes in your head half the time Fatass” Kumatetsu grumbled.

Byakko focused on the bear, his stare growing intense and yet he couldn't read anything from his expression. "It terrified me to feel what I did. It was a pain I had never known, and you say your kind can experience it whenever? And you just, get over it?"

"Only when we're sad, or see something sad. Sometimes we do it when we're happy too. You can cry because you're happy y'know? And yeah, we feel sad, then we move on. Sometimes people get stuck being sad all the time, but that's their problem. But, look, you don't have to figure yourself out all at once Byakko. There's always more to people than we think there is; more than they think there are yourself too. Like, look at you: Asshole and crying aside, I always thought you were a total jackass. But whenever you weren't trying to make yourself look like a "BiG sCaRy DeMoN", you weren't bad to be around. What I'm saying is sometimes you gotta give things a chance, cause then people might give you a chance" the bakemono explained.

"I have only known violence, and conquest through bloodshed. My only joy was the thrill of the hunt. And beneath all that, I can cry... because the friendship I had valued so much was nothing more an illusion" Byakko said bitterly. "That is what hurt the most Kumatetsu. It never occurred to me at the time, but I truly did value my bonds with the others. That is why it hurt so much when I was forced to accept that they meant nothing to Suzaku."

"See, you're getting it. And it's not like you can't have more friends here. There's me, and Tatara, and Hyakushubo. Why don't we become the Saint Beasts of Jutengai? Huh? Huh?" Kumatetsu jested, gently elbowing the tiger in his side.

The demon stared, his jaw hanging open. There was a dead silence, until there came the first chuckle, then a chortle, and finally loud, ruckus belly laughter. Byakko's shoulders shook as he laughed harder than he had remember, a smile plastered to his face. "I can't believe you" he said once he finally had his voice back.

"Y'know, I think that's the first time I've seen you smile and laugh. Genuinely, I mean. You're always so damn grumpy, so, hey, it's nice to see you actually happy for once" the bakemono said proudly.

The laughter stopped, and yet, the tiger couldn't shake the fond smile on his face. That dumb bear really was something; it reminded him why he started to feel so attracted after-

NO! Don't let that night taint your thoughts now. "I better get used to doing it naturally, just so it won't get forced on me" the demon remarked, tapping a claw on his collar.

"I won't do that. As far as I'm concerned the collar is just a means to make it so I can leave the house without you for once. And to stop you stealing food from the market" Kumatetsu smirked.

"Fine, I'll stop the thievery" Byakko relented. "But you'd best be prepared to buy a decent amount of food again, or you can at least let me hunt some game myself. I may have returned to my original size, but that won't last long once I can no longer stave off my hunger" he warned.

"Yeesh, already back to food huh?" the bakemono snorted.

The tiger scoffed dismissively. "You might think it's a joke, but without my natural energy stores my body hungers for a replacement. Food is the only thing that does it for me. Imagine being stuck with the hunger that consumes you in the winter, but all the time. Maybe *then* you'd comprehend my hunger" he scowled.

"You really feel that hungry, all the time?" Kumatetsu asked, amazed.

"I can ignore it for a time, but not forever. Once I reach a certain body weight it settles, allowing eating to be more for sustenance and pleasure again" the demon informed him.

"I always just thought you were just a lazy fatty" the bakemono figured.

"Then clearly," Byakko said with a smirk, "you didn't give me a chance."

"Hey!" Kumatetsu blustered. "Don't go using the words I say back on me Tubby! That's not how it works" he complained.

The tiger chuckled as he got up, his loose robe billowing about him. "I see now that we both have a lot to learn. For one thing I will stop referring you as insect, but I still have a lingering fondness for Dumbass" he grinned.

“Yeah, and even with all the weight off you I’ll still call your Fatass, so we’re even” the bear retorted, getting up as well.

“As long as it’s mutual. But... Kumatetsu?”

“Yeah?”

“I’ll... think about the friendship thing. As rude as you are you’ve still been kinder than most demons I’ve met, while still having greater strength than most of them too. So... thanks, I guess” the tiger grunted.

Kumatetsu paused, amazed at both the demon’s words, and the rather bashful look on his face. “Eh, it’s about time you thanked me” he arrogantly grinned.

“And you once again ruin it” Byakko sighed, shaking his head, but keeping his smile.

“You’ll have plenty of chances to ruin it too, so you can look forward to that. But hey, being sorta friends is better than your jailer. So let’s make the best of it, okay Byakko?”

“I will agree to that. Now, about breakfast?” the tiger began, his stomach **rumbling** aggressively.

“Rice and eggs. Take it or leave it” the bear answered.

“It’ll do, for now. At least with this collar we can go to other places. I don’t plan on being nice to the other people here. I want you to know that” Byakko warned.

“It’s a start. We’ll work on other people ehhe later. Let’s start with us” Kumatetsu suggested.

“Agreed. I’ll uhh, deal with the rice.”

“What?”

“You... you can get the eggs, and I’ll start on the rice. Is that alright?” Byakko asked with a forced smile.

“Being nice is hard, isn’t it?”

“I feel almost sick with myself for offering.”

“Ehh, it took me a few years to get it right. Just practise it some more, you’ll get it. But hey, thanks. I hate cooking the rice anyways!”

“How does your kind live with itself?”

“I have no idea. But get to it Fatty, YOU offered.”

“Grrr, fine!”