

## Oblivion

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# Oblivion

by [meggz0rz](#)

## Summary

Feudal-era Japan. A war to the death between youkai and humankind. Kagome, rebellious daughter of a noble family, is not about to let her grandfather sacrifice himself in battle. So she takes his place, dressed as a boy and ready to fight to survive. But in love and war, things are rarely as they seem, and there is a spy in the army ranks who just might be Kagome's downfall...

## Notes

To quote Monty Python, "And now for something completely different..."

If you've read "The It Couple," first of all, THANK YOU, and second of all, get ready, cause this one is not a comedy. It gets DARK. I'll be posting chapters from FF.net on here as much as I can until I'm all caught up, and then I'll be cross-posting in real time.

This story is very, very loosely based on Mulan. Like, literally just the basic premise to get our characters where they need to be to start the story. It seems to be a trend with me that I start with a simple premise and then my story goes off the rails hardcore rather quickly.

I hope you enjoy the story, and like I said, be forewarned, the light and happy moments don't last forever. But don't worry, I have a happy ending in sight, so don't let utter despair turn you off completely!

Please review if you can! Thanks so much! - meggz0rz

# Birthrights

*Thunk.*

The arrow hit its target straight on, embedding itself into the tree trunk and sending a small scatter of snow fluttering from the branches.

Kagome let out the rest of the breath she'd been slowly releasing, and let herself smile with satisfaction as she relaxed her shoulders and lowered her bow. A single bead of sweat dripped down her temple.

"*Every single time*," her little brother moaned from his perch beside her. He clutched his own bow and quiver to his chest and gave her a look that could only be exasperation.

Kagome just looked at him and smiled, reaching over to ruffle the top of his head. "Don't worry, Sota," she said with a quiet laugh, "You'll get there the same way I did. Practice, practice, practice."

A stray lock of hair had come untangled from her loose braid, and she brushed it behind her ear, shivering slightly at the chill in the air. Both her breath and Sota's were visible clouds hanging in the air between them, and even dressed as warmly as they were, in their heaviest kimonos and hand wraps, with heavy furs draped around their shoulders, Kagome knew they were both starting to feel the cold.

"Alright," she said, clapping Sota on the shoulder and stepping back to let him take his place in line with the tree, "Shoot one more time and then we'll get you inside."

Sota, already threatening to pass her in height despite the six years' difference in their ages, slid his feet forward and planted them in the snow, taking the proper stance and nocking another arrow into his bow. A small moment of silence as he pulled the bowstring taut, and then...

*Thunk.*

Not quite at the target, but in the tree trunk nonetheless.

Sota sighed and seemed to allow himself a hopeful smile of his own.

"See? Much better than even last *week*," Kagome said, throwing her arm around his shoulders and leading him back through the edge of the forest.

She could see their house just through the mass of thick trees ahead; that was one thing her grandfather and mother always insisted on when the two left the village protection without an armed escort.

There were bad things outside the village. Everyone knew that. And so the parents warned their children to stay together, to avoid being out after dark, to never speak to strangers.

*Especially* to never speak to strangers.

Sota started running ahead, leaving large, heavy tracks in the inches-deep snowfall, and Kagome smiled to herself as she hoisted her quiver and bow and slung them over her shoulder casually, twisting and turning occasionally to fit through the denser areas of overgrowth.

There was a sound like the snap of a twig behind her, and Kagome whirled, fumbling for her weapon as she scanned the dimming light of the wood.

Nothing. She stood there for a moment, breathing in and out slowly and silently, her heart pounding in her chest.

And then, behind her, a friendly voice made her nearly jump out of her skin.

"Kagome!"

"H-Hojo!" she stammered, turning around and smiling, with just one brief glance back at the woods before exiting the thicket of trees and walking toward the young man standing at the edge of the clearing. "What are you doing out here?"

Hojo smiled brightly at her. He was the son of the daimyo and thus the village's most prized resident, rarely seen as he was now, out in the village without the company of bodyguards. "Your grandfather and mother invited me to dinner," he said as she reached him, and he bent to take her hand and bowed low before it.

"Did they?" Kagome said as he accompanied her through the door of the house, suddenly aware of how disheveled she must look after hours of target practice and scuffling in the woods with Souta. She brushed a few stray strands of hair away from her forehead, sure that her face was pink.

It had long been discussed among the more gossip-prone of the village that Hojo was seeking a bride before long, as befitting his place in the village hierarchy. Kagome's mother had heard that and was obviously determined that Kagome, just recently seventeen years of age and therefore ready for marriage, should be the one to snap him up before any other eligible girls could get to him.

Even though it irked Kagome some to be pushed like this, at heart she understood her mother's eagerness. Kagome's grandfather, great warrior that he had been in his day, was getting on in years, and with her father's recent sudden death, there was some worry about even a noble family such as theirs being able to survive without Kagome's marrying into a good family and easing the financial burden some.

And Hojo was...likable enough. Not *interesting* conversation, to be sure, but *friendly* conversation. When she'd mentioned as such to her mother, she'd been answered with an exasperated sigh. Apparently proper young ladies didn't concern themselves with such matters as liking their husband-to-be. Liking, and in fact, *loving*, was for *after* marriage.

"Lord Hojo!" Kagome's mother appeared and bowed gracefully. "Such an honor. Please, come in, sit down. Kagome, for goodness' sake, go and pull yourself together." She smiled at Hojo apologetically and led him further into the dining room, sending an admonishing look Kagome's way as they passed the threshold.

Sota smirked at her, and she curled her lip and smacked him upside the head as she rushed to her bedroom to clean herself up.

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"Unfortunately, the situation is growing worse," Hojo was saying gravely when Kagome entered the dining room in a fresh kimono and with her face scrubbed clean, "My father is almost sure that the shogun will call for more reinforcements before the month's end. The youkai are growing bolder, more organized. They're attacking more than just traveling armies now; I hear tell that they're laying waste to entire mountain villages and burning them to the ground."

Kagome's grandfather, seated at the head of the table, merely took this information in stern silence, staring into his cup of sake and swirling it around absently. "If the shogun calls for it," he said finally, his once-gruff voice more of a whisper these days, "Then I will answer the call."

Kagome spilled some sake on her sleeve and nearly knocked her cup over. "The youkai are coming *this way*?" she exclaimed. "I thought they were bound to the outer lands. That truce has stood for - "

Her mother cleared her throat, and Kagome sat back sullenly, rubbing at the damp corner of her sleeve.

"You're right, Kagome. The truce has stood for nearly two decades. But it would seem your poor father's death was just the beginning, and they are doing what we should have expected from the first - breaking their word. My guess is they've eaten through all their resources and stripped their land bare, and now they want to do the same to our lands." Her grandfather leveled his gaze at her, unsmiling but obliging.

"What do they look like?" Sota asked eagerly.

"Souta, that's enough," their mother scolded, then said softly, "Surely the dinner table is no place for this sort of talk."

"They have a right to know," Grandfather said evenly, staring down into his sake again, more subdued than Kagome had seen him in ages, "Pretending it's not happening won't keep those monsters from our doorsteps."

*Thank you, Grandfather.*

"I heard they look like giant centipedes," Sota said through a mouthful of rice, "And they take young girls and make them have giant centipede babies!"

He looked straight at Kagome, who rolled her eyes.

"If I have a giant centipede baby," Kagome mumbled, "I'm sending it after *you*."

"Kagome!" Her mother glared at her, then worriedly glanced at Hojo.

Hojo wasn't smiling, just looked at Kagome solemnly. "I promise I'll never let that happen to you, Kagome. I would die to protect you."

Kagome swallowed and felt heat rush to her cheeks. She realized that for once, she had run out of things to say, and decided instead to fill her mouth with a large helping of food.

"You are too kind to us, Lord Hojo," Kagome's mother said, leaning over to refresh Hojo's cup of sake.

After a few moments of silence, Hojo spoke up again. "I suppose I should reveal the true meaning behind my acceptance of your dinner invitation tonight."

Kagome nearly choked on a mouthful of sake as she watched her mother gasp softly and place a hand over her heart.

"Kagome," Hojo said, looking at her so sincerely and so kindly from across the table, "you and I have known each other since childhood, and I'm sure you can have no doubt of the way my feelings for you have grown. I've come here tonight," and here he turned towards the rest of the family, looking at each of them in turn, "to ask your permission for Kagome's hand in marriage."

Kagome just blinked and stared, knowing she probably looked like a complete fool but unable to help it. *The way his feelings for me have grown? He barely says anything but a friendly hello to me in passing!*

Grandfather's expression remained unchanged as he gulped down the remainder of his drink. "If she'll have you," he said, refusing to look in Kagome's direction, "then I heartily give my blessing."

The rest of the company turned to Kagome expectantly. Her mother in particular looked to be nearly foaming at the mouth in anticipation.

"I - well," Kagome stammered, feeling her face burn with heat as she struggled to find words.

"O-Of course," Hojo interjected, seeming to sense her hesitation, "there'd be no need for us to marry right away. As tumultuous as these days are, I think it only proper to wait a while. The future's uncertain for all of us, but..." He trailed off, looking a bit flustered himself. "...but if you'll put your faith in me, Kagome, I promise to make you happy."

Kagome let herself exhale slowly, silently. *Why not?* It wasn't like there were other options staring her in the face. Hojo was as good a choice as any, right?

*Right?*

So she gave him a small smile and nodded. Hojo's smile in return was one of pure delight, and he opened his mouth to say something else -

"Lord Hojo!"

It was an urgent call from outside the house. Everyone turned to glance toward the window, where they could just see the glow of torchlight against the night sky outside. They all leapt to their feet, Hojo leading the way, and opened the front door to find a group of samurai and vassals all standing there, swords in hand, faces grim and frightened.

"Wh-what is it?" Hojo said, his face as white as a sheet, as he hurried down the steps toward the men. Kagome recognized some of them as the daimyo's most high-ranked of samurai, the ones most directly devoted to the safety of the entire ruling family.

"The shogun has summoned your father for aid. The youkai have finally crossed through the western borders and are heading this way. They've surprised us all, damn them. We must get you and your family to safety immediately."

Hojo looked about ready to collapse with fear. "What of the village?" he said haltingly.

The leader of the group of samurai grimaced and shook his head. "You are our priority right now, my lord. Your father is planning for an evacuation by dawn, but we have to get you out of here, to ensure the safety of the daimyo's house."

"Then it is happening," Kagome's grandfather said, looking more resigned and tired than afraid, "All the able-bodied men must fight."

The samurai nodded. "We're calling every man with any skill with a weapon to report to the training camp in the western woods. It will take the youkai army months to cross the territory to reach the shogun, but we must count on our enlisted men to push them back as far as possible."

"So they're bait," Kagome snapped, stepping in front of her grandfather protectively, "Cannon fodder to keep the youkai busy until they've had their fill to eat."

"They should be honored to - "

"To what? Die horribly to keep the rich men safe?" Kagome felt her voice break. "My grandfather has served his time. He owes the shogun no more of his blood."

"Kagome! Be silent," Grandfather said sharply.

Kagome just clenched her jaw and looked away, feeling a lump in her throat and a sick feeling in her stomach.

"Lord, perhaps you *would* prefer to remain with your family," the man in front of the group said hesitantly to Kagome's grandfather, "Your years of loyal service - "

"Our household *will* be represented in the coming war," Grandfather insisted through gritted teeth, "We are samurai, and to stay home and depend on others' sacrifices would be the deepest dishonor."

He turned to his daughter-in-law. "It'll be up to you to get the children to safety when it comes time for evacuation."

Kagome's mother just nodded, clutching at her throat, tears brimming in her eyes.

"I'll take you three with me," Hojo said, seeming to just remember they were all standing behind him, "Kagome, we'll get you all to safety."

"There's no time," the samurai said gruffly, "We don't have the horses to spare. Lord Hojo, you can send for them later if you wish, but we must leave *now*."

Hojo's hand reached out and grabbed hold of Kagome's, and he gazed at her for one brief moment, his once hopeful eyes now dull and numb. "I'll see you soon, Kagome," he said softly, "I promise." And all at once, he released her hand and was whisked off down the street by the crowd of bodyguards.

Kagome felt about ready to collapse.

"How long until they get here?" Sota asked, his childish curiosity replaced with almost frantic alarm, "How long until the monsters are here to kill us?"

Kagome's mother gave a gentle sob and took her son in her arms, holding him tightly.

Grandfather simply ushered them back in the house and slid the door shut. "Kagome," he said softly, his eyes far away, "My helmet. My armor. Go retrieve them."

"No," Kagome said, feeling a cold vice around her heart. "I won't."

He glared at her, though the expression was more pained than truly angry. "I am bushi," he said, "Like my father before me. Like my son, your father. I will not die without our house spilling blood in this war."

Kagome held the furious gaze for what seemed like forever, until she felt herself crumple and the tears began spilling as she rushed out of the room.

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Kagome sat in the dim light of the armory, carefully removing each individual piece of her grandfather's armor from the ornate chest it was housed in. Her vision was still clouded with angry tears.

She realized that right now she was feeling that loathing of youkai that always seemed so ingrained in the minds of the village elders. Youkai had never truly frightened her, not even as a child. They had intrigued her, if anything.

But now? She was certain of it, she *hated* them. All of them. They were the reason her grandfather would die for nothing.

*He probably won't even be able to hurt one before he's cut down*, she thought bitterly, feeling simultaneously ashamed of herself and relieved at being able to think freely.

"Kagome, child."

She jumped. "Where's Mother? And Sota?"

"I sent them to bed. They were both hysterical."

*No surprise there.* Kagome felt a little hysterical herself.

She felt an old, wrinkled hand settle on her shoulder just as her fingers reached into the chest and closed around two sword scabbards. One, she knew, was her grandfather's, and the other...

"Your father's," Grandfather supplied gently, using her for more than a little support as he grunted and struggled to kneel on the floor next to her. Kagome felt the lump in her throat swell up again. *You can barely even move*, she thought with frustration, *you'll never stand a chance in battle against vicious monsters.*

"He was a better warrior than I'd ever seen," her grandfather mused, reaching out to take the red-banded katana from her hands and looking it over wistfully, "I was a very proud father, I must say. The proudest moment? He once returned from an almost-certain suicide mission in the last youkai war, with every last man still alive and mostly unharmed. He cared more for his men than he did himself." The smile he gave was crooked and genuinely fond.

"So did you," Kagome said softly, pleadingly, "And now *we* need you."

Grandfather just shook his head and chuckled. It frightened her, how at peace with his decision he looked. He should be *furious*. He should be at least *mournful*.

"I may be old, Kagome," he said, "but I'll be glad to die knowing I helped the daimyo and the shogun defeat the oncoming evil."

*You won't help defeat anything. It'll just be a waste. A waste of a life. Another unmarked grave somewhere in the wilderness.* Kagome furrowed her brow and chewed on her lower lip hard enough to draw blood.

"Alright then," the old man said, handing the sword back to Kagome and turning away toward the chest of armor again, "Let's get all this sorted and get me on my way. The earlier I set out, the better."

Kagome wasn't sure what made her do it. What sort of devil had possessed her. But suddenly she felt like she was out of her own body, that she was moving and speaking but not of her own accord.

"You're right," she said, a little too cheerily, "I'll go get us some tea, and while I'm at it I'll pack you some supplies."

Her grandfather grunted in agreement as he blew a cloud of dust off of a leather breastplate and worked to rub it clean with the sleeve of his hakama. He didn't look up as Kagome tiptoed back out of the room and down the hall.

Not into the kitchen like she'd said.

But into Sota's room.

Her brother had chosen to sleep in their mother's chamber tonight, clearly out of fright. Kagome didn't blame him. She was scared out of her wits too.

But the fear didn't stop her from shakily gathering a handful of Sota's clothing and stuffing it into a travel pack.

Nor did it stop her from rushing to the stables and saddling the horse, careful not to make a sound as she led it to the front step and tied it in place.

Kagome returned to the kitchen, still completely stunned by what she was doing, and prepared the tea as promised, then returned to the armory with a tray as if nothing were amiss.

Grandfather smiled and took the cup eagerly and set her to work preparing the armor for travel, strapping it all together in one large bundle to attach to the saddle. When the work was done, he asked her kindly to go and ready the horse, and so she took the armor and the swords and rushed outside, knowing he'd be too slow to follow.

When she poked her head back inside the armory, she found him on the floor, still and silent. He'd be out for a good twenty-four hours, with the amount of sleeping herbs she'd given him. Tearfully, she placed a kiss to his wrinkled old forehead, said a small prayer to no god in particular, and rushed out of the house.

*Grandfather...Mother...Sota...Hojo. Forgive me. Clearly I've gone insane.*

Still in her silk dinner kimono, with her hair streaming wildly behind her, she jumped atop her grandfather's horse and took off at a full gallop, heading for the trail that could take her through the western woods.

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"It's begun."

Inuyasha looked up in mild surprise at his older brother entering the tent. "What?"

Sesshomaru's face was expressionless, as usual. "Naraku's sent the wolf tribe to start the push into the western lands. Or do you not know why we're here in the first place?"

Inuyasha's ears, white and dog-like atop his head, twitched in annoyance. "I know *why*," he snapped, sitting up in his bedroll and shaking himself awake, "I'm not a *child*."

Sesshomaru sniffed, the closest Sesshomaru ever came to a laugh of derision.

"I just meant I didn't think he'd be moving them so soon," Inuyasha grumbled, stretching his arms over his head and cracking his back. "I was getting some much-needed sleep."

He felt a prickle on the back of his neck and growled. *Always staring at me like I'm a fool*, he thought. "Something on your mind, Sesshomaru?"

"You seem a little hesitant to do your duty, little brother," Sesshomaru said, a hint of malice in his voice, "Could it be you feel the pull of the human half of your blood - "

"I know what I have to do," Inuyasha snapped, pulling on his haori and tying it in place, "And I'm *not* hesitant about any of this. I want the same thing you do. I want our father's lands back. Just like we were promised. I want the humans *gone*."

He knew he sounded bitter. He was tired of defending himself to absolutely everyone. *Everyone* was questioning him, *everyone* was looking at him with either distrust or outright venom.

"Keep that in mind," Sesshomaru said mildly. "You know your part of the plan is vital to ensuring our continued success in this campaign. And your...heritage, unfortunate as it may be, is what makes it possible."

"I understand," Inuyasha ground out, wanting the subject of his birth to be permanently closed but knowing that was too much to ask. With an angry sigh, he stood from his bedroll and reached for his katana, ready to strap it to his waist.

"Wait," Sesshomaru said, stepping forward and holding out another sword, one much more ornate and well-made. "Take this one."

"Tetsusaiga?" Inuyasha stared down in disbelief.

"The battle sword of Inu no Taisho," Sesshomaru said evenly, "Perhaps it will serve as a reminder of our purpose here. The reason we are allied with others of our kind to retrieve the lands we lost so many decades ago."

"Our birthright," Inuyasha said softly, his hand closing around the scabbard and taking it from Sesshomaru's outstretched hand.

"Get it done," Sesshomaru said, turning to leave, but not before tossing a small leather pouch at him.

Inuyasha caught it in midair and stared down at the pouch for a moment.

His clawed hand clenched into a fist around it.

# Fainting Spells

## Chapter Summary

In which Kagome finally realizes the reality of her rash decision-making, and a few new acquaintances seem to be just FULL of questions...

## Chapter Notes

NOTE: THIS FIC IS CROSS-POSTED TO FFNET AND IS AT 33 CHAPTERS AND COUNTING. I am trying to get it uploaded on here as much as I can, but if you're eager to know what happens you can find it there. Same username, meggz0rz (with a zero, NOT a capital 'o'). THANKS FOR YOUR PATIENCE GUYS

## Oblivion

### Chapter Two

#### FAINTING SPELLS

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*I am the most impulsive, most foolish...*

Kagome shivered and pulled her fur cloak closer around her shoulders. There were tears slowly freezing on her cheeks, pulled almost forcefully from her eyes by the stinging wind and the speed of her horse's gallop. She was fairly sure her nose was running too, but kept tightly ahold of the reins and just spurred the horse forward through the snowfall.

She'd stopped once she'd lost sight of the house and dressed in the frosty dark, pulling on one of her brother's hakamas and slipping her grandfather's armor over her arms. It was heavy, and cumbersome, and she was almost certain she wasn't doing it right.

It was perfect. She looked just like any other frightened young boy, taking the armor of someone older and more capable and trying to become a man overnight in the face of horrific circumstances. With her hair tied into a low braid, with her face covered in dirt and mud and her figure hidden by tight bindings and bulky garments, surely no one would be the wiser.

And if they were...

*Well, that's why I brought my arrows.*

She once again wanted to laugh at herself, to *scream* in laughter and burst into tears and let her mind just break. *What the hell am I doing*, she wondered for the thousandth time.

There was a mild clapping of hoofbeats just ahead. In the darkness, by the slivers of moonlight through the trees, Kagome could just spot a man wearing a hooded cloak. He was riding the smallest, *oldest* nag she had ever seen. The poor horse looked inches from death, and was simply stumbling along in the snow, seemingly unsure of where it was headed.

The hooded man turned to watch Kagome approach. He looked to be about ten years older than she was, wearing monk's robes. He gave her a friendly smile and held up his hand in greeting as if he had not a care in the world.

"Evening," the monk said, "Another lamb to the slaughter, like me?"

Kagome frowned and said nothing, avoiding eye contact.

"Apologies," the monk said, pushing back his hood to look her square in the face. He still had that easygoing smile on his face, and the bluest eyes Kagome thought she'd ever seen. "I tend to make light in hard situations. Not everyone appreciates it."

"Your...horse..." Kagome said, lowering her voice just a little, but not enough where it sounded forced. She gave him a very inquisitive look.

The blue-eyed monk turned to gently pat the animal's neck. "Poor old fellow," he said, "This will likely be his last ride. He's carried members of my order for over two decades. Once he gets me to the camp, I'm letting him retire for good. He can spend his last days eating all the vegetables I can spare."

"I didn't think monks did much fighting," Kagome said.

"They don't," the young man laughed, placing his hood back over his head, "They send the new initiates to do it instead. I joined the order just a month ago, so I'm the one to join the regiments. Fate does love its trickery, doesn't it?"

Kagome just sighed and nodded, feeling the nerves and fear roil up in her guts again.

"What about you? You can't be more than fourteen or fifteen."

She was acutely aware that he was looking her up and down, and she hunched her shoulders a bit almost as a reflex.

"No older brothers to represent the family, huh?"

"N-no," she said, resolving to volunteer as little as possible.

The monk seemed to get the hint, but it didn't affect his calm smile. "Well, kid," he said after a moment's silence, "Not to worry. I'm a fair hand in a fight; don't let the religious trappings fool you. I'll keep an eye out for you if you need it."

Kagome gave him a small, uneasy smile. "Thanks," she said hesitantly.

"Miroku," he supplied, "What's *your* name?"

*Oh, dear.* She scrambled for a moment, kicking herself for not having thought of anything earlier. *Not that I've been doing much thinking lately.*

"S-Sota," she stammered. Familiar enough where she'd look up, at least, if it were called out. But now that she'd said it she was picturing her younger brother's smiling face and she felt like crying. Would she ever even see him again?

"Pleasure to meet you, Sota," Miroku said. This was the most congenial man she'd ever met, honestly. He could even give Hojo a run for his money; Hojo who in all the years she'd known him hadn't looked unhappy or afraid once...

*At least, until earlier tonight.*

She was shaken out of her miserable hole of uncertain emotions when Miroku pointed ahead and gently patted his old nag to continue straight onward.

"I see the camp lights," he said, his breath a foglike cloud, "Maybe we'll actually get a decent night's sleep before they start trying to whip us all into shape."

He had that smile still pasted on his face, but the tone of his voice was more sarcastic than optimistic.

Kagome just nodded, that familiar dizzy feeling of apprehension returning.

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"New recruits, this way! Relinquish your horses inside the gates immediately!"

Miroku and Kagome dismounted and did as they were told, tying their animals off on some haphazard-looking posts and following the trickle of young men wandering toward the large campfire.

There were several officers standing around, easily spotted by their much nicer armor and their general dismissive looks toward the volunteers, who all appeared to be as out of sorts as Kagome was.

Kagome just did her best to keep her head down and fall in line, sliding into the crowd and following Miroku as he tried to shove his way a little closer to one of the campfires.

"Anything to eat?" he asked one of the officers, "We've been riding for the entire night."

The officer in question just scoffed and turned to walk away.

"Well then," Miroku said, taking a seat upon the snowy ground and holding out his hands to warm them by the firelight, "A little hunger is good for the morals, I suppose."

Kagome swallowed. Her throat was so dry. Would eating snow help? No, probably not.

The fire was so *hot*, though. It was making her feel a little delirious.

"File in!" There was a shout from one of the other ranked men, and the crowd of recruits began to move a little faster as they shoved into a group around the fire, "Commanding officer present!"

A man wearing the ornate costume of a general stepped forward and began addressing the troops.

Kagome was barely listening to his ramblings about honor, about defeating the youkai menace, about cleansing the land of their filth and restoring order, about loyalty to the shogun. She was feeling extremely lightheaded.

A nudge at her right elbow, and she looked up through half-lidded eyes. Miroku was staring at her with clear concern. "You all right, kid? You look a little..."

His voice faded out. She felt herself slump forward as the snow before her turned grey, then black...

---

"Sota! Hey, Sota! Do we have a doctor present? A medic? *Anything?*"

General Naito's droning speech was abruptly halted due to the sudden disruption in the crowd.

A small, skinny boy, wearing armor far too big and shivering with cold, had just passed out, and would surely have faceplanted in the snow if not for the monk next to him having decent reflexes.

Naito looked a little miffed at being interrupted, and immediately turned behind him.

"Okada," he said, "Take care of this, would you?"

Okada just scoffed, but nodded. He stepped forward to shove through the crowd of the enlisted men and reached the boy, who was propped up in the monk's arms and breathing very weakly.

"Something's wrong," the monk said, "I think he has a fever."

Okada rolled his eyes. "That's fairly obvious. Give him to me and be quiet. The general's not finished speaking."

The monk didn't look very sure, but finally he held out his arms and Okada was able to quite easily sling the boy's prone body over one shoulder and push back through the murmuring crowd toward the medical tent.

The boy moaned a little and started to slide down Okada's leather armor. With a hiss of frustration, Okada roughly readjusted his grip, tucking his arms beneath the kid's legs and shoulders, eager to just dump the little brat off on the healer and be done with it.

"H-Hojo?" The boy's eyes opened slightly, gazing up at him. They were almost sapphire blue in color, and thickly rimmed with long black lashes.

Hojo...Okada recognized the name. One of the higher-ranked families in the area. A young man primed and ready to succeed his father as daimyo when the time came.

And frankly, Okada knew, that time would probably be sooner rather than later. *This kid knows Hojo. Strangely well-connected for a scrawny brat in secondhand armor.*

The boy in his arms looked up at him, curious and obviously confused. "No," the kid murmured softly, his voice still youthful and high, "You're...not him."

"Well spotted," Okada snapped.

"Where...are we?"

"You passed out," Okada said shortly, "Clearly you're going to be a great asset to the shogun's troops. Can't even last a day's ride."

The boy then looked very ashamed, and clenched his jaw. "Let me go," he said, wriggling free, "I can walk by myself."

"Fine," Okada said, unceremoniously dropping him to the snowy earth.

The boy glared up at him with such fire that it almost surprised him, and struggled to stand on trembling limbs.

---

Kagome's arms and legs felt shaky and strengthless, but she forced herself, through what could only be sheer blatant defiance, to get to her feet and remain as motionless as possible.

The man in officer's uniform standing in front of her was at least a foot taller than she was, and he was standing there in the darkness, framed only by the dim light of the moon and the distant glow of the campfires down the pathway, with his arms folded in obvious scorn.

"Medical tent's that way," he said, and she caught the glint of a sneer on his face, "Let's see you walk yourself, and maybe I *won't* order a notice sent to all the villages asking if anyone's lost a child."

Kagome, as out of it as she was, felt a stab of anger. "I am no child," she said, almost forgetting to lower her voice due to the indignity she was experiencing, "I'm...I'm..."

*Wait. Maybe I shouldn't claim my true age. I'm already short for a female my age, and to claim to be a boy of seventeen would probably seem outrageous. Better to play it safe.*

The officer chuckled, and it sounded harsh and cruel. "Come on, kid," he said, "Think a little faster on your feet. If you're going to lie, you need to be better at it."

Kagome felt fear seize around her heart as she thought about just to what extent she was lying *right now*, and how if this man in front of her knew it, he probably wouldn't hesitate to order her exposed to everyone in the camp.

Or to order her killed on the spot.

She fell silent and turned away to trudge through the snow toward the tent the man had indicated.

The first step was fine.

The second was wobbly.

And on the third, she tumbled forward, landing roughly on her hands and knees, feeling the sting on her palms as she took a shaky breath in and out.

She heard footsteps approaching, and she was roughly yanked by the collar back to her feet. The bindings on her chest squeezed tighter, and she wanted to scream in pain but bit her tongue instead.

He was bodily *lifting* her off the ground with a single hand. The strength this man had in a single fist was *incredible*. Kagome could do nothing but let out a whimper, preparing for a slap or a punch or worse.

Nothing came. She felt them start to move, and she blinked her eyes open, staring at the man who had her completely helpless.

"Determined little brat, aren't you?" He seemed almost amused as he continued walking, still holding her up inches off the snow as if he were simply carrying a load of unwashed laundry.

---

Why these fools insisted on sending mere *children* to do their dirty work, Okada knew he would never understand, but he'd always just shrugged it off.

Most of the boys who came to the camp to be trained were clearly scared stiff of everything that moved. They were all looking for some excuse to fail out of training and get sent back home to their mothers.

And then there was this one. Sick, delirious with fever, barely able to stand, and still trying to fight to stay. And if he knew Hojo, he was from *nobility*, no less. Very surprising. The kids from fancy families were usually the ones with the most excuses and pleadings for mercy.

The lamp glowing in the tent ahead began to cast further light on the kid's face as they approached.

Yes, definitely *from nobility*. There was no mistaking those delicate little features, that aristocratic face shape. The boy was as pretty as any girl.

And he was *blushing*. Okada wanted to mutter in disgust and let the kid drop, but instead he just flung open the tent flap, deposited the boy on a cot and muttered a few words of instruction to the healer.

---

As she was roughly shoved into a horizontal position on the threadbare cot, and just before a foul-tasting tonic was shoved at her, Kagome watched the young man in the armor of an officer disappear again out of the tent without another word.

"It's just a cold brought on by exhaustion. Let's get you out of those wet clothes," the healer, a balding man in his late forties, barked gruffly, and reached out to start yanking armor off of Kagome's body.

"NO!" Kagome sat up with a start, almost choking on the last of the disgusting medicine, "I'll be fine, it's nothing!"

The determination to not be unceremoniously groped and then murdered won out over how ill she was feeling, and the medic spluttered in surprise and protest as she flew out of the tent, tripping over her own feet once and catching herself as she sprinted back toward the camp.

She passed by the officer who'd helped her, who heard her approaching and turned with a look of absolute bewilderment on his face.

"What the hell?" he barked, "Get back in that tent!"

"Feeling much better now," she said quickly, trying to shove past him and instead colliding face-first into his shoulder, making him grunt, "Just a fainting spell. Family trait."

*That's the best you can think of? Well done, Kagome.* She wanted to scream in frustration at herself.

"Oi." The taller man's voice was now properly irritated, and she felt herself wince a little as she looked up at him. His face was more visible now; he was probably only a few years older than she was, with black hair that even outdid her own in terms of length, and dark violet eyes that were narrowed dangerously. A very, very handsome face, she would have thought if her mind weren't currently occupied with trying to avoid getting punched in the face.

His hand clenched around the top of her breastplate and pulled her upward, his face mere inches from hers.

She did her best to look very sure of herself as she looked him straight in the eyes, clenching her jaw and keeping her mouth in a straight line.

"I personally don't give a damn if you live or die, but if you pass out again tomorrow in basic training," he said, and a humorless smirk began to cross his features, one that was rather terrifying to behold, "I will personally beat the ever-living hell out of you. In front of every last man here. Understood, soldier? There's no credit given here for a kid who tries as hard as possible to get himself killed, and I've been *itching* to make an example of someone."

"I drank the medicine. I'll be fine. I promise," she said, unflinchingly. "Sir:"

His lip curled, and he released his hold and stepped out of her way, allowing her to pass him and return to the main camp, where she found Miroku looking very, very surprised at her sudden and incredible recovery.

"How on heaven or on earth - " he began, and she just sat back down next to him, eyes fluttering closed for just a moment before she forced them back open and gave him a friendly smile.

"Fainting spell," she said again, still feeling like a fool for that excuse, "Family trait."

And then her attention turned to the general, who was now seemingly discussing what would be expected of them when training began early the next morning.

Behind the general, she saw the tall, dark-haired officer slide back into line, arms folded. He was staring straight at her. And he looked suspicious as all hell.

Kagome averted her eyes.

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