

Stepping Forward

The last month had been the most difficult Kotori had to face.

She'd convinced the hospital to release her early, just so she could go home, but she found that she couldn't do anything. She felt so weak, even walking on her own was a task. It was frustrating not being able to do much. Yuma had to help her with everything that first week.

Thankfully, she convinced him to reach out to their family and friends to ask for support, knowing Yuma would struggle running the apartment on his own. He wasn't a good cook at all and she knew he'd struggle keeping his attention on things like housework without someone there to help keep his focus on it, or keep him from getting too overwhelmed by the amount of tasks that needed doing.

Gradually, as the weeks went by, Kotori gained more and more of her strength back, but despite this, it felt to her like time had stopped moving, or even like it had even gone backwards. She had to gradually build her confidence with just using her abilities normally again, starting with easy tasks and building up to harder ones. Yuma encouraged her every step of the way and helped her rebuild that confidence she once had.

Building confidence with using them in her demon form was going to be a different task all on its own, though, and something she didn't feel quite ready for yet.

Emotionally, she still wasn't doing too well. Even with her strength back, she struggled to find the motivation to do things that she enjoyed. She'd only cook simple things and she just couldn't bring herself to even start a sewing project. She just had no drive or passion for anything.

It worried Yuma to see her like that. He'd tried to encourage her to go outside with him, but the farthest they got was the Sakana entrance before she felt too anxious to go any further.

It wasn't just her abilities she needed to rebuild her confidence with.

When Judai had told Yuma about planning to come over to their apartment to talk to Kotori about some things, he had an idea to hopefully raise Kotori's spirits a bit, by asking Judai to bring over his baby daughter. Kotori loved children and had been wanting to go and see her, so it seemed like a perfect idea.

Kotori was sitting in the living room with Yuma when the doorbell to their apartment rang. Yuma quickly got up and went to answer it, returning a moment later, popping

his grinning head around the door to the living room. Kotori looked at him curiously, wondering what he was so happy about.

"Someone's come to see you!"

Kotori wondered who was visiting her specifically, as Yuma moved into the room to let the person who was behind him in.

It was Judai who was holding his baby daughter, Asami, in his arms.

Kotori's eyes grew wide and she let out a little squeak in excitement.

"I heard you'd been wanting to meet her, so I thought I'd bring her around." Judai told her.

Yuma invited Judai to sit down on the sofa beside Kotori, who looked almost on the verge of tears.

Asami was just too cute!

"Would you like to hold her?" Judai questioned. Kotori nodded, prompting Judai to pass over Asami to her gently.

Holding her, Kotori's heart melted at every sound and movement the small infant made. She cooed and giggled at her and rocked her ever so slightly to keep her calm and feeling secure. Judai was amazed at it. Even though he was still getting used to holding his own newborn daughter, who always felt so fragile in his arms, Kotori seemed a natural at it straight away.

Standing to the side, Yuma watched the scene in front of him with both happiness and relief. He knew asking Judai to bring over his baby daughter was the right idea. He hadn't seen Kotori light up like this for weeks. Any happiness she had shown had seemed forced and feigned, so seeing her genuinely happy really made him feel happy too.

But he knew Judai was here to talk to Kotori about something else and he needed to find a reason to give them a bit of space.

"Hey, would you guys like some drinks? I can make some tea!"

"That'd be great!" Judai replied. Kotori seemed to be too distracted by Asami to reply, but Yuma decided he'd make her a drink anyway.

As Yuma left the room, Kotori glanced over at Judai.

"You didn't just visit to bring Asami-chan over to visit, did you?"

Judai nodded. It seems Kotori had already picked up on his main intention.

"I'd been meaning to come over and talk with you, but it was Yuma's idea for me to bring Asami round. Seems he was right that it was something you'd enjoy."

Kotori smiled at that. She appreciated the thought Yuma had put into it.

"I know a bit about what it's like." Judai began. "Being afraid of a power you have but don't understand. Feeling like you've lost your identity to it. Fearing that you'll only cause hurt to those around you."

"You do?" Kotori questioned, looking at Judai curiously. Judai responded with a nod.

"My ability originally had a very fearsome history to it. When I first gained my ability, it overtook me and I couldn't control it, but I was lucky that my friends were able to eventually bring me out of it. But the more I learned about the history of it, the more I saw others be afraid of it, or just expecting me to snap again and hurt those around me... so I grew fearful of it. I would have done anything back then to get rid of it.

The more fearful I grew, the more my powers would go out of control. They'd flare up when I was emotional, especially when I was angry.

I didn't want to accept it as a part of who I was.

I was under a lot of stress back then. Not just with these worries, but having to deal with strange and dangerous events at the academy, as well as schoolwork.

Everyone tended to look up to me as a 'hero', so quite often others turned to me to solve the issues plaguing the Academy."

Kotori watched Judai's expression carefully as he talked, noticing the subtle change from his happy demeanor to one that was filled with a subdued sorrow as he recalled difficult memories.

"Eventually I began pushing those I cared about away, because I felt they were safer not being anywhere near me. I kept running myself into the ground, throwing myself headfirst into dangerous situations. I even tried to request leaving the Academy at one point, because I started placing the blame of all the supernatural events at the Academy solely on myself.

I was tired, often ill because of how much I exhausted myself and I had no self-worth back then."

Kotori shifted uncomfortably as she looked down at the small baby resting in her arms, in an attempt to distract herself temporarily from everything she was feeling. What Judai must have gone through back then must have been harrowing, but what

made her feel uncomfortable the most was how much a lot of it mirrored what she had been through herself.

"I consider back then to be one of the darkest times of my life, but I'm glad that I had friends that never gave up on me and it gave me the power to push through.

Gradually, I decided that I didn't want to fear myself anymore and I began striving to be someone who wouldn't lose themselves to this power. Someone who could be trusted and looked up to. Eventually, I found the more I trusted myself and the less fearful I was of it, the more I was able to control it.

And, y'know, they say sometimes you have to go through bad things to get to the good and if I hadn't gone through that, then SAI may not have ever existed. That was created because I wanted to help those who have abilities like this and give them a place to go for support.

And what I want to offer you know, is that support. Just like when we did when you first got these abilities."

Kotori remained silent, but gave him a nod in agreement.

"It will take time to come to terms with everything, but I can offer you a spot with a therapist who we work with, as long as she's free. If not, I have others that I can refer you to. This is to help you work through everything and help you come to terms with who you are. I know Yuma is planning to do some training with you, so you can practise with your abilities in your demon form, but if you feel you need any extra training, we can also provide a safe space to do that.

Just don't push yourself too much. Try and recognise your limitations and don't force yourself beyond them."

Taking a deep breath, Kotori let it out slowly before looking back over at Judai with a grateful smile.

"Thank you, Judai-san. I think the therapy will help. If you were able to come to terms with who you are, then, I can do the same.

I don't want to spend the rest of my life being afraid of myself."

Judai seemed satisfied with that, happy that Kotori had the drive to do what she could to help herself.

At this moment, Yuma came back into the living area, carefully placing the drinks on the low table in front of everyone. He looked up and grinned at Kotori who was still holding Asami.

"Heh, looks like you're having fun there!"

"Would you like to hold her, Yuma?" Judai questioned. The moment he asked, panic appeared on Yuma's face.

"W-wait? Me? I dunno..." he looked over uncomfortably at the small infant in Kotori's arms. "I mean, I don't want to drop her or anything!"

"You won't drop her." Kotori reassured him. "I'll show you how to hold her."

Seeing how much Kotori wanted him to give holding the baby a try, he tentatively sat down beside her. Once he did, Kotori gently handed Asami over to him, making sure his arms were supporting her body and her head. At first, he had no idea what to do and he seemed incredibly tense, as if he was afraid to move.

Asami, though, was not afraid to move, as she stirred and began squirming a little more in his arms.

"A-ah, what do I do...!?"

"Just relax, I think she can tell you're a bit tense." Kotori told him. Although he still felt a little uncomfortable with the situation, he let out a breath and allowed himself to relax a little more. Gradually, Asami stopped squirming and fussing as much. Looking down at her, Yuma found his worries about holding her faded away a little more, as a smile appeared on his face.

"Heh. She's super cute."

"Yeah, she really is!"

Watching the young couple doting over his daughter was heartwarming, especially knowing how much they'd been through, but seeing how they supported each other, he knew that no matter what happened with them in the future, they'd find a way through it together.

"I think the two of you would make great parents one day." he commented. Both Kotori and Yuma's heads snapped up to look at Judai in surprise, and then at each other. Eventually, the look between them changed to smiles, before they looked back at Asami together.

Although they didn't say anything, Judai could tell they appreciated his compliment.

Judai stayed for a while longer talking with the couple and allowing them (mainly Kotori) to have more time with Asami, before she began getting more fussy. Figuring she probably needed feeding, they decided to call the visit a day.

"I'll get everything sorted for you this week, so you can start the therapy as soon as possible." Judai told Kotori as he stood at the door. "And if either of you ever need any help with anything, just let me or Asuka know."

"Thank you, Judai-san." Kotori replied. "And... if you and Asuka-san ever need a babysitter, then, well, I'd be happy to look after Asami-chan when you need it."

Judai gave her a smile and a nod. "I'll remember that. Thank you."

Right then, Asami began crying in protest to not being fed yet. "Well, I think I better give in to her demands. I'll be in touch!"

Both Kotori and Yuma waved bye to Judai as he walked down the stairs and vanished into the apartment below.

Walking back into the apartment, Kotori slowly closed the door and looked up at Yuma, giving him a grateful smile, before walking forward and placing her arms around him, pulling him gently into a hug and burying her face into his shoulder.

"Thank you for inviting them over. I really needed it."

Yuma returned the hug and the two stood in silence for a moment, simply enjoying the embrace with each other.

When the hug broke though, Yuma could see a spot of concern on her face.

"Is something wrong?"

"Oh, no. I just... I was just reminded of something seeing Asami-chan, that's all." Yuma frowned a little. Even though having Asami over seemed to make her really happy, what about it was causing her something to be concerned about? "It was something really silly that doesn't even matter at the moment."

Taking Kotori's hand gently, Yuma lead her over to the sofa in the living room, where he sat down and encouraged her to sit beside him.

"If it's something that's worrying you, it's important, right?"

Kotori nodded and sat down beside him. Taking a deep breath, she began to explain her worries to him.

"I guess this will be part of the whole 'accepting myself for who I am' thing, but... I was worried that if I had children in the future, that I might pass my abilities onto

them. After all, they'd have my demon heritage too. But also, if we had children, there's your Astral heritage to think about as well... though that's more generations deep than my own, so maybe it wouldn't affect them.

I guess I was worried... that it would burden them, if they ended up getting abilities from one, or even both of us."

Yuma watched as Kotori nervously rubbed her hands together in her lap as she explained her worries to him. He sat in silence for a moment, allowing himself to absorb what she'd said. Eventually, he reached out a hand and placed it on top of hers.

"I don't think it would be a burden to them if that happened, cos they'd have parents that'd know what they'd be going through and know how to support them and stuff, right?"

Kotori moved her hand so it was holding Yuma's. "Right." His reassurance made her feel better.

"This is the first time we've really discussed the possibility of maybe having a family together one day." Kotori gave a content smile. "I like the idea of it."

Yuma smiled gently back. "Yeah. Me too."

With that, Kotori leaned towards Yuma and cuddled up next to him, not saying anything else, but the content smile remained on her face. Reaching out and grabbing a blanket that was kept on the back of the sofa, Yuma wrapped it around both himself and Kotori, before resting his head against hers.

Talks like this, years ago, would have freaked him out, but Yuma found that a future with Kotori by his side was a journey he was looking forward to and one he was absolutely sure of.