One Is for Sorrow

by blackkat

Summary

Tobirama loved Itama enough to go against the natural laws in an attempt to bring him back. For Itama, it’s time to return the favor.

Notes

Red_Hot_Holly_Berries (my own personal enabler) and I have an ongoing Thing: she tries to turn everything into angst, I retaliate by trying to turn everything into fluff, and sometimes things explode. Like this fic. It started as an Itama-fic, took a nosedive into how Hashirama isn’t the best brother, struggled up to become a fix-it, twisted sideways into more brotherly angst with a side of grievous wounds, and crashed headlong into “well Itama can turn into a magpie now take that!”

It’s a little silly, a little funny, a little sad, and has been far too much fun to work on. There’s a thousand other things I should be doing aside from posting yet another WIP, but sometimes you just need cute boys turning into birds and saving people.
The beginning dialogue is straight from As Is the Sea Marvelous, which was the starting point for all the angst. Chapter titles are from Rumi’s *Gone to the Unseen*. 
“How could you, Tobirama?”

“It was war.”

“It was unnecessary!”

“I don’t understand why you're so angry. I did what I had to.”

“You destroyed any chance we might have had of peace! Madara will blame us all for Izuna’s death! He won't rest until he’s avenged him!”

“We are at war. Brother, I know you and Madara were friends, but it has been years. The Uchiha Clan still opposes us; would you have us lay down our weapons and die? Would you let them raid our lands, kill whatever children they find, without striking back? That is foolishness.”

“I know you, Tobirama. I know how fast you are. If you had wanted to, you could have turned your sword, injured Izuna instead of killing him. Why? Why, just this once, couldn’t you show a little mercy?”

“Madara is one man. The clans are tired of war; there is still hope that—”

“It was Madara’s dream too, Tobirama! Without him standing beside me it is practically meaningless! He’s like a brother to me. Can't you understand? Peace was a dream we shared! To go forward without him—it will be empty. And now—now any chance of that is gone.”

“I regret that my actions have caused you distress, anija.”

“Go away, Tobirama. Just—leave me be, please.”

Goodbye, Brother.

It goes unsaid.

(But Itama hears it.)

Itama is accustomed to frustration.

Nineteen years of life, and nine of them were spent as the drab, average brother who could never live up to the flashy genius of his older brothers, the easy charm of his younger brother. Ten more years after that spent as a ghost, a soul tethered to the living world by his favorite brother’s mistake, insubstantial and invisible, growing and changing and forced to watch his family crumble—

Itama feels he can safely say he knows more about frustration than anyone else.

And yet none of his previous frustrations can even hold a candle to this one.

“No,” he whispers, though he knows from long experience that no one will hear him. Even the strongest sensor in Fire Country couldn’t, even if that sensor wasn’t lying at Itama’s feet, his blood
staining the grass beneath him.

“**No,**” he says again, because there’s nothing else he can say, and he drops to his knees, reaching for Tobirama’s head. His red eyes are fixed in death, already dulling, and Itama’s breath catches on a sob. He tries to touch, tries to lift Tobirama’s head so that his older brother isn’t just lying in the dirt, discarded like trash, but his fingers pass right through, the way they have so many, many times before.

The boneless, lifeless sprawl, antithesis of Tobirama’s carefully controlled grace, doesn’t change, and Itama shudders as a sob wracks his body.

Dead. Tobirama is dead, was murdered, and there was no way for Itama to stop it.

“Are you happy now?” he demands, useless, unheard. The words strangle around another sob, and Itama has always cried too easily—cried for birds caught by cats, for fish on a line, for kittens drowned in a spring flood—but this time the tears are fiercer, hotter, twisted with loathing and self-directed rage. Hatred for Tobirama’s killer, and hatred for himself, caught by the Uchiha when he should have been warier, nothing now but a ghost trapped in the strings of one of Tobirama’s early attempts at Edo Tensei.

“Are you happy?” he asks again, and the words break in his mouth like glass, their edges sharp enough to draw blood. “Killing my brother isn’t going to bring yours back!”

None of the Uchiha around him so much as stir, and Tobirama’s murderer simply stares down at his fallen body for an endless minute, chest heaving, eyes spinning crimson and midnight. He trembles, just faintly, and then takes a step back, pressing a hand over his face. The sound Uchiha Madara makes isn’t a sob—it’s wordless, formless, a noise full of aching grief and raw pain, twisted through with fury left to blaze unchecked.

Itama looks at Madara, standing with his bloody sword still in his hand, and knows that he isn’t. Good, he thinks, and almost says, but the word sits uneasily in his chest and can’t quite make it past his tongue. He heard Madara’s scream when Izuna fell, remembers all too clearly the grief he felt when Kawarama’s body was carried back to the Senju compound, and can’t quite make himself that petty.

Too soft, their father always told him.

Kind, Tobirama used to tell him in the night, when nightmares drove him to his brother’s bed. He always said it like it was high praise, and Itama loved him for it.

Looking down, a sob shaking through him, Itama ghosts his fingers over the red marks on Tobirama’s cheeks, right and left and then the one down his chin. Three marks, and maybe no one else can understand the meaning, but Itama has followed one step behind his older brother since the day Tobirama tried to resurrect him, only succeeding in binding his soul to the living world.

One slash for each brother he lost, and one more as a silent promise to keep Hashirama alive no matter what.

“You did it,” he whispers, though he has no doubt Tobirama’s soul is already somewhere far beyond the reach of his voice. “You saved him one more time. He’s going to be so mad at you.”

“He wasn’t carrying any weapons,” one of the Uchiha kunoichi says, crouching down beside Tobirama’s body, almost on top of Itama. He ducks away automatically, not comfortable with the strangeness of having someone reach through him, and settles to stand protectively over his brother,
no matter how little good it will do. He’s not a child anymore, growing and maturing even as a ghost, as if some piece of him were still alive, but that will hardly let him fight an entire group of Uchiha when he can’t so much as summon a breeze. He wants to—wants it more than he’s wanted anything in a long time—but whatever the Uchiha choose to do to Tobirama’s body, he can’t stop them.

“What?” another Uchiha asks, this one a younger man with his hair pulled up in a short tail. There’s a frown overtaking his face as he kneels beside her, Sharingan eyes flickering over Tobirama’s body.

The woman tosses him a look, sharp and a little chiding, and repeats, “No weapons. Why would Senju Tobirama come to Uchiha lands unarmed?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Madara says harshly, though his gaze is still fixed on the sprawl of pale limbs across the forest floor.

The man with the ponytail murmurs something that only Itama, standing right next to him, manages to catch.

“Not anymore, it doesn’t.”

In that moment, Itama hates all of them. His hands curl into fists, and he looks away, because looking down means seeing Tobirama’s corpse, dead at the hands of the Uchiha. Dead because they live in a world where only retribution matters, even in the face of friendships.

He wonders what Hashirama will think, when Tobirama never comes home.

They fought, he knows. Well, for a given value of fighting, because Tobirama might snap and snarl but he’d never really raise his voice at family. And especially never at his last living brother. Itama could only watch as Hashirama spoke those cutting words, those damning words, so overcome with his own grief that he entirely failed not notice Tobirama stiffening, drawing in on himself.

If he had, maybe he would have stopped Tobirama from walking straight into Uchiha territory on a mad quest to make things right.

Maybe he’s managed it. Maybe now that he’s gotten his revenge for Izuna’s death Madara will be calmer, more reasonable. Maybe peace is possible now.

Itama doesn’t care. He doesn’t care, because his big brother is dead. There’s no one to save him, no way to undo this—

Sound ceases.

Startled, Itama turns back, only to find Madara frozen midway through the act of re-sheathing his sword, the two other Uchiha stuck halfway to their feet. There’s a twist in the air, a flicker, like chakra but somehow wilder, looser. Light blooms, gentle and soft, and a figure steps out of it. Instantly, Itama recoils, hands coming up in defensive positions he still can’t forget at the sight of muted red skin, long white hair, a demonic face crowned with horns. He leaps for the trees as eerie black-and-yellow eyes settle directly on him, but—

His feet hit the ground and stick there.

Tobirama.

He can’t leave his brother.

The monster looks down at his brother’s body, then back up at him, and moves to follow Itama. It
passes right through the frozen Uchiha as if it too is a ghost, and Itama’s heartbeat catapults itself into his mouth. Is it here for him? Has it come to drag him back to the land of the dead? Is Tobirama’s death enough to undo whatever chains his faulty Edo Tensei created to bind Itama’s soul to the earth?

“No!” he cries, and the habit of a shinobi’s life has him reaching for the chakra he can no longer touch. “I have to stay with him! You can’t take me away!”

The monster stops. It tilts its head, regarding him, and then—

It laughs.

Fingers with long claws reach up, closing around its face, and there’s a blinding whirl of chakra as it pulls sharply. The entire face comes off, as if it’s nothing but a mask, and with it the entire presence vanishes. Like mist suddenly condensing back into a cloud, the body turns wavering-white, then shrinks, whirling in on itself. Out of the haze man emerges, normal except for the two small horns rising from his brow. His hair is long and blue-white in the forest’s dimness, one lock beside his face wrapped with cloth, and his eyes are featureless lavender, almost white.

“Don’t worry, child,” he says, holding up one slim hand as he approaches Itama. “I’m here to help you save your brother, not to take you away.”

Save him? Itama’s breath catches in his throat, a lump like stone in his chest. His eyes burn, but he doesn’t dare shift out of his ready stance to wipe them away—he can’t afford to leave that big an opening against an unfamiliar opponent, and he might be weak compared to Tobirama and Hashirama, but he’s not stupid.

“Tobirama is dead,” he says, and ignores the way his voice cracks, the heat of the tears suddenly washing down his cheeks. “There’s no way I can save him.”

The faint, reassuring smile on the man’s face fades, and he comes to a halt just a handful of feet away. “You must get that stubbornness from Hagoromo,” he says, a note of amused disgust in his voice. “It seems to run in the family.”

The unfamiliar name makes Itama frown, but he doesn’t waver. “What do you want?” he insists, and hates the way he sounds, so much less intimidating than Tobirama, even when Tobirama isn’t trying and Itama is.

Lavender eyes narrow, and the man folds his arms into the sleeves of his white robe. “My name is Hamura,” he says, as though that should mean something. “The Uzumaki Clan calls me Shinigami. My brother is the Sage of Six Paths, and he might be content sitting back and watching his descendants run around making a mess of things, but I’m rapidly losing my patience with it. You’re going to help me put things right.”

That sounds a lot more ominous than Itama would like. He shifts back another step towards the trees, even though he’s fairly certain he’s not going to be able to escape one of the Uzumaki’s gods no matter how fast he runs. “I’m dead!” he protests, even as he gauges the distance to the river. Running water won’t cover a scent he no longer has, but there’s usually mist along the banks this time of day. If he can make it there, he can hide—

Hamura snorts, just faintly. “You’re not entirely dead,” he corrects. “Thank that meddling brother of yours. Apparently no one ever taught him it was better not to play around with other people’s souls.”

Training says he should be wary, but Itama’s instinct is louder right now, and it says this man means
him no harm. A little warily, he lowers his arms, shifting back to stand straight, and takes a breath. “He was just lonely,” he says quietly, because he’s stayed by Tobirama’s side for the last ten years; he knows all too well how his brother felt. “He wanted to save us, the way he couldn’t when we died.”

For a long moment, Hamura simply watches him, considering. Then he tips his head in acknowledgment, ceding the point. “He brought you halfway back,” is all he says. “You stand with a foot in the world of the living and one in the land of the dead. It means you are under my jurisdiction, but you still have ties to the earth. I can use that.”

Being used is something every shinobi is familiar with, so Itama doesn’t waver. “Is that why I grew?” he asks, looking down at his hands. Not as big as Hashirama’s, not as graceful as Tobirama’s, but...his own. Nineteen years old, an adult even in the eyes of civilians, and he’s existed for every moment of the last ten years, but he hasn’t actually been alive.

“It is,” Hamura confirms, and something in his voice is softer now, his whole bearing eased just a little. When Itama looks up at him he smiles, reaching out, and offers his hand. “Your brother loved you enough to go against the natural laws to bring you back. Would you like to return the favor?”

Automatically, Itama glances over at Tobirama, sprawled out at the feet of the man who killed him. Tobirama looks...small, like this. Like a broken doll carelessly dropped by a forgetful child, no longer of value, and—

“Of course I will,” he says, and pretends he can't hear the way his voice shakes. Itama is always scared, always terrified of everything. But he keeps going regardless, forges on because there’s no other choice to make, and now is certainly no different. “But—he died.”

He sounds like such a child, and he hates it.

Hamura makes a faint sound of amusement, stepping forward. “As you yourself did. But I will take you back to a moment when neither of you are dead, and leave you to fix it. In return, I want you to kill someone for me, little magpie.”

Light is gathering again, the wavering form of the robed demon with its red skin starting to bleed into the air around Hamura, even as his human form grows fainter. This time Itama doesn’t try to run away, even if he still wants to. “Aren’t you the Shinigami?” he asks as bravely as he can manage, not allowing himself to retreat. “Can’t you just do it yourself?”

Hamura’s chuckle fills the air around them. “As a piece of my mother’s will given form, he knows me far too well, and would see me coming in an instant. But if you change things for the better, he’ll step in to drag them back to chaos, and you’ll have the advantage. Do we have a deal?”

This time Itama doesn’t look towards his brother’s body; he doesn’t need to. “Yes,” he says firmly, and reaches for Hamura’s hand.

The world tilts, changes, collapses and reforms. Itama can feel himself falling and cries out, but it’s not his own voice that emerges—it’s the call of a magpie, warbling and throaty, and when massive hands with dull red skin scoop him up, he beats white-and-black wings edged with iridescent blue in startled protest.

“Easy, easy,” Hamura tells him, and it’s unnerving to hear his steady voice emerge from such an inhuman face. “I may as well give you an advantage before I drop you from the nest.” His fingers close gently over Itama’s magpie body, hold him securely even as he turns, and the forest around them shifts to a rocky plain. There are Senju in their armor, Uchiha without, and Itama feels a cold
chill run through him when he realizes that he recognizes this place. He was here just yesterday, following his brother into battle like a ghostly shadow.

This is where Izuna died. This is where Hashirama lost all hope of mending bridges with the Uchiha clan, and where Madara swore revenge for his little brother’s death.

Hamura raises his hands closer to his face, studying Itama closely for a moment, and then nods. “I’ll be watching,” he tells him, and then leans back and tosses him gently into the air. Itama squawks, not expecting the motion, but his wings flare out of their own volition, catch the air as if he’s already well accustomed to flying, and in a moment he’s aloft, soaring above the battleground.

The first moment is dizzying, a confusion of smoke and dust and unexpected updrafts, but Itama climbs carefully, one eye studying the ground beneath him. That mass of fire on the far edge has to be Madara and Hashirama’s fight, and he dips in the opposite direction, towards the other edge of the battle. There’s a flare of fire, bright enough to blind, and in a rush a dragon made of water rises to meet it. Steam explodes outward in a blinding cloud, too thick to even see hints of motion through, and Itama knows exactly what’s going to happen next.

His heart caught high up in his throat, he folds his wings and dives.

It’s a dizzying rush as he plunges into the cloud of steam, because there’s not enough time to plan anything at all. Even shinobi trained for speed can’t hope to match Tobirama, but Itama knows this battle, knows exactly how all of this will play out right down to the steps his brother takes, and—

The change of shape is less of a snap than he expects, more a shift than a switch. Itama drops, a flight of kunai just missing his head, and turns. Izuna jerks, eyes going wide as he brings his sword up, but Itama is counting seconds and there’s no time, not even for the realization that the Uchiha can see him. He ducks under Izuna’s guard, slamming a shoulder into his chest and hurling him to the side, and without pausing he turns right back.

There’s a flash of yellow light.

Itama has no sword, no kunai, not even so much as a branch to shield himself with. He can’t do anything but meet his older brother’s eyes as Tobirama brings his sword around, and he can see the exact moment Tobirama realizes that the scene before him has changed. His face goes slack, horror rising in a drowning wave as he jerks his blade up. In the same instant Itama ducks, and he can feel the rush of air as it skims right over his hair. A fraction of a heartbeat later, there’s a hand on his shoulder, pulling up, an arm around his waist, a ragged gasp against his ear. Tobirama’s impossibly familiar chakra crests, a yellow starburst filling the air around them, and then darkness that instantly gives way to light and silence.

Carefully, Itama cracks an eye open, but all he can see is the blue of his brother’s armor where he’s clinging to him. And—he doesn’t want to let go. His last image of his brother was Tobirama on the ground, eyes empty as they stared at nothing, and Itama can’t stand it.

“Tobirama,” he says, and doesn’t even try to make the word come out steady.

The arms around him tighten, almost crushing in their force, and Tobirama shakily breathes out into Itama’s hair. “Kai,” he whispers, even as he sinks to his knees, pulling Itama with him. “Kai. Kai!”

Despite himself, despite the many times he’s told himself not to cry, Itama feels tears on his cheeks. “It’s not an genjutsu, I swear,” he whispers, not wanting to lift his head but knowing he needs to. Even the first instant of trying to pull back is thwarted, though; Tobirama’s arms don’t budge, and he’s always been stronger than Itama.
“It has to be,” Tobirama says, and his fingers curl against Itama’s back, his shoulders, ten points of pressure to ground and steady both of them in turn. “You look—you are—”

“You brought me back,” Itama tells him, and Tobirama goes stiff against him. Itama knows enough of his brother’s thoughts to understand why. This is everything he wants, created by his own hands, fixed with his own effort, and that’s all Tobirama has ever needed to be content.

He pulls back, and this time Tobirama lets him, though his hands don’t leave Itama’s shoulders. “It’s true!” he insists. “That experiment, with the shinobi you captured, and the seal—it brought me halfway back, and someone else brought me the rest of the way.”

For an endless moment, Tobirama stares at him, and Itama can see the way he’s caught between disbelief and wild hope. “No one else knows about that,” he says slowly, and that spark of courage in the face of disbelief is growing in his eyes. “No one else could know.”

Itama smiles at him, curling his hand around Tobirama’s wrist. “I only saw the aftermath,” he admits. “But I saw you going over your notes afterwards, before Hashirama burst in and you threw that paperweight at his head. I figured it out from there.”

A breath, a beat, and Tobirama hauls him close again, burying his face in Itama’s two-toned hair. “You were always more clever than you gave yourself credit for.” The words are muffled, but clear enough, and it feels the same way it used to when Tobirama called him kind.

“It wasn’t hard,” Itama mutters, though his cheeks feel warm. He’s not particularly clever, and he’s always known it. “It’s easy to piece things together when no one else can see you.”

A faint hitch in Tobirama’s breath, and Itama can feel his fingers curl more tightly into his shirt. “Forgive me,” Tobirama says, and the words are so rough they may as well be cracking right down the center. “I—you always wanted to be seen, more than anything, and I took that away from—”

Exasperation flares, familiar and frequent when faced with his bullheaded older brother—both of them, to some extent, but especially Tobirama, who’s always doing too much and thinking he does too little. With a huff, Itama pulls back, slaps Tobirama in the back of the head, and fixes him with the firmest glare he can manage. “No, aniki!”

Tobirama blinks, red eyes clearly bewildered, and opens his mouth.

“No,” Itama repeats, more quietly but just as firmly, and slaps a hand over Tobirama’s lips. He takes a breath, not quite able to bear the look in his brother’s face, and shakes his head. “Thank you for bringing me back. I’m sorry it took this long, but I’m here now and I’m not leaving.”

There’s a long, long moment of silence as Tobirama stares at him, blank and silent. Something like nervousness curls in Itama’s stomach, but before it can build to the point of fleeing the scene, Tobirama takes a breath that shakes in his chest. His hands frame Itama’s face, calluses rough but dearly familiar, and he pulls Itama in to rest their foreheads together. His eyes fall shut, pale lashes like crescents of snow against the darker skin, and he whispers, “It really—you are Itama. No one else would yell at me like that.”

Of all the things to be remembered for, Itama thinks, somewhere between sheepish and fond. He twists his fingers into his brother’s hair, holding him close, and can’t help but remember the argument between Tobirama and Hashirama that ended up driving Tobirama straight to the Uchiha. It hasn’t happened yet, though.

It won’t happen at all, Itama vows, matching his breathing to his brother’s. Maybe Tobirama was
always been the one to protect Itama before, but now he’s going to return the favor, even if he has to protect Tobirama from himself and Hashirama equally.

“Hashirama will be overjoyed,” Tobirama says, as if he can see the direction of Itama’s thoughts.

Itama wants to see Hashirama too, wants to see the entire clan now that they can see him. And he wants nothing more than to cling to his brother as Tobirama drags him home the same way he used to when Itama exhausted himself training, but—

He made a deal. He made a deal to save Tobirama’s life, to bring him back from the dead, and it doesn’t matter that Tobirama isn’t dead right now. Itama agreed to take care of Hamura’s task, and he won’t be able to do that if he’s miraculously returned from the dead in the eyes of the Senju Clan. Tobirama can know, but no one else.

“Itama.” There’s something very close to alarm in Tobirama’s voice now, and Itama jerks his head up, startled, as Tobirama’s hands close even more tightly on him. “Itama, please. Come home.”

“Not yet,” Itama says, catching his hands, and it’s the habit of a child, but he twines his fingers with Tobirama’s, lets Tobirama’s bigger hands cover his. “I can't save everyone I need to if I'm stuck in the compound. And once I go back, you know Hashirama isn’t going to let me out again.”

“I won't let you out again,” Tobirama retorts, and Itama has to laugh, remembering the way Tobirama stepped in front of him, in front of Hashirama, whenever it seemed as if their father was going to come to blows. Always, always, he’s been the defender, and Itama loves him fiercely for it.

“I have things I need to do, and I'm the only one who can manage them,” he says, and he can see the reluctance in Tobirama’s eyes. He hesitates, but—

All it takes is a thought, and the world shifts.

“'Itama?’” Tobirama demands, and as a magpie Itama glances up at him and cocks his head, half-spread his wings. Tobirama shakes his head, even as he scoops Itama up between his hands to look at him more closely. “I assume this isn’t a side effect of Edo Tensei, so don’t think you’re going to escape telling me just how you managed to change shape, little brother.”

That, at least, is a far cry better than what he was previously about to say, which Itama knows would have been a threat to drag him back to the compound against his will. Content with that, he warbles and rubs his beak against the pad of Tobirama’s thumb.

Tobirama lets out a breath that’s almost a laugh, holding him up to eye-level. “I take it this is your way of ending the argument?” When Itama simply trills innocently at him, he rolls his eyes. “Very well. I dislike this plan, but I won't take you back to the compound. However, I expect to see you at least once a day. Understood?”

The trick with Tobirama is to outlast his stubbornness, Itama thinks, amused, and reaches up to tug pointedly on a lock of white hair falling over the faceplate. Tobirama makes a noise of disgruntled affection, but—

He’s smiling, just a little.

Itama can't remember the last time he saw Tobirama’s smile.
heard the drummer's call

Chapter Notes

Straight from the lips of Holly, world’s greatest enabler: *I regret nothing.*

I am of the same opinion, for the record. More magpie! Itama, for your viewing pleasure.

He dreams in flashes and shattered shades, of wings and swords and yellow light. Dreams of being trapped behind a pane of glass with *out out out* beating in his blood and fists bruised raw-red from his trying. Then the glass breaks and he’s falling falling *flying*, fingers turned to feathers and heart to fire.

It’s not the sensation of tumbling down that wakes him, but of success, a rush of fierce joy in his blood, and Itama opens his eyes with a silent breath that nevertheless feels like a shout.

He’s still cradled in the branches of the tree he chose to sleep in, braced against the trunk. There’s a magpie perched on the end of the bough, watching him with beady-bright eyes, and when it sees him looking back it warbles a greeting. Blue-brushed wings flare out, and another magpie answers it, then another, and another.

Four of them, Itama thinks, pushing himself up to sit. There was… a rhyme, wasn’t there, for telling the future by a group of magpies? Tobirama read it to him once, before they became too old for such things.

*One is for sorrow, two’s for mirth, three’s a blessing, four’s a birth.*

“Four for a birth?” Itama asks them, smiling. “Are you here for mine? Well, rebirth, I suppose, but I think it counts.”

The smallest of the group flutters down to land on his bent knee, and Itama gives a delighted laugh, offering her his hand. Perfectly bold, she climbs up onto his fingers, chittering at him. This one’s wings and tail are more green than blue, warmed by an undertone of gold, and when Itama raises a hand to carefully stroke the feathers on her breast she allows it easily, preening under the touch.

“You’re so pretty,” Itama tells her, smiling. “Are you my summons now? I didn’t have them before, but I think we have some things in common now.”

The magpie squawks, sounding exasperated, and Itama laughs, ducking away from her wings as she flutters up to the branch above him. “So that’s a yes?” he asks cheekily, and gets another chiding warble. But she pauses, then bobs her head before taking wing again. This time the others join her, and Itama leans forward to watch them disappear into the morning sky.

“A tiding,” he says to himself, because thinking out loud has always been a habit he couldn’t break. He used to talk to Kawarama, and then to Tobirama, but, well. Ten years invisible and inaudible to everyone has taught him it’s easiest to talk to himself. At least that way he doesn’t expect a response. “That’s what you call a group of magpies. They’re a tiding.”

He looks up through the branches stained by the first brush of sun, up towards the sky that’s a clear and cloudless blue, and he thinks he can see more magpies in the distance.
One is for sorrow, two’s for mirth, three’s a blessing, four’s a birth. Five for laughing, six for crying, seven for sickness, eight for dying. Nine is for love, ten is a kiss, eleven’s a secret, and twelve grants a wish.

Itama can’t mark the number of them as they wheel across the rising sun, and somehow that realization feels like a shiver of foreboding down his spine.

Izuna can’t stop thinking about it.

He’s up before the sun, awake in time to hear the birds start up in the forest around the Uchiha compound. There are more of them than normal, loud and fierce, but the din can’t manage to pull Izuna out of his thoughts as he perches on the edge of the wall.

Tobirama used a new jutsu yesterday, something Izuna has never seen in all his years of fighting the Senju. Something that let him move in a way even the Mangekyo Sharingan couldn’t follow, as if he’d stepped right out of the physical world for an instant before reappearing. And…it wasn’t the sort of thing Izuna was going to be able to dodge. He’d realized that as it happened, and—

Someone had pushed him out of the way.

They’d been gone a moment later, carried away by Tobirama’s sunburst of a new jutsu, but Izuna rubs a hand over his ribs, remembering the moment too clearly. He’s bruised, but he’s also alive, and that’s something to be thankful for. To wonder about, too, because he has no idea who would be reckless enough to interfere in a fight between him and Tobirama. He’s not quite Madara, and Tobirama isn’t Hashirama, but they’re not lacking in power, either.

Even so, the shinobi who dropped into the middle of their fight hadn’t hesitated. Hadn’t wavered at all as he turned to face Tobirama, and then Tobirama took him away.

Izuna wonders if the stranger was an ally. Probably, given how he sacrificed himself to save Izuna so readily. There haven’t been any reports of mysterious helpful figures from any of the patrols or scouts, though, so either he’s focused on Izuna in particular, or…

Or Izuna really was about to die, and that was enough to make the shinobi step in.

He doesn’t like the thought much. On the battlefield, he and Tobirama have always been roughly equal, and like their brothers they always engage each other to keep the rest of their clansmen out of the line of fire. But, if Tobirama—already fast, already devastating—can now move in ways the Sharingan can’t predict, things are going to get a hell of a lot more dangerous for the Uchiha, and Izuna can’t always count on a helpful stranger taking the blow for him.

They disappeared in the same flash of light Tobirama used, so logic say Tobirama took the stranger. Izuna leans forward, hands gripping the heavy stone of the wall, and closes his eyes. He doesn’t want to think about an ally of the Uchiha in Senju hands, suffering for saving Izuna’s life. Doesn’t want to think about Tobirama’s ruthlessness and how it might apply to interrogation. Hashirama is soft enough that he might not condone such things, but Tobirama would without a doubt.

Tobirama is like Izuna in that way: they’ll both do whatever it takes to protect their idiot older brothers, even if they have to take on the very worst aspects of the world their brothers are fighting to change.
Don’t, Izuna tells himself, mouth tightening as he drags a hand over his hair. Don’t think about torture and the Senju being stronger and a world that is always, always, always one side pitted against the other.

He can’t escape it, though. Can’t banish the sight of wide, dark eyes, shaggy hair sharply divided into white and black, an expression of fearful determination. For all of three seconds Izuna saw him, but —

But he saved Izuna's life, and that’s hard to forget.

“Izuna? What are you doing up here? Madara's been looking for you.”

Izuna blinks, pulled back to reality by the familiar voice, and turns to find Hikaku right behind him. The younger man has his pike over his shoulder, clearly about to go on watch, but is watching him with concern clear in his expression.

“I'm fine,” Izuna tells him, a futile attempt to preempt any displays of worry.

“Of course you are,” Hikaku agrees with devastating mildness. He props his pike against the wall and takes a seat next to Izuna, facing the opposite direction as he studies the interior of the compound.

This is a trap Izuna knows well; Hikaku is calm and patient and never goads, never outright pushes him to talk about feelings but at the same time one look from him is more than enough to trigger the itching need for Izuna to defend himself, even if his words weren’t a lie. It’s a little horrifying just how many times Izuna has fallen victim to it, and recognizing that it’s happening does nothing to stop its effectiveness.

“I am,” he insists.

“Right,” Hikaku says, still perfectly agreeable. “You're totally fine.”

“Completely,” Izuna snaps. “I've never been more fine, okay? Yesterday doesn’t matter, and nothing happened—”

“Yesterday?” Hikaku casts him a sideways look, blinking innocently like he doesn’t know exactly what he’s doing, the bastard. “You mean the battle? I heard Tobirama had some sort of new jutsu.”

Izuna gives him a dark look. “He did,” he admits, and it comes out grumpier than he would like. “Something with seals, knowing the bastard.”

And…seals are one of the ways shinobi torture, aren’t they? Sealed chakra, constant low-level pain, disorientation, emotional manipulation—seals can do all of that, and Tobirama is one of the best with them in the country. What if the shinobi who saved Izuna is going through that right now?

He hadn’t been able to see Tobirama’s face when the Senju realized he’d been thwarted, but…Tobirama hadn’t returned to the battlefield. He’d probably been angry that the element of surprise regarding his new jutsu had been broken, and was busy taking it out on the one responsible.

“I'm going for a walk,” Izuna bites out, and without waiting for Hikaku to answer he pushes off the wall, leaping down to land in the cleared ring around the compound.

Even though he’s not looking, he can still see Hikaku shaking his head at him. “Your brother is going to kill you for wandering off when you're like this,” he calls.
“I'm fine!”

“You said that already.”

“It’s true!”

Hikaku very obviously rolls his eyes, waving Izuna off, and Izuna huffs, turning and stalking into the trees. Everyone and their teenage cousin feels the need to have an opinion on his life, and it’s getting aggravating. The Uchiha are at war. It’s not like he’s supposed to be bubbly and cheery all the time.

Even worse, they're fighting the Senju. Hashirama might be honorable, but Izuna remembers three older brothers, dead at Senju hands.

He doesn’t want to think of his rescuer the same way. People stepping in to help others is rare, especially among shinobi clans, and Izuna is thankful. Intrigued, but grateful, because he’s fought Tobirama enough times to know he would have gone for a killing blow the moment he found an opening.

Izuna's surprise would have given him that all too readily.

This isn’t the first time Izuna has faced death, and he’s absolutely certain that it won’t be the last. He’s a shinobi, and for all that Madara wants to change the world, for all that Hashirama wants to same, their world won’t change. Not enough to make shinobi obsolete, and as long as they're shinobi, their world simply can't change.

Madara's never realized that, though, and Izuna doesn’t quite know how to make him.

Still. Even if it wasn’t the first time he’s faced death, this time was…uncomfortably close. Without the stranger to knock him out of the way, he’d have been caught by the blinding-quick sweep of Tobirama’s sword before he could so much as turn. That the stranger dodged it speaks to his skill, and probably also some knowledge of Tobirama’s abilities. It’s a puzzle, though, because Tobirama is the best sensor Izuna has ever encountered, and if he didn’t notice someone watching him, spying on him, that someone is probably very good.

Maybe it’s even worth staging a raid of the Senju compound to break him out, Izuna thinks, and closes his hands into fists as he forces himself to take a deep breath.

Madara would never approve that. He shouldn't, either. Izuna's being stupid. One life, no matter how skilled, isn’t worth however many lives rescuing him would cost.

Coming to a halt, Izuna rubs a hand over his face, leaning back against a tree trunk. He didn’t sleep well last night, and he can feel the fuzzy ache of exhaustion against his bones. Too much worrying, but it’s not like he can go to Madara, who already has so many worries of his own. And—

Something rustles, and there's a flash of blue between the trees.

Instantly, Izuna is moving, more instinct than conscious thought. He throws himself forward, shadowing the figure leaping through the branches, and the Sharingan’s almost painful focus floods his vision. This close to the Uchiha compound, anyone moving that fast—especially when they're headed away—is suspect, and regardless of his distraction Izuna isn’t about to let an intruder get past him.

But one chakra-swift step past a stand of trees the other shinobi has to go around and Izuna almost stops dead in surprise, because that’s Madara.
Madara is one of the best shinobi. He’s strong and fast and the equal of anyone but Senju Hashirama, but he’s also the Uchiha Clan Head. He shouldn’t be out here without an escort, a guard, and he’s clearly not looking for Izuna; his steps are entirely focused, his eyes straight ahead. It’s obvious he already has a destination in mind.

Maybe Izuna is too suspicious by nature, but he’s fairly certain something is up.

Before Madara can notice him—not that it looks like he’s going to, but for all that his older brother is an idiot Izuna respects his skills as a shinobi and is willing to give him the benefit of the doubt—Izuna slows his steps slightly, dropping back to follow Madara from a safe distance. There’s nothing he should be interested in in this direction; Izuna can only think of the river, one of the smaller, less maintained shrines, and an old guard outpost that’s been abandoned for years because it’s too close to the border of Senju territory.

He really, really hopes that Madara just got it in his head to visit the shrine.

Ahead of him, Madara makes a sharp turn around a stand of rocks (not towards the shrine, then, damn it) and Izuna curses quietly, changing direction. By the time his line of sight clears, though, Madara is gone, too fast for Izuna to mark his direction.

Even when he doesn’t know he’s being followed, Madara manages to be a jerk about it, Izuna thinks with a huff, shoving a few loose strands of hair back behind his ears. He could check for tracks, actually put his shinobi skills to good use, but…he’s not entirely sure he wants to know where Madara’s going quite that badly. After all, Madara has a history of doing stupid things when he’s alone, and Izuna is at the point where he’d really rather ignore it when at all possible.

Last time he followed Madara in this direction, he caught him meeting with the Senju Clan’s heir, skipping rocks and acting like the child he was never otherwise allowed to be, and Izuna had to tell their father about it. Madara might have chosen his family that day, but he was noticeably cooler towards Izuna for months afterwards, and Izuna hated it.

A flash of black and white startles him, makes him jerk and twist around with his heart suddenly in his throat. Something moving almost as fast as Madara darts into a particularly dense stand of trees to his left, and in its wake three magpies whirl and swoop among the branches.

“Really?” Izuna asks out loud, faintly peeved, because he came out here to think, not spend all morning chasing ghosts. Already seeing Madara has thrown him off balance; this is just silly now.

Still, he follows, if with slightly more caution than before. Madara wasn’t likely to kill him if he spotted him, but if this is a stranger there’s no guarantee.

The magpies settle as he passes, bright eyes fixed on him with an unnerving amount of intelligence. One hops along the branch to match his steps, warbling as if amused. Izuna shoots it a dirty look, but doesn’t try to chase it off, following a trail of faintly swaying branches. There’s a clearing up ahead, and—

Izuna takes one more step and stops dead, heart suddenly in his mouth.

There’s a boy perched on the branch of a tree, haloed by the morning sunlight that pours through the leaves. His hair is starkly divided between white and black, falling to frame his face, and he’s smiling, warm and gentle in a way that makes Izuna’s breath tangle in his throat. There’s a magpie perched on his hand, fluttering its wings, and as Izuna watches the boy laughs, free and unabashed.

He looks different without that grim determination on his face, outside the heat of battle, but it’s
undoubtedly, undeniably the same shinobi who pushed Izuna out of the path of Tobirama’s blow.

_Here_, something beats in Izuna’s blood. _He’s here he’s here he’s alive and Tobirama didn’t kill him. Tobirama doesn’t have him. He escaped._

“Oh, thank the gods,” he chokes out before he can stop himself, taking a stumbling step forward. All of his usual grace is buried under an avalanche of relief and gratitude, because Izuna may be a shinobi, may be capable of being ruthless and relentless and deadly in all situations, but he’s always hated people sacrificing themselves for him. He dislikes it in Madara, dislikes it in his clansmen, dislikes it even in strangers he’s never met. Knowing that this boy _didn’t_ die for him comes with a dizzying release of tension, and Izuna has to catch himself on the trunk of a tree as he staggers under the force of it.

The boy—not that much of a boy, now that Izuna can see him clearly—jerks and leaps to his feet as the bird hurls itself into the air in an explosion of beating wings. Dark eyes snap to Izuna, and then the stranger is gone as if he never existed at all, and the only person in the clearing is Izuna, heart beating wildly as a flock of magpies circles.

“Damn it,” Izuna mutters after a long pause, and he thumps a fist against the tree trunk in frustration. That was _stupid_, and Izuna is a little ashamed of himself. Of _course_ sneaking up on an unfamiliar shinobi—even one who saved his life—wasn’t going to end well. Apparently he and Madara are more similar than he’d thought, if he’s making mistakes like that.

With a trill, a magpie with bright blue on its wings flutters down to land on a branch just a little above eye-level. It’s large for its kind, and pretty, with eyes that are somehow less sharp and more warm. When it sees Izuna looking back, it ruffles its feathers and trills again, a sweet and throaty sound.

“Hi,” Izuna tells it, a little dry, but he’s been reduced to talking to a _bird_, so it can probably be forgiven. “That was _so smooth_, did you see? Hikaku would be so proud of me. I managed to make someone turn tail and run in _four words_, isn’t that impressive?”

Another trill, a little higher and longer this time, and Izuna would _swear_ the magpie is laughing at him. He sighs, running a hand over his messy ponytail, and gives it a warning look. “Yeah, yeah. You laugh now, but at this rate I’m going to turn into _Madara_ and that’s a fate worse than death. Soon I’ll be tossing people in koi ponds when they annoy me and monologuing to the cat.”

That lilting trill again, and that’s _definitely_ laughter, Izuna thinks. He can’t help but smile a little, raising a cautious hand to offer to the bird, and it hops onto his fingers with only the smallest hesitation. Izuna is mostly a cat person, but as he lifts the bird’s practically nonexistent weight down, putting bright eyes on the level with his own, he finds that the feel of feathers under his fingertips is less objectionable than he’d thought it would be. The magpie doesn’t exactly arch into his touch like a cat would, but it tilts its head against his hand and brushes its beak over his fingers, and he assumes it’s about the same.

There’s a little patch of blue right behind its eye, to match the color streak its wings and tail, and Izuna only realizes he’s brushed his fingertip against it when there’s a flicker of surprise that he hasn’t gotten pecked.

“I’m ten for ten today,” he tells the bird in amusement. “Very impressive.” The magpie just tilts its head curiously, and Izuna sighs and brushes the backs of his fingers over its white-and-black chest. He hesitates, then shakes his head and lifts the bird up a little higher. “That shinobi—you guys must know him, right? Has he been living out here in the woods?”
The magpie is perfectly silent, perfectly still, watching him with sharp brown eyes.

“Right,” Izuna allows. “You probably wouldn’t tell me even if you could. But…keep an eye on him, okay? Make sure he doesn’t get into any more trouble. And if he needs something, come get me. I owe him one.”

The bird, of course, doesn’t respond, and Izuna grimaces, feeling foolish for half-expecting it to. “Just. Keep it in mind? He saved my life. And—I’m glad he’s safe.”

That, at least, gets him a warbling trill, and with a surge of wings the magpie takes off. The other four rise to join it, and in a moment Izuna is truly alone in the clearing.

He closes his hand into a fist, slow and careful, and breathes out. Somehow, though, he can still feel the weight of a fragile body perched on his fingers, feathers and flight and the rush of wings in the morning sunlight, dark against the sky.

When Tobirama told Itama to meet him at Hashirama’s old favorite spot along the river, he’d thought they would be safe there. After all, Hashirama avoided it because of bad memories, and Tobirama assumed Madara would do the same. He and Hashirama are all too similar, in the end. That’s always been the problem.

It is, therefore, an incredibly unpleasant surprise to step out of the trees and find Madara on the opposite bank. Tobirama had been too distracted by the thought of Itama to look, to check with a sensor’s sight, and he curses himself for it now, falling back as he reaches for his sword. He isn’t wearing armor, either, just civilian clothes, and it puts him at a distinct disadvantage against someone of Madara’s skill level.

He’d meant to wear it, he had, because stepping out of the compound without it feels like he may as well be naked, but.

But he’d been wearing it yesterday, and he couldn’t feel the warmth of Itama’s body through the cold metal. Couldn’t remember, except through the insufficient press of fingertips, whether Itama was warm to the touch or as cool as a corpse, and he hadn’t been able to even consider the possibility of not feeling it this time.

So no kunai, no armor, no faceplate; nothing but a handful of senbon and his sword to face down Uchiha Madara, whom only Hashirama outmatches.

And—

Itama.

Itama is coming here, and has already been killed by the Uchiha once. This time there’s no promise of a miracle, someone else to bring him all the way back to life, and Tobirama will slit his own throat before he lets one of his brothers get hurt again. Uchiha Madara will never lay a single blasted finger on Itama, even if Tobirama has to cut each finger off individually to be sure of it.

There is no space for second thoughts, though he wouldn’t have them even if there was. No chance to plan, but Tobirama has always been able to improvise when needed.

Besides. He’s the strongest Suiton user in Fire Country, and the Nakano lies between himself and
Madara.

He *drags* the chakra up, a massive burst that’s perfectly controlled, and doesn’t even need the instinctive hand signs. A dragon rises, the river falls, and Tobirama leaps across its now-shallow bed even as Madara’s dangerous eyes go wide. The Uchiha doesn’t waste time reeling, though; even as the dragon descends he’s bringing up his hands, framing familiar signs, and Tobirama focuses on those hands, the muscles in his arms, the shift of his feet for signs of his impending movements. His dragon opens its mouth as the fireball leaves Madara’s fingers, swallows it down and explodes into steam, and under the cover of it Tobirama hurls himself forward.

Madara catches a vicious kick aimed at his chest, ducks the sweep of Tobirama’s sword, leaps back out of range and tries for another Katon jutsu. This time Tobirama hardly bothers to shape the water at all, pulls a funnel of it up from the rocks and dumps it over Madara’s head as he darts around to the side, senbon falling between his fingers as he re-sheaths his blade. Turning to meet him, Madara wrenches his gunbai off his back and sends the fan end hurtling at Tobirama’s head, but Tobirama shifts his weight back sharply and slides beneath it, slamming feet-first into Madara’s ankles. The Uchiha yelps and almost goes down, and Tobirama hurls himself forward.

The spinning flail end of the gunbai knocks them from the air even as Madara catches the other side, and he slams bodily into Tobirama, barreling him over. Tobirama hits the ground hard, already moving even though he *knows* with a desperate edge that it won’t be in time—

But Madara doesn’t go for the killing blow. He draws back, lets Tobirama scramble to his feet and put a safe distance between them, watching with wary Sharingan eyes but not trying to press his advantage.

“What are you doing, Uchiha?” Tobirama spits, even as he draws his sword again and braces for another attack.

“I could ask you the same thing, Senju,” Madara returns, cautious but not aggressive. “You’re the one who made the first move.”

Tobirama almost snarls. So easy to see Hashirama in this fool—dangerous men with their heads trapped in the clouds, too blinded by dreams to see that they aren’t actually *accomplishing* anything. Too blinded to recognize that the path to peace is closed right now unless they sacrifice more than any peace could be worth.

“Why are you here?” he demands, instead of answering, and it *hurts* to think that he might have inadvertently put Itama in danger by telling him to come here, lends bite to the words and an edge of venom to his tone.

Madara's eyes narrow, and he shifts his grip on his gunbai just a little. “This bank is Uchiha territory,” he retorts. “I don’t need any reason to walk my own land, Senju.” A glance around the area, at the water streaming back into the body of the river, and he grimaces a little. “Don’t tell me that brother of yours is dead and you’re about to start crying.”

Logic says he means Hashirama, but all Tobirama can think of is Itama's face between his hands, wide red-brown eyes staring up at him, a smile that makes the whole world feel a little brighter.

All he can think of is the small body carried back from a courier mission, the stark fear frozen forever into still features. Just one more coffin to be built, but—

Tobirama had felt like the world ended that day, and he doesn’t think he’s ever fully managed to recover.
“No,” he gets out, and the words are too rough, too strangled, but he can’t fix them. He can never fix anything, except he’s somehow unknowingly managed to fix this and he doesn’t even understand how. “No, Hashirama is fine.”

It’s possible that relief eases the line of Madara’s shoulders, if only slightly. He takes a breath and nods, though his eyes flicker to a spot on the bank like he’s looking into a familiar memory.

Only then does the entirety of the words hit Tobirama, and he draws himself up with a huff. “I would not cry,” he tacks on, offended by the very idea.

This time the wry curl of Madara’s mouth is easy to see. “It’s not a weakness to cry for the loss of family,” he says, almost chiding, and this time when his eyes flicker back to Tobirama they hold. “Nothing is more important.”

Tobirama can’t quite make himself look away, even though Madara’s Sharingan is clearly activated, even though Tobirama has spent the last twenty-four years of his life learning to fear those eyes more than anything. But Madara makes no move to catch him in a genjutsu, no attempt to steal his will. Just looks at him, and—

Madara chose his family over the concept of peace, even as a child. It’s possible that Tobirama managed to forget that, across the years.

He opens his mouth, not quite sure how to respond but willing to make the attempt, when there’s a sudden flash of black in the sky. A scream, avian and furious, splits the air, and Tobirama knows instantly what it means. He leaps forward, even as a streak of violet-sheened black plummets straight at Madara’s head. White-splashed wings snap open hard, and clawed feet slash at Madara’s eyes without hesitation.

With a yelp, the Uchiha leaps back, but the magpie follows, striking out with its beak. Madara cries out again, definitely pain, and lashes out, but the bird—Itama, Itama, it has to be Itama—dodges and immediately launches itself at Madara’s face again. Blood flies, splattering the stone, and Madara curses even as he goes reeling back further. Chakra sparks, precursor to a jutsu, and Tobirama moves faster than he can ever remember moving in his life.

He snatches half a pound of furious feathers out of the air, ducks the burst of fire that consumes the spot where Itama just was, and leaps back, trying to keep the grip of his hands gentle even as Itama struggles and shrieks, wings beating desperately.

“No!” Tobirama tells him, even as he retreats to the very edge of the river. “No, stop that, we weren’t fighting—”

Itama stops struggling in favor of giving him the most incredulous look he’s ever seen from a bird, a sharp flick of his wings taking in the waterlogged bank, the scorched rocks, the scattered senbon. A chittering caw, as pointed as words, and Tobirama can practically hear the ‘Really, aniki?’

“We’re not fighting now,” he amends, and finally deems it safe to let go a little, shifting his grip on Itama to one hand and cradling the small body against his chest.

Itama chitters unhappily, but doesn’t try to get away, though he keeps one sharp eye trained on Madara with deadly intent.

Forcing himself to finally take a breath, Tobirama looks up to find Madara staring at him, blood dripping down his face from several deep gouges on his face. Two centimeters lower for some of them and Itama would have taken out his eye, Tobirama thinks, and doesn’t know whether to feel
proud or exasperated. Itama isn’t one to throw himself into fights, but when he does he’s very clever about it, and going for an Uchiha’s eyes first is a good strategy if there's little risk of getting caught in a genjutsu.

“The bird is yours?” Madara asks, and there’s a peculiar note in his voice as he studies Tobirama, eyes flickering from his face to his careful grip on Itama.

Tobirama opens his mouth to deny it, but before he can Itama gives a warbling trill and beats his wings. Claws dig in to Tobirama’s shirt, and in an instant Itama is on his shoulder, pressed right up under his ear and half-buried in silver hair.

There's blood on his beak, and Tobirama is a little proud.

“‘Yes,’” he says, because it’s a good enough excuse, and lays a hand over Itama to hold him in place as he steps back. He isn’t quite sure how to leave this encounter, except that he knows he has to; there's no way he’s letting Itama linger anywhere near an Uchiha who might do him harm, and Madara is at the very top of that list.

Madara makes a disgruntled sound, wiping the blood away from his eye. “I should have guessed,” he says, and it’s almost grumpy. Crossing his arms over his chest, he directs a dark look at Itama, who preens faintly. “I’ll have you know that even my falcons aren’t usually that vicious.”

Itama gives a smug trill and tugs on Tobirama’s hair.

Exasperated, Tobirama rolls his eyes at his little brother. “Falcons are predators,” he says dryly. “Magpies are survivors.” And if that thought makes the breath catch in his chest a little, makes him tighten his grip on Itama, well. No one but Itama has to know.

He turns before Madara can answer, leaps for the far bank and then up into the branches of the trees. Madara isn’t following, but Tobirama doesn’t risk it, taking a circuitous path towards the most secluded area beside the river that he knows.

The moment they come to a stop, Itama drops from his shoulder. There's a moment where Tobirama’s focus seems to blur, like he can't quite manage to look at the magpie straight on, and then Itama is in front of him, already reaching out.

“Did he hurt you?” Itama demands, and hands touch Tobirama’s face. “Are you okay?”

Tobirama’s chest aches, and he grabs his little brother, dragging him up against his chest. There's no armor in the way this time, nothing to keep him from wrapping his arms around Itama and feeling the warmth of him, the faint hitch of his breath, the way he twines his arms around Tobirama’s neck in return. It’s what he used to do as a child, after long days of training or tiring missions or encounters with their father. So painfully, perfectly familiar, and maybe a part of Tobirama spent all of last night convinced that this was a dream, but—

It can't be. His dreams are never this good.

“I'm fine,” he says, and nothing has ever been truer.

There's a huff like a laugh against his ear, and Itama pulls away enough to smile up at him. He’s beautiful, grown into the young man Tobirama had never, ever thought to see him as, and when Tobirama brushes white hair back from his face he laughs, wiggling like he’s going to try to get away. “Aniki, tickles!”

Tobirama’s heart feels like it’s too large to fit his body, and he can't help but smile back. “I brought
you a sword. Keep it with you.”

“But this is your favorite sword.” Because of course Itama would know that; it’s hard for Tobirama to think of him spending every moment of the last ten years at Tobirama’s side, unseen and unheard, and...maybe he’s been careful not to consider that fact too closely. Surely it’s a form of torture, living that way, and if Tobirama inflicted it, accidentally or not, on his own little brother—

“Yes,” he gets out, before the dark thoughts clog his throat. When Itama opens his mouth to protest, Tobirama lays a hand over it, returning the favor from yesterday. From the amusement in Itama’s eyes, he knows what Tobirama is doing, but he doesn’t protest, and Tobirama smiles faintly at him. “I’ve put off naming it for months now. I think there was a reason. It’s supposed to be yours.”

Itama gives him a tremulous smile, then throws himself forward to hug Tobirama tightly again, squeezing hard. “I love you,” he says, and his voice is thick with the tears he’s always shown so easily. Tobirama is glad one of them isn’t hesitant about revealing emotions, even if he’s always worried for Itama’s gentle heart. “I saw Madara facing you, and I was so scared—”

Likely not as scared as Tobirama was yesterday, swinging his sword at Izuna only to find Itama, determined but terrified, in the Uchiha’s place. The very thought of it makes something within him shake, and he buries his face in Itama’s hair and forces himself to breathe.

“I love you too,” he says, so very much an understatement that he wants to laugh. Itama was dead, and Tobirama thought the world dark and hopeless. Now Itama is alive, so bright and warm and beautiful, and maybe—

Maybe there is a way for things not to end in tragedy this time around.

For the first time in ten years, Tobirama has hope.
flew beyond space and time

There's a small civilian town some miles from both the Senju and the Uchiha’s clan lands, tucked back between the arms of a mountain and filled with worn, wary people. Itama only knows it vaguely, from staggering through a few times on the tail end of a particularly exhausting mission. Their father tried to keep shinobi away from civilians, because *someone* had to hire them if they wanted to have any income and their reputations were better when they were untouchable shadows, but sometimes there was no alternative.

There is an alternative now, of course. Itama is entirely capable of camping out in the woods until Hamura’s creature reveals itself, trying to influence one side over the other, but—

He’s spent *years* not being seen, having people walk through him. Half a lifetime as a ghost, and it’s not something Itama would ever have chosen for himself. Better than the alternative, maybe, but… unhappy, to say the least. The civilian village isn’t anything close to being home, in the Senju compound with his brothers around him, but it’s enough for now. Itama wraps himself in a hooded cloak, covers the sword Tobirama gave him, and blends in enough to at least eat in peace, surrounded by people whose eyes don’t go through him.

He’d never thought he would miss the casual bump of people’s elbows as they pass too close behind him, but he *did*.

Chasing the last few strips of carrot around the bottom of his bowl, Itama casts a glance at the street outside the stall, judging the clouds. Heavy and growing darker, and it looks like a spring storm is rolling in. Unpleasant, where sleeping in the woods is concerned, and Itama *could* and probably should, but he’s finally able to feel weather again, discomfort, and he’d honestly rather not.

Sighing a little, because he can just *hear* their father’s derision at his lack of toughness, Itama pushes his bowl away and stands up, bowing to the cook and then stepping back out into the street. There's a wind picking up, too, ruffling the feathers of the green-gold magpie as she drops from the top of the stand to settle on Itama's shoulder.

“Hi, Iku,” Itama murmurs, lifting a finger to stroke her breast. She trills in response, plucking at the hood of his cloak where it’s pulled down over his face, and Itama laughs. “Not up to your standards?” he asks, and she clucks reprovingly. “It’s fine, Iku. No one’s going to be looking under my hood.”

Iku makes a noise of abject skepticism, but stops trying to pull the cloth forward, and Itama ducks his head, hiding a smile. She reminds him a lot of Tobirama, really, though he’ll never say as much to either of them. The comparison is likely to get him pecked and swatted, so he swallows his giggle and picks a direction, wandering down the street just be in the middle of people living. He’s living too, and it’s still so *strange*, remembering that. When Tobirama had pulled him back, he’d never even thought to live again.

A pair of white-haired Hatake shinobi nod to him as they amble past, clearly marking him as a fellow nin but making no move against him, and Itama nods back. He’d forgotten that the other shinobi clans nearby have much easier relationships than the Senju and the Uchiha; despite the competition for jobs, there’s an unspoken understanding between most of the families that wiping each other out is far more trouble than it’s worth, and too great a risk as well. Only the Senju and the Uchiha really have the numbers for outright warfare with another clan, and as much as Itama loves his family, as much as he fears the Uchiha, it makes him…sad.
He thinks of Izuna yesterday, in those moments before Itama met Tobirama at the river. He was... gentle. Gentle to a bird, and—it’s a little confusing, because Itama can’t quite blame him for Tobirama’s death, not the way he does Madara, but he’s an Uchiha.

(For a moment all he can see is Uchiha soldiers around him, weapons bared, cornering him. Out of chakra, out of chances, with no way out and adult shinobi surrounding him, Itama had looked into their eyes and seen nothing but cold hatred. No mercy for a child, no hesitation. Only death, and the viciousness of a dozen blades piercing his body, and then—

Tobirama, all of thirteen and crying silently, bent over the corpse of an unfamiliar shinobi that was halfway transformed. Some rough mockery of Itama’s features, but empty and slack in death.

It was the first and last time Itama ever saw his brother weep.)

Itama’s hands are shaking, so he curls them into fists, hides them in his sleeves. Focuses on the Hatake as they disappear around the corner, and then looks for any other shinobi nearby. He’s not nearly the sensor Tobirama is, but he can feel a little bit, and that’s enough right now. The town is almost entirely civilians, with only a few bright spots of chakra here and there, and Itama lets himself relax a little. Breathes in, breathes out, watches the first few drops of rain strike the dusty street. People start hurrying for shelter, but Itama can actually feel the drops on his skin, the cool, wet breeze, and he can’t help but smile a little.

Iku croaks her displeasure, hunkering down on his shoulder, and doesn’t move. A little surprised, Itama glances at her, sees the way her bright eyes are following someone’s path, and turns, only to have his heart trip over itself, stumble and miss a beat. The only reason he doesn’t do the same is because he’s frozen stiff, can’t even force himself to move.

That man is one of the Uchiha who was there when Madara killed Tobirama. He’s the one who remarked how strange it was, for Senju Tobirama to be wandering through Uchiha lands without weapons. He bent down to touch Tobirama’s body, and—

“Hikaku!” a voice calls, and a young boy leaps down from one of the surrounding buildings, stumbles as he lands, and grabs the teenager’s elbow. He can’t be more than ten, and the surprise of seeing him drives Itama back a step, breaking his frozen shock.

Right. Children can be outside of the clan without worrying about being hunted down, now that Hashirama is Clan Head. Now that Madara is Clan Head, though that thought burns like poison in Itama’s chest. He forces his lungs to work, his feet to move, takes three long strides back towards the inn.

Iku’s warning croak pulls him up short. She grips his shoulder hard, flares her wings and calls out, loud and strident, and it rings through the emptying street. All around them, each one perched alone, other magpies take up the call until the air rings with their voices. It sends a shiver of unease down Itama’s spine, and he swallows hard, glancing up. A single magpie means sorrow, but even if they’re sitting alone, there isn’t just one. There are eight of them.

Five for laughing, six for crying, seven for sickness, eight for dying.

“Who?” Itama asks, and it’s traced through with desperation. People keep dying, and he hates it. Hates it so much, with all his heart and soul. With a warning, with a little bit of knowledge, maybe he can stop a tragedy before it even starts.

“—trying to leave me, Hikaku,” the Uchiha boy whines, still clinging to the other man. Itama looks at them, not quite sure why he does, his eyes drawn by some other force, and his breath tangles in his
lungs as a magpie circles their heads.

The Uchiha man, he thinks, and doesn’t know where the certainty comes from. The Uchiha is going to die, sacrifice himself for the boy. Soon, too. There’s a clock that’s ticking down and if Itama doesn’t step in there won’t be a single chance that it ends without a body on the ground.

A body like Tobirama’s, still and stolen from the world. But this time it will be the man who made his death into a joke, instead of Tobirama himself.

“I wasn’t going to leave you, Kagami,” Hikaku says, exasperated, and they’re past Itama now but he can read Hikaku’s body language, the fondness in the way he leans into Kagami just a little despite his pretended annoyance. “Stop falling behind. I swear, you get distracted by everything.”

Itama's breath shakes as it emerges. Stop daydreaming, Tobirama used to tell him, in almost exactly that tone. You're leaving openings for the enemy.

Itama hadn’t been daydreaming, when the Uchiha caught him, but it hadn’t saved him. Kagami paying attention isn’t going to save Hikaku, either.

His feet are moving before he even realizes he’s made a decision, long quick strides before he leaps for the rooftops, keeps to the far side of the peaked roofs and stays low even as he follows the pair. They're talking, argument light and familiar, and neither of them notice Itama. Neither of them are looking, safely beyond Senju lands in a village the Senju almost never visit, with only the Nara beyond and the Shiranui to the south.

Itama shouldn’t be doing this. They're Uchiha. Hikaku was there when Tobirama died, didn’t make any move to stop Madara. And maybe it’s not fair to blame him, but—Itama does, blames all of them. His brother was murdered.

He’s going to save Hikaku anyway. He’s going to save him because he can, because if he doesn’t he won't be able to live with himself. Because he remembers Tobirama dead, Tobirama trying so desperately to bring Itama back. Because Kagami is there, and if Hikaku dies for him that can never, ever be undone or forgotten.

Iku caws and takes to the air as Itama slides down a sloping beam, soars next to his shoulder as they reach the edge of the town. Itama bites his lip, judging his speed, the distance to the trees where the forest starts, how far ahead of him the Uchiha are. Almost too far to risk, and Itama has always been the cautious one, the careful one, wary of every step before he takes it. But—this will be fine. He can do it.

“I think those birds like the rain more than we do,” Kagami says, pointing, and in the moment Hikaku turns to look Itama pushes chakra into his feet and leaps. It’s a long jump, almost too far, and he can feel a shiver beneath his skin. Wings, he thinks, and for one breathless, boundless moment he’s not bird or boy or anything in between, but a thought of flight and a rush of feathers caught on a storm-wind.

The feeling of the branch beneath his sandals is actually a surprise.

“They probably know that it’s getting to be springtime,” Hikaku says, and Itama can only just hear him over the double-time beat of his heart as he catches himself on the tree trunk. No change in tone—they didn’t see Itama, then. “They're pretty, aren’t they?”

“Falcons are cooler,” Kagami says dismissively, louder as they pass beneath Itama's perch. “Do you think Madara-sama will teach me how to fly his falcons?”
“Probably not. He doesn’t even let Izuna fly them,” Hikaku answers, sounding amused, and Itama grits his teeth, pushing down the memory of the amusement in his tone after Tobirama was killed. Not fair, a little part of him whispers, but—

_I'm angry_, Itama thinks, and it’s so rare as to be startling. He’s never been good at getting angry. _The Uchiha killed my brother and I'm angry at them. I'm angry at Hashirama, too._

Another reason he hasn’t gone back to the Senju, hasn’t let anyone else know he’s alive; Hashirama is there, and right now Itama isn’t entirely certain that he wouldn’t stomp right up to him and punch him in the stomach for what he said to Tobirama. What he said that made Tobirama do _that_, thinking it was the only possible way to atone.

It was a mistake, it was Hashirama caught up in emotion and his own failure, but still. _Still_. When his words had consequences like that, anger is the only possible response.

That’s all been undone now. Tobirama isn’t dead, trying to win back Hashirama’s dream of peace with Madara. Izuna isn’t dead, pushing Madara over the edge of madness and grief. Itama isn’t dead, either, and that means he’s never going to let any of it happen again, no matter what. That doesn’t mean he’s _forgotten_, though.

An unfamiliarity with anger doesn’t mean he can't deal with it; Itama sets it aside, doesn’t let himself dwell on it and focuses on what's in front of him right now, stretching out his senses as he follows the Uchiha. They're taking a wandering route back towards their clan’s compound, and Kagami _has_ to be even younger than Itama thought, because he’s loud and cheerful and still acting like a child, which is—startling. Almost unnerving, really. Itama had known, distantly, that Hashirama started harshly punishing squads who hunted children, but he’d always slipped away when those discussions started, too unsettled by memories of his own death to listen in.

It’s so strange to see the effect of it, though, a whole generation of children who never had to learn just how vulnerable their age made them.

The relief that comes with that thought is breathtaking, and just for that, to preserve that little bit of ignorance, Itama knows he’d save every last Uchiha, even Madara himself.

Leaping lightly across a longer gap, Itama settles on a thick bough, touching his hand to his sword and closing his eyes. Tobirama just has to touch the ground to know the location of every person with an active chakra network in Fire Country, but Itama’s never been the genius his brothers are. He concentrates, lets his awareness slide out, slow and steady, and marks the rise and fall of the land, the ebb of natural chakra where the trees are particularly thick. Animals, here and there, but not a threat. A shadow without chakra, likely a civilian on the road. And—

There. Just ahead of them, near the curve of the Nakano as it loops around the mountain, is a tight knot of shinobi, settled in and waiting. Not Senju, and not Uchiha, Itama thinks, even if it’s hard to be sure just through chakra. _Definitely_ a threat, though, Itama is willing to bet everything on it.

_Iku_ flutters down to his wrist, cocks her head and looks up at him with one bright eye. Warbles, mimicking a songbird, and then takes flight again.

All along the path, as Kagami and Hikaku pass, more magpies take up the call. Itama has to muffle a laugh, pressing a hand over his mouth, because the Uchiha don’t notice, don’t even look up, but it’s the perfect mark of how far along the path they are.

“One more, your circles burns, ura.” Hikaku and Itama pass, more magpies take up the call. Itama has to muffle a laugh, pressing a hand over his mouth, because the Uchiha don’t notice, don’t even look up, but it’s the perfect mark of how far along the path they are.

“Thank you,” he murmurs as Iku sweeps past him, and she croaks, clearly pleased with herself. Smiling, Itama turns off the road, keeping to the trees as he hurries towards the foreign shinobi.
There won’t be much time to deal with them, but he has to try.

It’s incredible, how different the Uchiha are under Madara.

Hikaku smile a little at his cousin, bouncing along beside him like an excitable puppy. Sweet, and happy, and not yet a soldier even though he’s turning nine next month. When Hikaku was his age he’d already been fighting for three years.

Kagami is so much brighter, and there might not be peace between the Uchiha and the Senju, but sometimes Hikaku looks at the children in the compound and thinks that even if nothing else happens, this is enough.

“—won’t even teach me earth jutsus,” Kagami is complaining. “I don’t just want to know fire jutsus, I want to be able to crush stuff with rock, too!”

Hikaku rolls his eyes, raising his face to the branches above them to hide his smile. “Of course you do,” he says dryly, and when Kagami opens his mouth to protest adds, “You have to learn the Grand Fireball first. It’s—”

“Traditional,” Kagami finishes in a mocking voice that says he’s heard it from his mother too many times already. “But if I’m fighting someone they’re going to know that I know that, since I’m an Uchiha! I want to be able to smash them in the face with something cool!”

That is…actually a rather good point, if veering into Senju territory—they're the clan with a thousand skills, but most clans tend to focus on what they’re best at, and compensate for predictability with skill. Hikaku opens his mouth, wondering how many times he’s going to have to explain this before Kagami gives it up, and—

A cry, hoarse and strangled, echoes through the trees.

Instantly, Hikaku jerks back into the trees, dragging Kagami with it. His spear is in his hand before he can even remember reaching for it, and he shoves Kagami behind a tree as his Sharingan spins to life. Now that he’s concentrating, he can feel the chakra ahead of them, hear the crash of metal on metal, and he throws the supply scrolls to Kagami.

“Get those back to the compound,” he orders sharply, and for once Kagami doesn’t even try to argue. He snatches up the bundle of scrolls and bolts, moving fast towards the river.

Kagami is fast enough to evade pursuit, and there will be patrols near the border. He’ll be fine, Hikaku tells himself, and doesn’t look back as he takes the corner at a run. The sounds of fighting come clear, and he leaps an outcropping of rocks and drops down on the road right in the middle of the fight.

Not a shinobi clan he knows, is his first thought, twisting and bringing his spear up to catch a sword on the shaft. He kicks the woman away, ducks low and sweeps another man’s feet out from under him, and tries to find a commonality between the ten of them. Nothing immediately obvious, like they’re not a clan at all, and that makes them even more dangerous. No planning that can be done, no skills he can immediately try to counter, just act and react and try not to get taken out by surprise.

Hikaku isn’t fighting alone, though. A strange nin goes flying through the air, knocked back by a powerful burst of water, and the slim, cloaked shinobi at the center of the fight whirls to meet the
next opponent, katana flashing up to deflect a shuriken. Hikaku slides underneath a woman’s axe, hurls himself over her partner’s sword, and has just enough attention to spare to fling a handful of kunai at the man coming up at the cloaked shinobi’s back. The attacker goes down, and the shinobi leaps, flipping over his opponent’s head, landing on one hand and springing back to crash feet-first into another attacker. The sword flashes, blood flies, and the woman goes down as the cloaked shinobi brings his hands up.

Hikaku expects water again, but the earth shudders under his feet instead, and his breath catches in his chest.

Most shinobi don’t bother learning more than one element for jutsus, and if they do they don’t use all of them equally well. Hikaku has encountered shinobi from Earth Country who aren’t this deft with Doton jutsus, though, and he has to grab onto a tree as the ground surges, twists beneath his feet and parts, dropping four enemy shinobi into a gaping chasm and then sealing itself again. There’s no sign of the attackers resurfacing, and Hikaku winces even as he flings himself back into the fight, knocks a man to the ground and drives his spear through his throat.

Shinobi can think up a hell of a lot of nasty ways to die, he reflects with grim humor, ducking a flight of senbon. There’s a step behind him, heavy and purposeful, and he slams his spear back, catching the next man in the stomach with the butt of it. The man stumbles back, wheezing, and a moment later the blade of a sword sweeps across his throat, putting him down. In a blur, the cloaked stranger leaps his falling body, light-footed and nimble even for a shinobi, and Hikaku turns on instinct, ducking forward and leaving his back clear. It’s what he would do if he were fighting with Izuna or any of the other Uchiha, and the stranger takes the opening, a sandaled foot hitting his shoulder blade. The stranger leaps again, comes down feet-first on an attacker’s face, then spins back upright and shouts, “Behind you!”

Hikaku wrenches around, flipping his spear into both hands and bringing it up hard. A sword crashes into the shaft, skidding down it as Hikaku angles it to redirect momentum, but there’s a blade in the man’s other hand as well, already coming up—

A bird with white-splashed wings crashes into the man’s face claws-first, screaming viciously, and half an instant later a sword drives through his throat. The cloaked shinobi kicks him away, spins and levels a finger at the last of their attackers as he turns to run. “Iku!” he commands.

The bird screeches, and then the air is full of rushing wings. A whole flock of birds whirls into the air, surrounding the fleeing man with sharp beaks and tearing talons, shrieking almost gleefully, and the stranger leaps right into the midst of them, brining the hilt down hard on the man’s temple. He falls, and the stranger lets him, steps away as the birds veer off as a flock, until only the first is left. It comes in for a landing on the stranger’s shoulder, feet catching the heavy hood and dragging it sideways, and the shinobi laughs.

“Oh, Hikaku thinks, startled. He’s young, probably only a year older then Hikaku himself. Cute, with dark hair that Hikaku can see is splashed with white like his birds’ feathers, and wide brown eyes. A perfect disregard for the blood splashed across his cloak and still dripping from his sword says he’s a clan shinobi, and the step back he takes from Hikaku says wariness.

“Any wounds?” Hikaku asks, because it seems like someone should.

The stranger’s eyes flicker down, searching not himself but Hikaku for injuries, and when he doesn’t find any he eases, letting his sword dip a little. “I’m all right,” he says. “The boy? Is he okay?”

“I sent Kagami back to the compound,” Hikaku says automatically, half a heartbeat before his brain catches up with his mouth. Then he stiffens, because there’s no way the stranger should know that
Kagami was with him, not when they weren’t passed on the road and Hikaku didn’t sense anyone watching them in the town.

The stranger seems to realize his mistake, because he winces, taking another step back and raising one hand, palm up in an offering of peace. “I sensed them waiting,” he says in explanation, and a nod takes in the bodies all around them. “I took a shortcut through the woods when I saw you heading this way. Children shouldn’t—”

He breaks off, but something tight settles at the base of Hikaku’s throat. If he’d walked into this fight unaware, with Kagami next to him, one of them probably would have died. Two skilled shinobi against ten less skilled nin is close enough to a fair fight; one skilled shinobi, trying to protect a child who’s still learning almost everything, and outnumbered ten to one—

That’s a death sentence.

“Thank you,” he manages, and the horror of what might have happen lodges in his chest like a blade. He presses a hand to his face, trying to contain the urge to tremble, and breathes carefully. “Oh gods, I—”

Gentle fingers catch his wrist, and the other shinobi is suddenly in front of him, a faint, sad, sympathetic smile on his face. “It’s okay,” he says, and for a moment his eyes drift past Hikaku, not quite focused, before they slide back to hold Hikaku’s gaze. “He’s fine, and he just reached the river.”

Sensor. Right. That’s how he knew these shinobi were waiting in the first place. Hikaku breathes out, feels it shudder up from his lungs and curls his hand into a fist in the stranger’s grip. “Thank you,” he repeats, and means it more than he has anything in a very long time.

The sadness slides away from the stranger’s smile, and he lets go of Hikaku’s wrist. “Thank you for the help,” he returns. “Iku can only do so much without hands.”

Still perched on his shoulder, the bird chitters, sounding reproving. She tugs on a lock of dark hair, and the stranger giggles, tugging his hood back up. “I should go,” he says. “And you should get back to Uchiha lands. Senju patrols pass near here sometimes, and one is coming in about ten minutes.”

Fuck. The last thing Hikaku needs is to be caught alone and armed by a Senju patrol. He winces, but nods, sliding his spear through the holder on his back. “I appreciate the warning. Are you going to be all right? The Uchiha compound is close—I can put you up for the night, as a thank you—”

He cuts himself off, startled by the flash of fear that crosses the stranger’s face. The other man takes a quick step back, raising his free hand. “No, no, I'm—I'm staying in the town, and—I have to go. Sorry!”

The bird drops from his shoulder as he spins, takes a long step and leaps for the trees. In an instant he’s gone, vanished among the leaves, and the bird gives a coughing croak that sounds eerily like a laugh. It swoops past Hikaku, then wheels up to join the circling flock, and Hikaku turns to watch them all rise in a cloud. More, now, and he can't be sure but he thinks he can count eleven all together, calling to each other, dipping and swooping and then turning, heading back towards the civilian town.

Maybe they're summons, Hikaku reflects, grabbing the man that the stranger knocked out and heaving him up and over his shoulder. Turning towards the river, he picks up a run, deciding that the Senju can deal with the bodies. He needs to let Madara know that there were strange shinobi on their
lands—the cloaked stranger with the birds included, as grateful as Hikaku is for the save.

The other teenager likely isn’t a threat, given his actions, and Hikaku hopes Madara will see that. But if he’s as strong as he seemed, as well-trained and skilled as Hikaku thinks, then there’s every possibility the Senju might invite him to join their clan if they find him, and that’s not something the Uchiha can allow. Hikaku regrets it, but…

Clan is family. Maintaining the status quo protects the clan, and Hikaku isn’t about to do anything else.
“How many dead?” Tōka demands, and Tobirama lifts his gaze from his book at the sharpness in her tone. She’s in full armor—he can hear the creak of it as she walks, swift and steady, and the more rapid steps of the shinobi trying to keep up with her.

“Eight,” the man reports. “One was left alive—deliberately, I think, but we might have scared off the attackers before they could grab the survivor.”

“How many attackers?” Tōka asks, and her tone is shading towards suspicion. “Your patrol was only four strong, right?”

Takuma makes a sound of affirmation. “It looked like there were only two of them—one used a sword, and the other some kind of polearm. The location was perfect for an ambush, but I thought I should bring it to you anyway.”

“People fighting near our lands is always cause for concern,” Tōka says grimly, and her footsteps quicken. “Get Botan and her squad, tell her I want them with me for a long patrol. And increase the frequency of patrols along that part of the border. I don’t like this.”

Slowly, deliberately, Tobirama closes his book, then rubs his fingers against the bridge of his nose as he sighs. A sword. What are the odds that it was Itama, really?

Then again, what are the odds that it wasn’t? Itama always was too kind for his own good; if he saw someone in trouble, he would have jumped into the fight without hesitation.

There’s a seed of panic buried somewhere deep in Tobirama’s chest, but it’s easy enough to push down further, ignore. No bodies but the unfamiliar nin, and Itama’s looks are distinctive enough that even years later, an adult instead of the child most of their clan members would remember, Takuma would have marked him. So Itama isn’t dead, and he’s decent at healing, so he’s likely not injured anymore if he was at all. And—eight dead, one alive? That’s precisely how they were taught to fight if taken unaware. Dispatch the threat, leave a source of information in order to discover the source of the attack, and their father made sure to drill it into their heads again and again.

He pushes to his feet, sets his book aside. There will be time to come back for it later, and the day doesn’t promise rain, so it should be fine. His clan is entirely used to finding his books everywhere, too, so they won’t disturb it. Tobirama just—needs a walk. And if he happens to find Itama on that walk, all the better. Itama is quite certainly fine, but—it’s been so many years, and Tobirama simply wants to make sure.

He’s almost in sight of the side gate out of the compound that he favors when a voice calls his name, and Tobirama turns, raising a brow at Hashirama as he jogs closer. Hashirama looks tired, with lines around his eyes, and Tobirama can’t help but want to smile, to reach out and smooth those lines away. Their father always thought Hashirama would be a terrible Clan Head, weak and ineffective, but Tobirama knows the truth. Hashirama works hard, and he strains himself for even vague chances
of peace. Foolish, sometimes, but…

They haven’t lost a child under the age of thirteen to combat in three years. It’s such a small thing, but Tobirama has never been more grateful for anything.

“Are you going out, Tobirama?” Hashirama asks, reaching out, and Tobirama allows the light touch to his elbow even if he doesn’t reciprocate. It’s fine; Hashirama is a tactile person, and Tobirama is not. They’ve worked out the differences enough to meet in the middle.

“I thought I would take a walk, anija,” he says, and crushes the flicker of guilt that lights in his chest. Hashirama cried so much when Itama died, couldn’t be consoled, and if he knew that their little brother was back, was a man with the same heart and the same bright smile, he would be incandescent with joy. Tobirama wants to tell him, wants it fiercely because they’ve had far too little good in their lives, but Itama asked him to keep it a secret, so Tobirama will. He won't betray that trust.

There’s worry in Hashirama’s dark eyes as he hesitates, glancing out towards the forest, and his mouth pulls tight. “Are you armed?” he asks, glances back at Tobirama and lets the wry curve that tips his mouth make the words an invitation to laugh at him; they both know Tobirama is always armed. “There’s been word that the Uchiha are more active than usual. If you want Tōka to go with you—”

“Tōka is taking a patrol out,” Tobirama interrupts. “I will be fine, anija. I don’t plan to go far.”

For a moment he can see the flicker of indecision in Hashirama’s face, the caution that’s kept their clan alive warring with the instinctive urge to think of Madara as his friend and therefore less of a threat. At length, though, Hashirama nods and steps back. “Be careful,” he says with a smile.

“Of course.” Tobirama inclines his head to his brother, then turns and keeps walking, leaping lightly to the top of the gate and then down to the ground on the other side. He hardly picks a direction, simply starts walking, and—

Hashirama’s words put him in mind of his encounter with Madara the other day, the meeting on the riverbank. He’d thought, in that first moment, that he was going to die then and there; Madara is Hashirama’s equal, after all, and Tobirama knows his own strength precisely but he’s hardly his brother’s match. Madara hadn’t killed him, though, had hardly even bruised him.

What are you doing, Uchiha?

I could ask you the same thing, Senju. You’re the one who made the first move.

It’s less bewildering a reaction than it likely should be. In this, too, Madara is Hashirama’s equal, fools with their eyes set on the horizon and too many dreams clouding their heads. Like Hashirama working himself to the bone for a peace that’s out of reach, like Madara hardly bothering to do more than defend himself from his greatest enemy’s brother—they’re so alike, maddening. They don’t fit this world, and Tobirama wants to hate them both for it, for not seeing. The reality is inescapable, to Tobirama, but neither of them has ever seemed to so much as notice. They spar instead of fight, occupy each other every time their clans clash, and Tobirama wonders if they think no one else can see the desperate, despairing looks across battlefields, the way their blows never fall as hard as they should.

Weak, Butsuma would say.

Tobirama is not quite so convinced. Stupid, idiotic, but…
He takes a breath, shakes himself from his thoughts. Reaches out to rest a hand against the trunk of a tree, and closes his eyes as he lets his sight slip. It’s like echoes radiating outward, like lines of fire in his mind, and sensor’s sight has always been instinctive, easy. Hashirama one told him that their mother had worried for weeks because Tobirama always kept his eyes closed as a baby, never opened his eyes unless he had to, and they’d thought he might be going blind until one of the elders realized the cause.

Over the years, it’s grown even easier. Tobirama can feel everything if he stretches himself enough, right up to the very edges of Fire Country. Looking for Itama is far simpler than that, especially since he’s close. In the eastern part of the woods, Tobirama thinks, and smiles faintly. More sun, and Itama has always loved the morning light, rose early even as a small child. He would sit on the roof to watch the sunrise with a smile, and if Tobirama joined him he’d be bubbly and bright enough to rival the sun, naming off the birds that crossed the sky and making plans for the day.

Tobirama has missed him so much, like a piece torn out of his soul. Doesn’t know what he could possibly have done to have deserved this twist of fate, Itama brought back from a terrible death and given a second chance, but he’s thankful to every god and the world as a whole. There can never be any gift better than this one.

Even as he goes to step away, to let himself slip back into the dull flatness of regular sight, he hesitates. There’s another familiar chakra signal burning close by, just on this side of the Nakano. Madara, he thinks, and curls his fingers into the tree’s bark, indecisive. Madara is there, on Senju lands, but he’s alone, the only other Uchiha far distant. His chakra is calm, too, and he isn’t moving, isn’t training. Not a threat, Hashirama would likely say, but Tobirama isn’t an optimistic idiot like his older brother. Madara is always a threat.

For a long moment, Tobirama wavers. Itama is close, but Madara is closer, and what if he’s waiting for something in particular, what if he’s there for a reason? Tobirama is the second-strongest member of the Senju; it’s his duty to guard the clan at any cost, and he’s practically required to see to things that might harm the clan as a whole.

Closing his eyes, Tobirama curses himself, then changes direction. Itama doesn’t seem to be moving, so Tobirama will deal with Madara and then go find him. Leaving an Uchiha in such close proximity to his little brother puts his hackles up, regardless. Any threat to Itama at all is likely to be met with as much force as Tobirama can bring to bear, and he won’t regret it.

The only thing he could ever regret is harm to his little brother.

He keeps to the trees as he nears the river, suppresses his chakra until he’s practically a shadow moving through the forest, steps quick and silent. Madara is stronger than him, but he’s like Hashirama—his power means he doesn’t need to be as observant, and he’s not nearly as good at picking up on a stealthy approach as less powerful shinobi. The approach bears out this time as well; Tobirama gets all the way to the edge of the riverbank without being seen, and pauses there, staring out.

It’s not some preparation for an invasion. Madara isn’t even wearing armor, and he’s stretched out on his back on the bank, gunbai leaning against a tree several meters away with the chain looped around a branch. His eyes are closed, and his breathing is steady, and his long hair is twisted into a tail that tumbles over the stones. He looks—peaceful. At ease. Nothing at all like the leader of an enemy clan lounging barely twenty steps from a hostile border.

Madara is a fool, Tobirama tells himself. He’s just as much a fool as Hashirama. It’s the reason they forged a connection in the first place, after all. Tobirama shouldn’t have expected anything else.
“There are Senju skilled in archery,” he says, stepping out of the trees, and even as he doesn’t it he isn’t sure why. “Should one of them pass on the cliffs the Uchiha will be without a clan head.”

Madara doesn’t startle, just rolls up to sit with one leg folded under him. Startling, the sight of him with his hair tied up—it brings the lines of his face into focus, and Tobirama knows that the Uchiha as a whole are famed for their beauty, but he’d never thought to apply that to Madara before. It’s a little uncomfortable to do it now, as well, in the face of the man who is so undeniably his enemy.

“If an archer could take me out, I probably wouldn’t deserve to be clan head anyway,” Madara says dryly, and his eyes are dark, no hint of Sharingan visible as he looks Tobirama over. “Is your bird going to try and remove my eyes again?”

Tobirama can’t help but smile, just a little, at the memory of Itama going right for Madara's face. He can still see the scratches, red and raw, and it’s—satisfying, after the way Itama died.

“He’s otherwise occupied at the moment,” he says, and pauses. It irks his sensibilities to think as much, but Madara is…not a threat. At least in this instant. Not armored, barely armed, body relaxed, in a position that will make it difficult for him to react quickly enough if there’s an attack. Deliberate, Tobirama knows; Madara is a shinobi, of course defenselessness is deliberate. It’s startling, though. Unnerving, almost. Proof that Madara is the same brand of fool as Hashirama, ready to show his throat to someone if they so much as imply they’re not a threat.

Madara snorts, glancing up the bank behind Tobirama. There's something wistful in his face, sad and touched with old regret, and somehow Tobirama isn't surprised at all when he asks, “How is that idiot brother of yours?”

Tobirama’s first instinct is to bristle, defend Hashirama, but—well. Rare to find someone who agrees with his assessment of his brother, though Tobirama would also apply it to Madara in equal measure. He breathes out, reminding himself that for all they try to act like enemies Madara and Hashirama are far closer to the platonic version of star-crossed lovers. Tobirama would probably find it tragic if it weren’t so frustrating to deal with.

“My idiot brother is fine,” he says, rolling his eyes. “If you're going to try to pry information out of me, Madara—”

Madara makes a noise like a discontented cat. “If I were going to try such a thing, I certainly wouldn’t try it on you,” he returns. Pauses, gaze shifting away again like he’s looking to the place of a memory, and then rubs a hand over his eyes. “No,” he says, and it’s a little weary, a little resigned. “I just…wanted to know.”

They’re both hopeless, Tobirama thinks. Both idiots. No reasonable people should have to put up with the two of them. “He truly is fine,” he says, debates his next words for a long moment, and then sighs through his nose. “It’s been arranged for him to marry Uzumaki Mito, but I don’t believe either party is overly happy about it.”

Madara's face twists, and he looks away. “The Uzumaki are a strong clan,” he says. “It’s a powerful alliance.”

It might be, but Tobirama has met Mito, has seen the way her eyes stray more towards Tōka than Hashirama, and for Hashirama himself…well. He’s always been most drawn to those who need his help, Tobirama knows. Mito is the strongest shinobi among the Uzumaki, daughter of the Clan Head, and needs no one’s assistance in anything. Wants it even less, honestly, and while she would certainly do her duty, live out the rest of her days as nothing more than Hashirama’s wife, Tobirama thinks it would rather be like giving a tigress a golden collar and putting her in a cage.
“Our mother was an Uzumaki,” he says, not entirely sure what drives him to it. “The alliance would stand without the marriage, but at this point it is a tradition.”

With a grimace, Madara lifts his gaze to the cloudy sky above them. “Some traditions should be changed,” he says grimly, and—

Tobirama thinks of all the children who have gone out on missions and then come back, and he swallows. Too late to save Itama, to save Kawarama, but still. Still.

“I think,” he says slowly, “that you're already changing the most important ones.”

Madara’s sharp glance says he knows very well what Tobirama is referring to, but that he didn’t expect such words from him. All he does is nod, though, and rise to his feet, carefully nonthreatening.

“There's still a lot to change,” he says, but there’s a smile touching his mouth, and a distance to his gaze that says he’s looking forward, into some distant future he and Hashirama share.

Tobirama wonders what it’s like, to see such things. To live in a world where even now such things have the taste of possibility. He isn’t truly sure he wants to know. It’s too large a thing, too overwhelming, too unknown. There isn’t a contract or treaty in existence that can encompass all the things Madara and Hashirama want to see brought into existence.

He doesn’t ask, doesn’t call Madara back as the Uchiha turns, heading up the bank and back towards his part of the forest. But—

He doesn’t flinch when Madara picks up his gunbai. Instinct says to tense, to fight, but the urge is secondary right now, relegated to the back of his mind as he watches Madara walk away. A threat, always, but…not an immediate one.

There's far too much to think on, and Tobirama can't even begin to focus. He eyes the water of the Nakano, fast-flowing and deep in this part, and settles down on the bank to strip off his sandals. A swim always leaves him feeling more clearheaded, and he needs that desperately right now.

Madara is a headache and a half, even when they're not actively fighting. Tobirama probably shouldn’t be surprised, given his similarities to Hashirama, but it’s aggravating.

The interrogation room they take the second to last of the unknown fighters to has a window, and Itama takes full advantage of that, perching on the sill as a magpie and listening as the man spills everything he knows without a hint of hesitation. Not prepared for torture at the hands of the Senju, Itama thinks, and a part of him that always sounds like his father wants to be derisive. He crushes the urge, though, shoves it down. Easier, given that the man doesn’t seem to know much of anything.

They were hired, he says. Unrelated shinobi, not part of any clan, instructed to wait along the road and kill any shinobi who came along. Specifically Senju and Uchiha shinobi, and something in Itama churns worriedly when he hears that. Hamura warned him, didn’t he?

_I want you to kill someone for me, little magpie. As a piece of my mother’s will given form, he knows me far too well, and would see me coming in an instant. But if you change things for the better, he’ll step in to drag them back to chaos._
Tobirama didn’t kill Izuna, once Itama stepped in. There was no crushing loss to drive the Senju and the Uchiha further apart, but this seems like an attempt to recreate that tension, a push towards all-out war when Hashirama and Madara have been scaling back the fighting. The only description the man gives is a person in a hooded cloak with a deep voice, but there’s an itch of certainty at the back of Itama’s mind that is so very sure it’s the creature Hamura sent him back to kill.

He leaves the Senju interrogators to clean up the room and flutters up to the compound’s boundary wall, casting an eye over the interior. There are people out and laughing, children running in the streets, men and women out of armor. Itama has seen the slow shift from outright terror and grim purpose up close over the years, but there's a difference looking at it like this, high up, no longer tethered to Tobirama’s side. It makes all the differences from what he remembers as a childhood far starker and obvious.

Not a bad thing at all, Itama thinks, and he’d give just about anything to keep it that way.

The captured mercenary only mentioned the town as his meeting place with his employer, so that’s Itama’s next stop. He takes human form on the outskirts, hidden among the trees, and then slides into the crowds, tugging his hood down over his hair. Tobirama’s sword—his sword now, Itama reminds himself—is at his side, ready to draw, and there’s a sharp tension snaking down his spine. Too many eyes, Itama thinks worriedly, too much attention even when he’s trying to pass unnoticed, and he’s just not good enough. Tobirama can pass undetected anywhere, regardless of whether he’s wearing a henge or not, but Itama is always too self-conscious, too aware of every movement. It takes effort to remember to breathe, let alone how to play at being a civilian.

He does manage to keep one eye on the magpies around him, at least. Not the same ones from yesterday except for Iku, but there are eleven of them, clustered on rooftops and in trees. It feels like care, like they’re watching over him, and Itama swallows, tries to calm the racing of his pulse with that thought.

Eleven’s a secret, the magpie rhyme says, and Itama wonders if it’s his secret they’re referring to or the creature’s. Both, maybe, or possibly a secret Itama doesn’t know yet—either way, Itama needs to keep his eyes open, not get blinded by nerves the way he does so often.

A flicker of familiar chakra around the corner doesn’t help at all, though—Itama only needs to feel the edge of it to recognize the two Uchiha, and he ducks back into the shadows of an awning, heart in his throat as he tucks himself back against the wall.

“Those are the same birds!” Hikaku is insisting. “I'm sure of it.”

At his side, Izuna makes a face. “They’re magpies,” he says dryly. “One of the most common birds. Which you’d know if you ever paid attention to the wildlife.”

“I do,” Hikaku protests. “I pay enough attention to know exactly which wildlife wants to eat me, and that’s enough.”

Izuna very visibly rolls his eyes. “You're sure the shinobi had black and white hair?” he asks, and sweeps a glance over the street.

Hikaku tips one shoulder in a shrug, but he’s looking at each person as they pass, and Itama is desperately grateful he had enough warning to hide. “I didn’t see all of it, but it looked like he did. He’s the one you said Tobirama took?”

“I think so.” With a sigh, Izuna comes to a halt, then says, “We’re never going to find anything just wandering around. Let's split up, divide the two. Will you take the north side?”
“I'll call you if I find him,” Hikaku promises, then turns and trots away, slipping easily through the crowd.

As soon as Hikaku is gone, Izuna groans, rubbing his hands over his face. “What are you even doing,” he mutters to himself.

It’s—well. It’s like the man in the clearing the other day, laughing at himself, joking to a magpie. Itama hesitates, but Izuna is…silly, maybe. Gentle with a bird when he didn’t have to be, careful with his words, relieved to see Itama safe. He had offered his help, purely out of gratitude that Itama saved him, and treated Itama in his magpie shape kindly.

He’s also alone now, and vulnerable. Itama has seen Madara's adoration of his little brother, and what it’s driven him to. The easiest way for Hamura’s creature to break the fragile stalemate the clans are in right now would be to kill him. Izuna doesn’t even know there's a threat, and he might be a match for Tobirama in open battle, but anyone can be taken unawares.

This is for peace. This is to save Tobirama. Itama closes his eyes, swallows down the terror that sits razor-edged in his throat, and slips out of the shadows.

“You shouldn’t be out here alone,” he says.

Izuna jerks around, dropping his hands, and his eyes automatically spin into red and black as the Sharingan comes to life. Itama flinches, ducking down, and the feeling of wings inside of him surges as if they're about to break free from his skin.

But then there's a breath, loud and sharp and full of relief, and Izuna steps back, gives Itama room. “You're here,” he says, and there's something like wonder in his face. “Hikaku was right, it was you!”

“I'm here because you could be in danger,” Itama says, with an edge of exasperation.

Izuna blinks, then frowns. “Danger?” he asks. “Now that I know Tobirama can move like that, it’s just a matter of countering—”

“It’s not from Tobirama,” Itama says hotly. “He won’t attack you outside of a fight unless you make the first move. There's someone else. He’s the one who hired the shinobi yesterday.”

“That’s why we’re here,” Izuna tells him. “We’re looking for him. But—”

“You should go back to the Uchiha compound and let other people do the looking,” Itama interrupts with all the determination he can muster. “The Senju found a survivor, too, and they’ll be here soon. There are more patrols, too.”

For a moment Izuna just stares at him. Then, slowly, he says, “You know a lot about what the Senju are doing. Are you one of their allies?”

Itama swallows, meets suspicious dark eyes with the feeling of wings in his chest. “Yes,” he says honestly. “But I'm an ally of the Uchiha, too. I just don’t want anyone else to die.”

Derision flickers over Izuna’s face, edged with pain. “We’re shinobi, we’re always going to die. You can't trust the Senju—”

“I saved your life!” Itama bursts out, because he can't physically contain the words a second longer, because his heart is beating hummingbird-quick and he can't. Tobirama was dead, Tobirama was murdered, and the Uchiha stood over Itama with swords and kunai and never hesitated, even when
he cried. “I saved your life, and I’m a Senju. I saved your life even after your brother killed my brother! I hate the Uchiha! I hate all of you, you’re awful, you killed me too, but I still don’t want you to die!”

Perfect silence. Izuna stares at him, eyes wide and expression astonished, and Itama belatedly realizes what he said. There's panic rising, a surge of horror, and he spins on his heel and leaps for the rooftop above, bounding across it and then dropping off the far side, ducking into an ally. A moment later he’s leaping up again, but this time there’s a flicker of chakra, a twist, and it’s like the feathers inside him just—come out. In an instant he’s fluttering upward, and the other magpies sweep around him, cawing and jeering and mocking the people below. Iku circles Itama, and there's mirth in his sense of her, bright and sharp.

Away, Itama thinks, and it’s like they can hear him, because the flock turns, weaving its way out of the town and into the forest beyond. Ten magpies, ten magpies and Itama, but there's too much feeling clawing at the insides of Itama's head for him to think of what the number means.

He doesn’t want to know, doesn’t want to stay. Being a ghost was so much easier, right up until the end. Being a human is hard and messy and he’s scared, he’s scared and angry and he doesn’t know what to feel right now.

Izuna laughed at himself, and held Itama's bird-shape in his hands. He smiled, and he was relieved, and Uchiha stood over Tobirama’s corpse and made jokes, circled Itama and drove their swords into his body and killed him.

He hits the ground as a human, on his knees, and digs his fingers into the earth, his breath shaking out of his lungs. “Stupid,” he tells himself, but the word cracks in his mouth. “Weak,” and it sounds like his father. His eyes burn, but he can’t let himself cry. There's still Hamura’s creature to find, and—

Iku flutters down to his shoulder, presses herself up against his ear and drags her beak through his hair, chirping at him. Itama laughs despite himself, because that’s her chick-noise, and she’s sweet even when she’s insistent.

“All right,” he whispers, and staggers back to his feet, rubbing at his eyes. “You’re right, Iku, sorry. We should go, I know that.”

Iku warbles, rubbing her beak against his cheekbone, and then takes off again, circling his head before swooping off in the direction of the road. Taking a breath, Itama follows, determinedly swallowing down the traces of anger and fear that are trying to push their way up. He can focus on a mission, regardless of anything else—their father made sure of that, and it’s not the sort of lesson Itama can forget.

Carefully, lightly, he lands on the branch of a tree that leans over the road, perching next to Iku as she cocks her head, one bright eye peering down the path. Itama reaches out, stroking two fingers along her back as he looks as well, and—

One man approaching, a shinobi by his sandals and the way he carries himself. Long dark hair is loose around his shoulders, and he’s tall and broad-shouldered and dark-skinned, with a mask pulled up over the lower half of his face. Not familiar at all, and Itama frowns, tips his head as he watches him approach. He’s muttering to himself, looking displeased, and just about the last thing Itama wants right now is to talk to anyone else at all, but he takes a breath, steels himself, and leans forward.

“Are you looking for something?” he asks.
The man startles, twitches back. His head jerks up, and Itama blinks at the sight of his eyes, red sclera and green iris with no visible pupil. Interesting, and definitely not something Itama has seen in any shinobi living nearby.

“Who are you?” the stranger demands.

Itama debates for a moment, but—he thinks of the bandits, hired from unknown places, strangers to this part of Fire Country. Too suspicious of him, maybe, but he just wants to be sure.

“I'm Itama,” he answers. “I live in the woods here. Who are you?”

The set of the man’s shoulders eases slightly. “Kakuzu, from Waterfall Country,” he answers flatly. “This the road into Tanzaku-Gai?”

That’s a good distance from here, Itama thinks, swallowing. Why would a shinobi from so far away be looking for Tanzaku-Gai? On a mission, maybe. He could be here for Izuna, or maybe Tobirama. Itama needs to find out somehow.

He tips forward off the branch, flipping in midair to land lightly on the road in front of Kakuzu. “It is, but there's a shortcut!” he offers, makes it bright and cheerful and maybe a little silly. “Do you want me to show you?”

Kakuzu hesitates, eying Itama warily for a long moment, but he finally nods. “Why not,” he says dryly. “Try anything and I’ll rip your throat out, kid. I'm not an easy target if this is a mugging.”

“It’s not!” Itama protests, offended, and raises a hand. Iku drops off the branch to land on his wrist, and he carefully settles her on his shoulder. “It’s going to rain again soon, though. The shortcut should get you to town before it starts.” And, if he’s with Kakuzu, he can make note of where the man is staying, and be close at hand if he really was hired to kill Izuna. Risky, but less so than diving in front of Tobirama’s sword on the battlefield.

Kakuzu stares at him narrowly for another moment, gaze flickering to Iku and then back, and sighs. “Fine,” he says. “Lead the way.”

Itama gives him his most innocent smile, turning towards the trees. “Over here,” he says, and feels the first splatter of rain hit his hand. “It’s not too far, don’t worry.”

“Fuck,” Kakuzu mutters, dragging the hood of his cloak up over his shoulders. “If you want to mug me, at least get us somewhere dry first, all right?”

Itama laughs, startled by the words. “All right,” he agrees, and plunges into the undergrowth, going just slow enough for Kakuzu to keep up.
“Izuna? Izuna, what are you doing out here? You're getting soaked.”

Hikaku's voice is sharp against the distant murmur of the town, the dull drumming of the rain on the rooftops. Izuna doesn’t quite startle, but he raises his head slowly, blinks carefully back into focus to find Hikaku standing right in front of him, hood pulled up, frown on his face.

“Izuna?” he asks again, and there's clear worry in his voice. “Are you all right?”

Izuna realizes belatedly that he’s wet, his robes soaked, his hair plastered to his skin. Blinking, he glances up to see the downpour has started in earnest, and lets out a ragged breath, rubbing his hands over his face. “The Senju will probably be here soon,” he says, because that’s one part of the message that’s important right now, even if it’s not the part he’s focused on. “We should leave.”

“The Senju?” Hikaku repeats in alarm, and steps forward like he’s going to grab Izuna and check him for wounds.

I'm a Senju! Izuna hears, like an echo, and his next breath rasps in his throat. The fact that he hadn’t even begun to suspect that makes learning it all the more jarring. A Senju saved him, a Senju pulled him out of the way of Tobirama’s strike. A Senju saved Hikaku and Kagami on the road, and—

He came to warn Izuna of another danger, beyond the Senju patrols. The man who hired the shinobi yesterday, a stranger the survivor of the ambush couldn’t quite describe. Izuna kneads his forehead, trying to pull scattered thoughts together, and lets out a slow breath.

“Was there anything?” he asks.

Hikaku is still watching him, wary and a little tense. “About the man? Not much. A few people saw groups of unfamiliar shinobi moving through the town over the last few days, but they disappeared into the forest.”

Like Izuna's rescuer, disappearing into the trees after he shook Izuna to the bone. The brother of a man Madara killed, who saved Izuna nevertheless. Could have let him die, because he would have, under Tobirama’s sword, but instead of continuing the cycle, he stopped it.

Izuna has never been one to put any faith in an enemy’s gestures. The Senju are just as likely to stab them in the back as anyone else, even if Hashirama is pretending to make an effort in stopping child hunting squads. Madara's foolish enough to believe it, and it’s going to get him killed if Izuna doesn’t stay close. He’s always known that.

But this—this is something different, something strange. Two steps beyond Izuna's frame of reference, a Senju with no reason to save Hikaku and Kagami’s lives, let alone Izuna's. But he did. He saved them, and he warned Izuna of approaching Senju, and Izuna was suspicious of his knowledge but he never expected that.

I hate the Uchiha! I hate all of you, you're awful, you killed me too, but I still don't want you to die!

Izuna feels cold. It’s mostly just the rain, but—part of it is the thought of the stranger on his knees, an Uchiha shinobi standing over him. You killed me too, and clearly he survived, but Izuna knows what rests at the heart of his words. A destroyed world, a dead brother, a family broken at Madara's hand, and it makes sense. The Uchiha and the Senju have been competitors for generations, enemies for decades. At one point or another, they’ve faced nearly the entire Senju clan, and not everyone has
walked away from those fights.

Izuna's savior makes it sound like he didn’t, either. Not intact, at least.

Shaking himself, Izuna tries to focus. They can't search the forest, because that's dangerously close
to Senju territory, and Hashirama is a threat only Madara can handle. Maybe one or two Uchiha can
slip into the trees, try to find some trace of a clue, but it’s a risk Izuna doesn’t want to take unless
things are certain. For now, the best thing to do is retreat and leave the Senju to their patrols, make
sure the Uchiha on the whole are alert to this new threat from an uncertain direction.

“I need to talk to Madara,” he says, and turns, stepping back into the main street and picking up a
quick pace. There's a sound of surprise from behind him, and a moment later Hikaku falls into step,
almost jogging to keep up.

“Izuna?” he asks again, and it’s caught firmly between suspicion and worry.

Izuna shakes his head, looking up. “The shinobi who saved you was a Senju,” he says, and the
words taste sour on his tongue. “I don’t—I don’t know what he’s planning, but—”

A hand catches his elbow, pulls him around without hesitation. “What?” Hikaku protests. “Planning?
Izuna, I don’t think he’s planning anything. He saved my life, and yours, and he didn’t even stick
around long enough for us to get a name. And he told you he’s a Senju, right? If he’s got a plan, it’s
the most convoluted one I've ever seen.”

Izuna is trying not to think about that. Threat, he tells himself. He’s a Senju, he’s a threat, and that’s
all there can ever be to it. “That doesn’t mean it's not some kind of scheme,” he says sharply, and
doesn’t thing about the stranger perched on a branch in the sunlight, laughing with his magpies. “The
Senju are probably going to try something soon.”

“Izuna.” Hikaku gives him a look of pure exasperation, threaded through with something almost like
disappointment. “He saved your life. From a Senju. You know that I’m on your side here, that peace
is never going to be as easy as Madara thinks it is, but doesn’t that earn him something?”

Yes, Izuna wants to say, but the flare of relief and joy he felt when he realized just who it was he had
met in the street has turned to something like anger in his gut. Senju, he thinks, and it’s like Madara
meeting Hashirama on the riverbank all those years ago. There's a plot, even if Izuna can't see it right
now.

“No,” he says instead. “The Senju are our enemies, and they can't be trusted.”

There's a long, long moment of silence as Hikaku stares up at him, and Izuna gazes back, trying to
keep his gaze set and cold. Then, with a breath, Hikaku steps back half a pace, and his mouth pulls
into a frown as he looks away. “The fact that you think it’s that simple worries me, Izuna,” he says
quietly.

The words twist in Izuna's chest, make him set his jaw. It feels like Madara looking at him, right after
he led their father to the river and Hashirama. Like something tired, a little sad. Izuna's never liked it
much, that memory.

“There's a long, long moment of silence as Hikaku stares up at him, and Izuna gazes back, trying to
keep his gaze set and cold. Then, with a breath, Hikaku steps back half a pace, and his mouth pulls
into a frown as he looks away. “The fact that you think it’s that simple worries me, Izuna,” he says
quietly.

The words twist in Izuna's chest, make him set his jaw. It feels like Madara looking at him, right after
he led their father to the river and Hashirama. Like something tired, a little sad. Izuna's never liked it
much, that memory.

“The Senju out there planning something worries me!” he snaps. “You were ambushed by nin hired
to go after lone shinobi, or small groups. We can't find who set it up, but the easiest option is—”

“The Senju?” Hikaku demands, incredulous. “Can you even hear yourself, Izuna? It was on their
land, and if they had planned it, why wouldn’t they have just used Senju shinobi instead of hiring ten
foreign nin? Why would one of their clan have saved me and Kagami?”
Izuna doesn’t want to dwell on the strange shinobi, the way his hands shook as he stepped back, retreated from Izuna in the cloud-dim street. “He’s just like all the rest,” he says. “He hates the Uchiha.”

For a long, long moment, Hikaku stares at him. “But not as much as you hate the Senju,” he says, precise, because Hikaku has always been good at getting to the heart of things, especially when Izuna doesn’t want him to. He half-turns, steps back, and says, “You should go back to the compound, Izuna. Madara should be back from training by now, since you need to talk to him.”

There’s a sinking, sour suspicion in Izuna’s stomach that his talk with Madara isn’t going to go any better than his talk with Hikaku has. “You can't stay here. There are Senju patrols coming.”

Hikaku rolls his eyes, pulling his hood down over his face a little further. “So this stranger is reliable when he’s warning you about patrols, but not at any other times?” he asks pointedly, and before Izuna can do more than open his mouth in offense he’s already moving. “I’ll meet you back at home, Izuna. Go quickly.”

“You're supposed to be my guard!” Izuna calls after him, but Hikaku vanishes into a narrow alley and doesn’t reemerge. With a groan, Izuna rubs at his temple, trying not to focus on the brewing headache there. Hikaku is levelheaded, sensible; this isn't anything close to the reaction Izuna would have expected from him, and it irks him.

Still, he’s right about the fact that Madara should be home by the time Izuna gets there, and then Izuna can make his case for a preemptive attack against the Senju, or at the very least doubling security. The strange Senju saving him was just—just an attempt to get the Uchiha in his debt, that’s all. It’s like—like if Hashirama had offered to heal him, had Tobirama’s blow fallen. Put Madara in the Senju’s debt and they can ruin the Uchiha, take advantage of them, destroy them.

Izuna won't allow it, no matter what.

Leaving Izuna on his own is something Hikaku will probably get reprimanded for, but it’s barely a mile to the border of Uchiha Clan lands, and Hikaku has faith he can make it that far without insulting someone to the point they try to take his head off. Though maybe that’s overly optimistic; Izuna seems to be in fine form today, fully set in his ways like a boulder in the middle of a path, and just about as inconvenient in the long run.

Izuna doesn’t trust the Senju, and Hikaku doesn’t either. But there’s a difference between not wanting to put his clan’s safety in the hands of their enemies and recognizing a helpful overture when it’s made. Clan first, always, and if the stranger who saved him and Izuna both is willing to continue the trend—and, with his warnings, it seems like he is—Hikaku wants to give him the benefit of the doubt.

He’d worried, when they met, about the Senju snatching him up, taking him into their clan. The man is already a Senju, though, and he’s helping the Uchiha anyway. Significant help, at risk to himself both times, and that’s enough for Hikaku to question Izuna's assertion that he hates the Uchiha. Enough to hope, and Hikaku isn't Madara with his easy dreams of peace, which come so readily. Hikaku's peace is the peace of having spent all of his life on the frontlines, and wanting a rest. Wanting the fighting to stop, even for a little while, while still protecting everything he’s been fighting for all this time.
Hikaku doesn’t know what kind of peace Izuna wants, not really, but he’s always suspected that it focuses more on the complete destruction of the enemy, the elimination of a threat, and with an enemy as powerful as the Senju, they’ll never manage that much.

Tugging his hood down just a little further, he slips between two houses, rounds a tea shop, and pauses there, sweeping a look up and down the street. The stranger said he was staying in town, when he rejected Hikaku's offer of shelter—understandable, now, in light of his identity—but he’s also a shinobi. It didn’t seem like a lie, but there’s also no saying the stranger has simply checked himself into a room at the inn and settled down. More likely he’s found a place to hide, like an empty house or an overlooked shed. If Hikaku wants to find him, he’s going to have to get creative.

Of course, he could simply take Izuna’s word for things. That’s the easiest path forward. But Izuna has ingrained notions that can color his views, shape mindsets that Hikaku doesn’t necessarily agree with. Better to learn what the stranger is doing directly from him, and come to his own conclusions from there.

He’ll have to work quickly, or at least stay well out of sight. For all the power of the Sharingan, the Senju Clan is rife with sensors, not the least of whom is the stranger. The odds of there being one on the patrol is higher than normal, and Hikaku would rather not get spotted the instant one glances around the town.

Still. However brief their fight together, Hikaku managed to pick up a few clues. The birds, particularly—magpies, according to Izuna. He’s seen a few around the town, even in the rain, and he starts forward, searching the rooftops for any flashes of white and black. There's one sleeping with its head under its wing beside the inn’s lantern, then two more farther on, chittering to each other like they're sharing secrets. It feels like they're watching Hikaku as he passes, but when Hikaku gives them another look they seem entirely focused on each other. Hikaku isn't quite sure if they're summons or something else, but he’s fairly sure that they're not simple pets, at the very least. If he can follow them—

A shadow moves in his peripheral, and Hikaku startles, spins. He’s half a second too late and he knows it, lets his Sharingan spin to life and—

The long, curved blade of a naginata touches his throat, and a woman says, “Put the eyes away, Uchiha, or my archer will do it for you.”

Something cold and darkly terrified slithers down Hikaku's spine, and he takes a breath. Carefully, slowly, he raises his hands, palms up to show they're empty and not about to form a seal, and lets the clarity of the Sharingan slip back into normal vision. He can't see any hint of an archer in front of him, but he isn't about to question it. Not when there's a weapon at his throat.

“What do you want?” he demands, and carefully turns, slow enough that it can't be a threat. It makes his spine itch, like he's expecting an arrow in it, but he keeps his gaze on the woman in front of him and doesn’t let himself twitch. She’s definitely a Senju; he’s seen her on the battlefield before, and that naginata is unnervingly familiar. Good with genjutsus, Hikaku thinks. He’s even seen her catch an Uchiha in them a time or two.

To his surprise, though, there’s no immediate order to surrender, no blade swinging for his throat. The woman huffs in disgust, darkly-painted mouth tipping down in a frown, and takes a step back. She even lowers her naginata, though she doesn’t relax entirely.

“Not him,” she calls, just loud enough to carry, and tips her head at Hikaku. “Have you seen another shinobi in this place? A man in a cloak?”
Hikaku blinks at her, entirely caught off guard. “I—what?” he protests. “How do you know it’s not me? That’s the worst description I’ve ever heard!”

Brown eyes widen, then crinkle around the corners, and her mouth tips up. It’s not quite a smile, but it’s definitely humor, and Hikaku doesn’t appreciate it at all. “No offense, Uchiha,” she says, “but our description included a deep voice, and no one in their right mind would say that about you.”

Hikaku's mouth drops open, and he only just restrains a splutter. “I'm twenty,” he protests. “My voice is plenty deep!”

The woman actually laughs, a warm, husky sound. She pulls back entirely, planting the butt of her naginata on the ground, and leans on the weapon as she laughs. At Hikaku, and he scowls at her, folding his arms over his chest.

“Sorry to break it to you,” she snickers, “but you're not going to be singing baritone without a lot of work. It’s for the better, though. This way I don’t have to kill you for setting up an ambush on Senju lands.”

Oh, Hikaku thinks, startled, and looks at her, in full armor and heavily armed, and then behind him, to where he can just pick out a handful of other armored Senju waiting out of range.

“You're looking for the man who hired them?” he asks. “Those foreign nin?”

She hums, quietly thoughtful, and returns the look, studying him carefully. “The Uchiha got wind of that, too?” she asks, instead of answering.

Hikaku grimaces. “I was the one caught in the ambush,” he says.

The woman’s eyes flicker to the spear on his back before she nods, shifting back on her heels. The I'm not going to attack you couldn’t be clearer if she’d said the actual words, and it’s—startling.

“According to the survivor we caught, it was someone in town who was their employer. They couldn’t say if he was a local or not, but I suspect he wasn’t.”

It makes sense to share the information; the border between their lands shifts with the tides of battle, and not everyone keeps track. The attack could have been meant for either of their clans, and there's no way of telling which right now. Hikaku bites his lip, but—if the Senju have a survivor as well, they likely know everything about the fight already.

“A sensor spotted them,” he says. “And he was fighting them when I got there.” No need to mention Kagami, but— “I thought he was a Senju.”

With a frown, the woman tips her head, then glances over at another member of her patrol. The blonde woman shakes her head, answering the unspoken question, and the first woman taps her fingers against the haft of her naginata with a considering hum.

“We haven’t heard of any of our clan who were involved,” she says. “You must have been mistaken. What did they look like?”

Hikaku hesitates, wondering how much to give away. But…getting an identity for the stranger would be helpful in knowing his motives. If he lied to Izuna, if he isn't a Senju, there's something else going on here.

“Long hair,” he says. “Half white and half black, like someone poured ink on one side of his head. About my age, with reddish-brown eyes, and he had a flock of magpies with him. Suiton and Doton natures, at least that I saw, and he used a sword.”
“What?” the woman says, and she’s gone as pale as a ghost, her hand white-knuckled on her weapon. Hikaku blinks at her, a little taken aback by the response, but there's no time to ask a question. The kunoichi grabs his arm, pulls him around so quickly he stumbles, and calls over her shoulder, “Botan, keep going. Follow the boundary to the river and circle back.”

The blonde raises a hand in acknowledgement, then disappears into the maze of streets. A few flickers of motion follow, and in an instant the patrol has vanished completely. All except for one, and she hauls Hikaku towards the overhand of a shop and shoves him up against the wall without a sound. Hikaku yelps, but she’s perfectly, unnervingly silent, tight-lipped and pale as she looms over him. When Hikaku tries to jerk free, her grip doesn’t waver, and she shakes him once, just hard enough to be a threat.

“Black and white hair,” she says, dark and low. “Are you sure? Think about your answer very carefully, Uchiha, because I will take it very badly if you're wrong.”

“What is wrong with you?” Hikaku protests, tugging at her grip again, and if he weren’t the one pinned he might be impressed by just how strong it is. “Yes, I'm sure! I saw him, and I talked to him, and I have a perfect photographic memory of his hair being black and white! What more do you want?”

The kunoichi hardly even seems hear the last part. She pulls away just slightly, grip on Hikaku loosening, and closes her eyes for just a moment. Her hand splays over her face, her breath shakes as it escapes her, and she turns her face away for a long second. Then, in an instant, her chin tips up, her shoulders square, and she turns back, all traces of what she was feeling hidden behind a wall of grim determination. “Suiton and Doton,” she says, and Hikaku nods in confirmation, not quite able to find his words in the face of her sudden shift.

She casts him a sideways look, narrow and elegant like a cat, and then takes a breath. Smooths a hand over her tightly bound hair, shakes herself, and nods once, like she’s reminding herself to focus. “All right,” she says grimly. “Why did you think he was a Senju?”

“Besides using Doton and Suiton equally well?” Hikaku asks, a little dry, because the number of people who are good at multiple types of jutsus are low, especially in this area. When the kunoichi gives him a look, though, he raises his hands in surrender and says, “He got scared when I offered to put him up in the Uchiha compound. And—someone else who met him said he told them he was a Senju.”

Which, knowing Izuna, is probably the nicest possible way to phrase things, and therefore largely inaccurate. But—he seemed completely convinced his rescuer was a Senju, and Hikaku has to take him at his word at some point. Hikaku loves Izuna, would support him and back him in anything, give his life for him, but he knows that Izuna can be abrasive, can push too hard. Given his face when Hikaku found him, whatever talk he had with the stranger didn’t exactly go smoothly.

The kunoichi’s mouth tightens again, just faintly. “And you think this person was right?” she asks.

“Probably,” Hikaku says honestly, studying her face. He pauses for a long moment, then asks, “Who is it?”

The silence stretches for so long that Hikaku thinks she isn't going to answer, but finally she sighs softly and rubs at her eyes. “Someone who died a decade ago,” she says wryly. “Who I helped bury after the Uchiha killed him.”

Well. That makes more sense of Izuna's reaction, his certainty that the stranger hates the Uchiha. Murder will do that. “Oh,” Hikaku says, feeling a little off balance. He glances at the kunoichi again,
then at the storm-dark town around them, and asks, “Do you want me to lead you to the ambush?”

Her eyes widen, and she pauses again. “You mean it,” she says after a long moment, and it sounds faintly surprised.

Hikaku opens his mouth to snap at her, thinks about what he’s about to say, and closes it again. After a second of sorting through his thoughts, he offers, “If he’s…the same age as me, and he was killed by Uchiha ten years ago—a child hunting squad got him, didn’t they?”

The woman’s nod is short, sharp, and her nostrils flare, anger flickering over her face for an instant before she quashes it. “When he was nine,” she confirms, and the words sink into Hikaku's stomach like stones. The Senju killed Uchiha children, too, but—that hardly means the Uchiha are blameless.

“Then let me help,” he says quietly, and his fingers close into fists, tight enough that his nails dig into his skin. “I wasn’t—I was a shinobi then, but not part of them. But I’m still an Uchiha. And if he was supposed to have died, but he didn’t, and he was scared—”

The kunoichi is still watching him, but the line of her mouth has shifted into something softer now, less aggressive. She holds his stare, perfectly unafraid of the power of his eyes, and then inclines her head. Reaching out, she grabs the edge of his hood and pulls it back up to cover his head. “All right,” she says, and then offers her hand. “A truce between us, until dawn tomorrow?”

The certainty of something like a truce makes Hikaku dizzy with relief; he hadn’t realized how tense he was until it was offered. “Agreed,” he says, and clasps her wrist. “Uchiha Hikaku, briefly at your service.”

With a chuckle, the woman grips his wrist in return. “Senju Tōka, and don’t worry about the patrols. I'm third in my clan. They won't bother you while you're with me.”

Hikaku is a little glad he didn’t know that beforehand, he thinks, rather faint. Senju Tōka is third in line to be clan head, right after Tobirama, and she’s known from the deserts of Wind Country to the shores of Water Country for her sheer power and skill. This isn't just a deal with a Senju kunoichi, this is a deal with one of the Senju Clan’s leaders.

“Oh,” he says again, and when she raises a thin brow at him, he lifts his hands. “No, just—why are you leading a patrol?”

Thankfully, there's no offense in her face, just laconic amusement. “Because there was an ambush on our lands,” she says dryly. “And from the sound of it, my cousin was involved, even though he died as a child.”

“A coincidence?” Hikaku offers weakly, but when Tōka turns and heads for the edge of the trees, he hurries to fall into step.

Tōka tips one shoulder in a shrug, noncommittal. “I've never met anyone else with hair like his,” she says, and her voice turns wistful. “He loved magpies, too. He’d always count them, as a child. There was a rhyme he loved, something his brother taught him—one is for sorrow, two's for mirth, three’s a blessing, four’s a…something. I can't remember it now.”

Hikaku knows as well as anyone how the little things fade, and not being able to grasp them feels desperate, like another death all over again. He looks away, up into the trees as the approach, and—The magpies from earlier, he thinks with a start. One, and then two more a little way on. Three altogether, so that’s the sign of a blessing, isn’t it?
He wonders who the blessing is meant for. Tōka, getting word of someone she’d thought dead? Himself, meeting a Senju kunoichi of her reputation and not being murdered on the spot? Or the stranger, slipping away unheeded in the confusion?

There's a flicker of movement out of the corner of his eye, a whirl of a rain-soaked cloak, and Hikaku turns to look. With narrowed eyes he scans the street, but it’s empty, everyone having fled the rain. There's no sign of anyone present, even though Hikaku could have sworn he saw a figure there.

Suspicious, wary, he turns and picks up his pace, following Tōka into the trees, but the feeling of eyes on his back lingers long after they’ve passed out of sight of the town.

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