Promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep

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Summary

Tobirama has adjusted to having an Uchiha firedrake in his hoard, even though he does now spend a considerable portion of his time keeping an eye on Hashirama and Madara down by the river. Which is why, some time after he first followed his brother, he notices that Madara has picked up a follower of his own.

Clearly Tobirama can't sit around and do nothing, and it's at this point that the future takes a sharp turn to the left.

Notes

So I found some inspiration and decided to jump feet first back into this verse!

Title shortened from a quote by Robert Frost: 'The woods are lovely, dark and deep. But I have promises to keep, and miles to go before I sleep.'

Love to know what you think, as always, and if there are any dire spelling errors, please let me know!

Now that Tobirama is aware of the fact the Hashirama is sneaking out of the central clan territory for illicit meetings with an Uchiha, it's child’s play to keep a slightly more careful eye on his whereabouts and follow him when he does.
It’s not that Hashirama is bad at concealing his trail when he heads towards the riverbank, simply that Tobirama is relying on his ability to sense chakra to track him down, and the proximity of Hashirama’s and his friend’s chakra might as well be an alarm call for how distinctive it is.

The net result is that Tobirama spends more time than he’d care to admit lounging in tree branches and spying on his hoard. He’s careful to keep downwind from his brother and friend - they may be a pair of idiots, but they’ll still notice him if he doesn’t take care. He learns the name of the newest piece of his hoard after hearing Hashirama call it out as a greeting and adds Madara’s name to his mental list of his hoard.

He has, thus far, succeeded in squashing any impulse to go and actually introduce himself to Madara - mostly because he really doesn’t feel like explaining to Hashirama why he hadn’t informed Butsuma about the entire situation.

Tobirama refuses to feel guilty about concealing his knowledge from either his brother or his father. Dragons are supposed to devote care and attention to their hoard. It’s an inherent instinct to want to watch over it and protect it; Tobirama just wishes that he didn’t have to spend quite so much time acting like a stalker to do so.

As part of the whole ‘protect your hoard’ mentality, Tobirama makes it his duty to keep half an awareness on the surrounding forest whilst during Hashirama’s meetings. He certainly doesn’t trust either of them to be particularly vigilant in that regards - they’ve not noticed him yet, after all.

Which is why, a little over a year after he first added Madara to his hoard, Tobirama notices the unfamiliar presence of a fourth person in the forest. Tobirama senses them approaching from the direction that Madara usually departs in, but initially pays them little attention, naively assuming that they are heading elsewhere.

He regrets that assumption when the becomes clear that they have no intention of deviating from their course towards the river.

Tobirama swings down from his perch in the crook of two branches the dirt of the forest floor. Careful to avoid moving into a sightline of the river bank, he moves downstream a little way, just around the next bend. One advantage of being Tobirama’s dragon nature being water aligned is that he doesn’t need chakra to cross the river without getting wet - if he wishes, the water of the river simply slides around him as if it were air. As he moves to intercept the intruder, Tobirama focuses on their chakra signature. They’re young, likely a similar age to himself and there’s a crackling nature to their chakra indicative of a fire alignment. Unfortunately, by the time Tobirama has looped around, he’s too late to stop them seeing Hashirama and Madara.
At that point the wind shifts slightly and Tobirama catches the stranger’s scent, strongly enough that the similarities with Madara’s are blindingly obvious. Tobirama halts in his approach and bites off a string of curses. The other dragon is undoubtedly closely related to Madara, likely a younger brother. Tobirama can’t just kill him outright. Another thought occurs and Tobirama vows there and then that if his treacherous instincts decide to add this one to his hoard as well, he’s going to try to drown Hashirama the next time they spar. It’s only fair, given that it entirely his brother’s fault that he has one Uchiha in his hoard to begin with.

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Izuna cannot say that he is particularly pleased when his father orders him to follow his elder brother the next time Madara slips away from the central nesting grounds. He’d noticed some time ago that Madara was wandering off for extended period of time, (subtle is a word rarely associated with his short tempered sibling), but Izuna guesses that until now, Tajima hadn’t deemed it worth worrying about. Izuna wonder’s what’s changed.

His brother would never knowingly endanger the clan, he’s certain. But Izuna is also aware that Madara’s views don’t always align with what their father deems suitable for the heirs of the Uchiha clan. Izuna really hopes his brother has actually been training by himself, which is the excuse he’s given in the past when questioned about his absences from the clan grounds. If not, Izuna’s going to be subject to several exceedingly awkward conversations in the near future.

Izuna manages to situate himself in a tree a short distance from the river and peers out through the foliage. Sure enough, his brother is there, human shaped, arguing with a boy who looks a few years older than himself. Even as Izuna watches, Madara looses his temper entirely and lunges towards the other boy, who shrieks and attempts to move out of the way. They go down in a tangle of limbs and snarling, the odd flash of scales and fang revealing the dragon heritage of both of the boys.

Izuna huffs and sits back on his heels, curling his toes into the bark of the branch beneath him whilst he considers what to do. Given that the Uchiha have barely civil relationships with most other dragon clans, odds are good that Madara’s friend is someone that their father would consider an enemy.

“I take it you’re following the other one?”

Izuna yelps, jerks in surprise and promptly smacks his head on the branch above him. He very nearly falls right out of the tree, but manages to regain his balance at the last instant. Blinking stars out of his vision, he focuses on the source of the question. It’s a boy, his own age. Wide set, slanted red eyes peer out from beneath a shock of silver hair. The three markings on his face have Izuna reassessing his original impression of ‘human’ to ‘currently human shaped’: the slash of red on either cheekbone and the last on the stranger’s chin don’t quite look like tattoos. Colouration
markings from his other form, most likely.

Izuna glares at the boy, irritated at his near fall from his current perch.

“Didn’t someone teach you that it’s rude to sneak up on people? And what’s it to you?”

The other boy raises a judgemental eyebrow at him.

“I’m related to the one with the bowl cut. Someone has to keep an eye out for him.”

Oh damn. Izuna thinks. That most likely makes the other boy on the river a dragon too, which adds a whole other level of complicated to the situation.

Izuna effects a look of wide-eyed confusion that still manages to fool some of his more gullible cousins and replies. “I was just taking a walk, heard the noise that they were making and got curious.”

Red eyes narrow into a look of sharp disbelief, and yeah, it doesn’t look like Izuna is going to be able to talk his way out of this one. Sure enough:

“I can smell your blood relation to him, firedrake. And I’m not one to put much stock in coincidences.”

Izuna very carefully doesn’t react. Body language is about half of all dragon communication, and he really doesn’t want to give away anything more than he has already. The white haired boy eyes him for a long moment and then continues with, “Were you sent to follow him?”

“Nope!” Izuna exclaims, far too quickly. The stranger raises scoffs disbelievingly. Izuna wilts and mutters, “Yes.”

A loud yell from the direction of the river temporarily draws the attention of both of them to their relations out in the sunshine. The other boy sighs wearily and scrubs a hand across his face. Izuna isn’t sure if he ought to be fighting or fleeing at this point - whilst the white-haired boy’s words have been sharp, his body language hasn’t been particularly aggressive. Yet.
“I’m not one for double-meaning and verbal traps, so I’ll speak plainly. What would it take for you to leave out some of the specifics of your brother’s meetings?”

Izuna’s lips curl in a snarl. “Are you asking me to lie directly to our father’s face?”

“No. Simply… leave out some of the specifics of his meetings.”

Izuna hisses, a faint curl of smoke emerging from his mouth in response to his ire. “And I’m just supposed to believe that you’ll keep quiet? If you think I’d believe that, you’re as dumb as a sack of rocks.”

That earns him an irritated glare, but it fades out to a look of contemplation. Izuna feels rather like he’s being judged, and it makes him twitchy.

“What if I was willing to swear on my silence by my hoard?”

Izuna gapes. “Are you actually serious?’ he asks. ‘You’d swear it on your hoard?’

The other boy tips his shoulder in an approximation of a shrug. “If that is what it would take to convince you, then yes.”

“That… you… Why would you do that?” Izuna splutters. “Do you know what happens if you break that vow? Your own body literally turns on itself. Does your clan not teach you basic dragon bodily functions?”

His outburst earns him a glare, and then an ice cold reply of, “I am perfectly aware of the consequences, thank you very much. You bind your chakra into the words of the vow. Breaking it severs the connection between your nervous system and your chakra pathways, which feeds back into a destructive loop. You can’t regulate your internal energy, and your body ends up ripping itself apart, although the exact nature of your demise depends on what species of dragon you are.”

That’s - actually more of an explanation than Izuna ever got from the clan elder who taught them about the Uchiha history. They’d mostly stuck to ‘do not do this on pain of grisly death’ or ‘do not do this for risk of insanity.’
“Fine. Clearly you’re not ignorant, just insane.” Izuna sits back on his heels, considering. The request for silence was unusual enough, but the offer of an oath sworn on a hoard was, well. Unprecedented, actually.

“Why?” Izuna asks. “You must have a reason for suggesting a hoard oath. What is it?”

Crimson eyes lock onto his, and Izuna is astounded to realise that the other boy is looking at him with something rather like hope.

“Because I love my brother. And the time he spends with your brother is the happiest that I’ve seen him for years. I don’t wish to take that away from him. Besides, the two of them talk about putting an end to the idiotic squabbling between clans, and if there’s a chance for that, I’ll do my damnedest to see it done.”

For the briefest instant, something lonely and tired and old flickers behind his eyes. “I’ve had rather enough of my clan members dying for one lifetime.”

Izuna is good at reading body language, and all of the signs he’s picking up on indicate that the stranger is telling the truth. Not … all the truth, perhaps, but as far as Izuna can tell, the offer of silence had been made with complete sincerity.

“Also,” the stranger adds slyly, “Your brother will owe you a favour when he finds out that you covered for him.”

Izuna has to admit, that is a compelling incentive to agree to keep his knowledge a secret. He glances back out of the foliage, where Madara has succeeded in trapping his friend in a headlock.

Huffing, he concedes. “Fine. I’ll agree to keep this quiet, on two conditions.”

Crimson eyes narrow. “Oh?”

“We both swear name oaths, rather than hoard oaths, and you agree to be my sparring partner when my brother is sparring with yours.”
Now it’s the other boy’s turn to look surprised. “Sparring partner?” he echoes.

Izuna nods. “Brother is stronger than me right now already; I’ll never catch him up if he’s always getting so much extra practice with your brother. So. Sparring partner. That’s the condition.”

“Agreed.”

It takes them several minutes to agree on the exact wording of their joint oath, to ensure that there’s a little leeway given for unknowingly revealing the secret, but in the end it’s done.

“Tobirama, huh?” Izuna says, rolling the word around his mouth. He deliberately avoids the other name, the family name, of the boy-shaped dragon sitting an arms length away. Not that he hadn’t suspected that Tobirama belonged to the Senju clan, but. Well. It would have been simpler if he hadn’t been.

Tobirama tips his head in acknowledgment. “Best not mention my name within earshot of Madara, lest our arrangement gets back to Hashirama. It beggars belief that my brother hasn’t been caught by our father already, and I’d rather not test his ability to keep more than one secret at a time.”

Izuna snorts, amused despite himself. “I’ll hold you to the same, then.”

Tobirama’s expression scarcely changes, but Izuna is pretty sure that’s amusement written into the lines of his body.

“Until next time, Izuna.” he says, before turning and disappearing into the tree branches behind him.

Izuna stays on his perch for a few more minutes, allowing the full impact of the past half hour or so to sink in. Despite the sheer enormity of the risk his new oath poses, Izuna can’t help but feel a thread of giddy excitement at what the future might hold.

No risk without reward, he thinks to himself, then pushes off from the tree branch to return to the Uchiha nesting grounds. He’s going to have to come up with a suitable way to spin the truth of Madara’s meetings to their father on the journey back.
A little ways downstream, Tobirama presses his back against a tree trunk and takes several long, calming breaths. He can’t quite believe that his last minute plan had worked, but the slight weight in his chakra where the newly formed name oath sits convinces him otherwise.

It's a long way from anything resembling peace. But it's undoubtably a start.

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