Recherché

by **Eggburtsamislice**

**Summary**

Recherché (French): "something very rare, exotic, or choice, arcane."

The tale of a ruthless aeon, the undead who feasts upon the living, and of a determined, yet woefully inexperienced demon slayer. They share a hatred older than time, fueled by the need for revenge. Partially inspired by Bram Stoker's Dracula, there will be mentions of violence, blood, gore, the Uchiha massacre revisited, flesh eating and non-con (in later chapters) Set in Konoha during the late 1880s. A veritable clown car of characters push Kakashi and Iruka down the SLOW path to passions forbidden, which also features a high body count. AU
Prologue

A brief synopsis of the story can be found here:

https://youtu.be/jTj2aXGft2U

Let's get these pesky warnings out of the way first:

Definitions of VIOLENCE

GORE (dismemberment)

Mentions/descriptions of FLESH EATING (human and animal)

References to past SEXUAL ASSAULT/ABUSE

NON-CON (in later chapters)

Voracious WEREWOLF like creatures

UCHIHA MASSACRE revisited

Minor and MAJOR CHARACTER DEATH(S)

There in the northwest, lush emerald pastures sprinkled with lavender and clover, carpet the gently rolling hills where prize sheep and cattle graze; to the dense forests in the northeast, ancient conifers almost touch the sky amidst their teak, pine, mahogany and cedar brethren. Temperate climes and fertile soil bring forth choice grains and produce all year-round; from a complex of hothouses in the east, come the rarest medicinal herbs and horticultural specimens in the entire five nation region.

Long before Japan’s ports were forcibly opened to trade with the West, the lumber and textile mills of Konoha were the largest producers and exporters of dry goods, construction and shipbuilding materials in the Orient. After the Meiji Restoration’s implementation, however, Konoha would become the first territory in Japan to establish balanced trade protocols with European markets.

Bounded on the east by sparkling aquiline seas, merchant ships daily pull into her ports offloading freight of exotic spices, textile dyes, and raw cotton. These same ships steam homeward, their cargo holds laden with bales of superfine wool, pallets of top grain leathers, dried herbs, lumber and barrels of aromatic oils.

A center of industry, the hub of domestic and foreign commerce and polestar of mechanization, that was Konoha. An unsullied blend of the bucolic and the cosmopolitan, a land steeped in the tradition
of its ancestors, yet as current and relevant as tomorrow’s newspapers.

The providence of the kami made Konoha and by extension, Fire Country wealthy; the people inhabiting the land made it rich beyond measure. Whether dwelling in stately manor homes in the west, lowly row houses in the northeast, or humble bungalows scattered throughout the territory, there was a sense of community and dignity which bound them together.

Fire Country … a land favored by the gods.

Konoha … the crown jewel in the kami’s chest of treasures,

at least it was… until seven months ago.

Years ahead of its time in matters social and political, it was the first territory ever to entrust administration of a powerhouse of industry and commerce to the oversight of a woman;

Senju Tsunade,

her lineage, storied and esteemed, within and beyond the boundaries of the region. She was a descendant of Senju Hotaka, a farmer with radical ideals. In addition to revolutionizing animal husbandry, his experiments led to hybridization of indigenous plants, vegetables and trees. Because of him Fire Country was recognized as a leader in all things agricultural as well as a pioneer in the field of veterinary medicine. With the land’s abundant resources and a handful of willing workers, he built storehouses, amassing rot resistant grains, wild honey, dried fruits and herbs; dispatching his children abroad, he built a wider consumer base for Konoha’s bounty and ratified trade agreements between the five nations.

Over time, small factories sprung up to keep pace with demand.

Travel between the nations became a tedious and dangerous enterprise in the days of Tsunade’s great great great grandfather, Senju Atsushi. Draft horse or ox drawn carts were easy pickings for roving brigands; should they reach their destination with cargo intact, it was still a fortnight’s trip. Travel by sea shortened delivery time, yet perils from contrary winds and corsairs brimming with picaroons posed a risk for those aboard the tiny boats. Atsushi began sending trained and armed security with every shipment whether on land or by sea; dressed as humble farmers, the incidences of robbery declined and Konoha’s reputation as a people not to be trifled with grew.

To this day, ox drawn carts play an important role in the annual celebration commemorating Konoha’s growth.

Her great great grandfather, Senju Katsuro designed and built the ports that provided a safer environment in which to lade cargo. He financed and built the mills which produced revenue for the then tiny village and established schools specializing in medicine, shipbuilding and perfume compounding. Spearheading construction of rail lines and improving lanes from the farms, mills and factories, he ensured rapid turnaround times for incoming and outgoing ships. And with the revenue generated he purchased larger parcels of land, annexed the schools and founded a medical research facility.

He lived to see the day when Konoha became a prosperous and independent territory within Fire Country.

With a steadily growing population, Senju Hisao, her great grandfather strengthened the territory’s infrastructure. Upgrading existing sanitation methods, he ensured a reliable source of potable water as well as an underground system of waste disposal. During his time as Governor, he designed and
built the Administrative complex, moved the law enforcement building closer to the sea and instituted a mounted patrol to maintain checkpoints along the borders.

Lastly, her grandfather Senju Hashirama was instrumental in the reforestation of Konoha's indigenous trees and the introduction of new genera of plants and herbs within the land. He overhauled local government, setting up a separate agency to handle monetary concerns related to foreign trade; this in turn, freed up the Governor’s office to focus the social, cultural and economic needs of those who lived in the territory. Tsunade capitalized on his work, ensuring continued financial stability of the territory. She oversaw construction of new transient housing alongside the port area, segregating wearied crews from the general populace. Annexing the medical facilities, she founded a state of the art research laboratory; there, new medications were developed and tested and cutting edge medical instruments and equipment were manufactured. Lastly, she instituted a training center for artisans and craftsmen, that the traditional work of their ancestors might be preserved.

But if Senju Tsunade was the heart and brains of this realm, Morino Ibiki was its brawn.

Son of an equestrian breeder, Ibiki dreamt of the day he might escape the predictability of farm life. But as the eldest, he was expected to take over the family business; a life too sedate and monotonous for such an ambitious young man. By age sixteen, he begged his parents to lie about his age that he might join the ranks of a growing military force.

With heavy hearts, they allowed him to do so.

When he returned home after twelve years’ service, mother and father deceased in his absence, he was a highly decorated, honorably discharged man of the world. He walked with a slight limp these days -- the muscles in his hip and bones of his left ankle, irreparably damaged when his mount was felled by a samurai’s yajiri.

As long as he lived, he’d never forget that day.

Somehow freed from the weight of his horse, he lay in the dust of a foreign land as the iron covered boot of a warrior came into view. One swing of the samurai’s katana put the horse out of its misery; another swing almost deprived him of vision, leaving behind a scar that ran from his right eye and extending past his jaw. Writhing in pain, a final slice split the flesh next to his left eye and across his top and bottom lips as the samurai left him to die.

A marked and bitter man, he spent the first six months back in Konoha wasting away his savings at the opposite end of a sake bottle. The time for sorrowing over his fate sluggishly passed and in the harsh cold light of day, he took stock of his life and talents as he stood before a mirror in his lonely boardinghouse room near the port.

When not fogged by alcohol, he had a sharp mind, an eye for detail which saw what others missed. Years in the military taught him to be a leader of men, to communicate his thoughts and ideas concisely and how to motivate others to accomplish defined goals.

These were qualities that could be parlayed into a successful second career, of this he was certain.

However, a scarred face and irregular gait kept most of the ‘decent, marriageable’ women at bay for they feared interacting with him, convinced somehow that he was cursed by the gods. But he wasn’t the sort of man who needed definition by the ties of marriage and children; his heart beat only to serve and protect the land and the people of Konoha and he would allow no impediments to swerve him from the desire of his heart. His imposing physical presence and stern demeanor paved the way to sporadic employment and placed him on the path of service. Hustling drunks from the taverns along the docks or protecting the assets at the bordello/boarding house, put money in his pocket, food
on his table, and alcohol in his gullet.

But this was not the life he intended to live forever.

With his brother married, looking to start a family and overseeing the newly streamlined business of horse breeding and veterinary medicine, Ibiki fell back on the only marketable skills he possessed; he sobered up, applied for and was accepted as one of Konoha’s constables.

This he believed was his true calling in life.

He quickly moved up the ranks from border patrol to commanding units near the docks, to Supervisor of patrols and finally, sergeant in the newly formed investigations unit. When the Commandant of Constables announced his plan to retire, Ibiki was the first choice for the position, however, the Governor had other plans. She did away with the title of Commandant and appointed him Chief Inspector, granting him authority over every aspect of law enforcement.

Under his guidance was a training center established for civilians; they were deputized upon completion of schooling and called into service during yearly festivals which attracted hordes of tourists and a sophisticated criminal element. These ‘ready reserves’ also acted as search and recovery teams in times of natural disasters -- typhoons, mudslides and such like. He tirelessly lobbied for a dojo specifically for the constable’s use and made it mandatory each officer take part in a martial arts program, for gone were the days in which a badge alone was enough to deter lawbreakers. Since interlopers from other nations were becoming bolder and their attacks more brutal as they dared to break through Konoha’s rearguard, he tripled the number of uniformed officers patrolling the docks and outlying areas of the territory. For those patrols, Ibiki acquired lightweight, protective under armor to keep them safe as they dealt with untrained hooligans wielding katana or tanto.

Through his efforts, the incidences of crime perpetrated by outsiders dwindled to single digits; his men were united in purpose and mind.

All was well in the land and in his heart . . . for a time.

He’d lived through the horrors of war - seen evisceration, corpses swarming with maggots, bodies drawn and quartered and left in the streets as an example to others.

But the events of these last seven months were the most terrifying things he’d seen in years.

Notes:

The Meiji Restoration (1868-1912), was a chain of events which led to the consolidation of a political system under the Emperor of Japan. During this time, the nation underwent a period of accelerated industrialization leading to its rise as a military power. But before the far-reaching changes made possible by Emperor Meiji took firm root, every region in Japan maintained its independence. Japan is in reality an archipelago, so whenever reference is made to the ‘five nations’, it refers to those self-governing regions not yet unified by one language or system of education. It’s my weird way of melding the world of Naruto with some of the events that shaped the real nation of Japan. Though some events of this period serve as backdrop, our focus is on a hellish force older than time itself.

Archipelago: a large group or chain of islands.

Polestar: something that serves as a guiding principle; in the center of attention or attraction.
Hotaka: “step by step.”

Katsuro: “victorious son.”

Brigand: bandits, especially those of mountain or forest regions.

Corsair: a fast ship used for piracy.

Picaroon: rogue, vagabond, thief.

Hisao: “long-lived man.”
Paper lanterns of orange, tan and yellow shooed away night’s lingering shadows as the ritual convoy wound through the orchards and groves in the west. Long before the morning sun shook off its slumber, the tinkle of tiny brass bells and the thunderous plodding of hooves against old stone pathways rustled the citizenry of Konoha from their comfortable beds. The rumble of forty-seven ox drawn carts laden with timber would grow louder as they neared the central point of the territory and so too would the indistinct voices of stout workmen marching alongside the carts.

Residents raced to their windows and flung open the shutters - not to shake angry fists against the noisemakers, nor rain down dark curses on the heads of these roisterers as they traveled through dusty streets. Instead, a tidal wave of cheers, whistles and applause swelled behind this ragtag caravan, nudging them onward, growing in volume as the people lifted their voices in a refrain of joy; this symphony of exuberance reached its crescendo as soon as the last wooden wheel of the forty seventh cart rolled into the town’s square. With the somber ringing of the temple bells west of the downtown area, a reverent hush would fall; the fragrance of sandalwood and myrrh mingling with the prayers offered by a coterie of monks.

The procession was but one part of a time-honored tradition in Konoha, one heralding three nights of festivity. Once prayers concluded, the monotonous drone of saws and the clangorous rhythm of the carpenter's hammers began; the earthy scent of sanded lumber igniting a sense of expectation and wonder throughout the town. Over the next fourteen days, the community Konoha swelled and as the inns filled, homeowners extended hospitality for those who’d made the sojourn from other parts of the territory.

Finally, on the fifteenth night of the eighth month, the downtown area was aglow with a sea of paper lanterns; ornate booths lined the lanes, vendors hawked their wares and proud farmers displayed the first fruits of their harvests. Warm eventide air transported pungent aromas of roasting sweet potatoes, pumpkin, taro and chestnuts; beside every open window stood artful arrangements of pampas grass and bush clover, Tsukimi dango and raw chestnuts adorned family altars. These too were integral parts of the tradition thought to make the wishes and prayers of that household come to fruition.

It was a simpler time; children stayed up past their bedtime, scampering over cobble stoned streets, playing hide and seek among the booths - strolling musicians charmed the adults into forgetting their cares, to sing and dance with abandon. Young lovers jockeyed for space along the rocky shoreline admiring the beauty of the rising harvest moon’s reflection on the water’s tranquil surface; others spread blankets atop grassy knolls and hillocks, waiting for the moon to reach its zenith in the cloudless, indigo sky.

Ah yes, that’s how things used to be.

But on this, the first night of the great festival, there was only a melancholy chorus of lupine howls from the dense forests. Devoid of adornment, the town square lay lifeless, dark and cold; from the
hillocks where fragrant wild grasses sway in the wind, fat black crickets provide the night’s music.

And before the only unshuttered windows in town, a commanding figure stands, awash in the soft yellow moonlight. A mountain of a man, Chief Inspector Ibiki Morino was hard to miss. His eyes, black as coal and keener than a night heron’s, he scanned vacated pathways and side alleys hoping to capture movement of any kind ...

... there was none.

Tonight, every family huddled together, trembling behind bolted doors. There they would remain until morning light, kneeling before family altars, chanting prayers and whispering petitions to their ancestors for a form of protection, a sense of security Ibiki could no longer provide. He understood their fear … he shared their sense of helplessness, but he alone bore the brunt of their anger.

And as he stood silent vigil, Ibiki prayed as well;

for wisdom,

for favor from the gods who’d forsaken his people

and failing those two . . .

he prayed for luck.

In the days of his youth, the full moon’s monthly appearance signified a time of renewal, rebirth and hope for the future. But these last seven months, the full moon was but an omen of brutality; a clarion call to the depths of hell to let loose a foul scourge from its darkest recesses.

Times like these call for a stiff shot of brandy
to calm the mind and settle the stomach,

that’s what he told himself over an hour ago, as the liqueur flowed from its decanter. *Just something to keep my hands engaged and mind distracted,* he reasoned. *Can’t afford overindulgence … must needs keep my wits.*

In those first few hours, he kept his promise, but as time dragged on, he feared crushing the fragile crystal with every step he took. Unanswered questions swirl through an overwrought mind … the repeated cries for swift resolution to this menace echo in his ears; his thoughts, plunging him deeper into depression’s miry clay.

A final swish of the amber liquid inside the snifter’s balloon released a heady bouquet of peaches, pears and a hint of aged wood, calming rattled nerves. The mellow heat smoothly burned down his throat as he emptied the glass in one gulp.

*So much for temperance.*

Savoring the sweetness, he closed his eyes for a moment, as if to push back against the unrelenting darkness welling up in his soul;

yet the darkness would not yield.

Triumph or tragedy - no in between, nowhere to run ... nowhere to hide should tonight’s carefully laid plans fail.

*No, we will succeed,* he thought as he refilled the snifter. *I’ve thirty mounted constables patrolling*
Yet his thoughts wander ever backward, making him acknowledge an unwanted possibility. Deep down inside, he knew; the bony finger of death would indeed beckon another eternal captive ere the dawn, as it had these past months.

The alcohol roving about in his system was bringing down his defenses and slowly targeting his insecurities.

He turned away, temporarily abandoning his post. Soft moonbeams illumine a path through the spacious and sparsely furnished living area which doubled as his bedroom and remote command post; a lightweight wool overcoat, draped over the back of a chair near the couch and his heavy black boots stood in readiness beside the front door. With another gulp of brandy working its way down his gullet, Ibiki carelessly loosened the narrow black tie and itchy starched collar as he wilted into a buttery soft brown leather couch and closed his eyes. Immediately, images of seven young women splashed over his mind, their throats shredded, their bodies drained of their life force, save for tiny droplets of blood on their clothing.

No need for investigation after the first victim’s discovery - a common prostitute; an unfortunate, not unexpected end - a hazard of her chosen profession. A month later, victim number two - another prostitute, found outside the bordello that masqueraded as a boarding house near the port. Assuming the perpetrator a seafaring man, he’d doubled the amount of constables assigned to the docks; that proved a waste of time and manpower. With his own officers convinced these murders were the victim’s due for pursuing an immoral lifestyle, their ‘investigations’ were halfhearted at best and rotting corpses lay unclaimed in the morgue for weeks, ultimately relegated to the potter’s field.

The only things linking these women were occupation and where their bodies were dumped; the eastern edge of the town where transients found a night’s lodging and men of a coarser nature lived and worked. His constables again dismissed these acts as the work of a lone, disgruntled customer and at first, Ibiki was inclined to agree.

But the next two murders ripped holes through that theory.

The third victim, a washerwoman - her body left in an alley behind the laundry, ten feet from the Administrative complex. The next one, a talented, comely seamstress, propped up at the base of an apple tree, mere steps from Ibiki’s backyard. With no family to claim their bodies, they too were interred in pauper’s graves.

However, with the next three victims, the murderer changed tactics.

All of them, well-educated and respectable young women from noble families; when news of their deaths were made public month after month, the halcyon town was thrown into an uproar. Paranoia cut a swath through the tight-knit community like a stiff breeze through fields of white headed dandelions; wariness unknown before, turned even the most mundane social interactions into waltzes of polite unease.

‘This isn’t the work of your average thrill killer,’ he remembered telling his men. ‘Instead, we’re dealing with someone of great intelligence and extreme precision.’

But to what end? he wondered.
What’s the angle and why was Konoha the target?

He knew there were factions inside the territory, both political and religious who opposed dealings with the Western world. *Had they orchestrated these murders hoping the Governor and Advisory Council would abort trade negotiations? Or … were the gods truly angry … was this divine retribution because Konoha was about to bow the knee to the god of greed?*

There were also those of the opinion that a ravening pack of wolves or other woodland creatures were responsible for the recent avalanche of misfortune. *It’s the influence of the moon’ they said, which allegedly fueled the lust for human blood, driving these beasts into a cyclic feeding frenzy. Still others believed recent renovation and excavation near the old manor house north of the cemetery had somehow angered a powerful spirit being; destroying young lives was its way of ‘exact revenge on those who dared disrupt its eternal sleep’, or so the rumors went.*

*Guileless townsfolk, he chuckled to himself, so quick to believe outlandish things.*

But with a deranged misogynist on the loose, there was little time to entertain baseless conjecture and silly superstitions. Ibiki trusted his gut which insisted this killer walked on two legs, not four and that this so-called phantom possessed a physical body – one that could be apprehended and eventually executed for his crimes.

All that was left him now were incongruent facts and an eerie pattern of behavior.

First off, it was physically impossible to leave nothing behind or take nothing away from any crime scene. He knew that. Yet, neither footprints or wagon wheel impressions were found near the corpses indicating the path taken to or from them, nor was there evidence the body had been dragged to its final location. No scraps of clothing or strands of hair clutched in the victim's hands either, which signified the women knew and trusted the assailant or the attack was so sudden they didn’t have time to fight.

The wily mongrel didn’t even leave a scent behind for the bloodhounds to track.

Second, the killer was very particular about *when* he struck; the murders always occurred once a month during the three-night phase of a full moon. Yet, no one ever reported hearing a scuffle nor panicked screams in the night. Next, the murderer was particular about *who* he killed. All the victims were between the ages of seventeen to twenty-five and though the first two were ‘sex-for-hire’ workers, there was never any evidence of rape or carnal activity of any kind prior to their deaths. Obviously, the killer derived a perverted form of sexual gratification by overpowering defenseless women. He also took great care to lay the victim's' hands in their laps, intertwining their fingers as if in prayer.

Lastly, though their throats were ripped asunder, the carotid artery was always cleanly cut, as if by a surgical instrument. But how this maniac drained the blood from their bodies without splattering it all over the crime scene was still a mystery. Ibiki allowed himself another chuckle, remembering the fallout after interrogating every physician and surgeon in the territory. Questioning those upstanding men, treating them like common criminals earned him a good scolding from the Governor, but he had no regrets.

“You sick bastard,” he snarled, raising the snifter to his lips once more, “you will slip up and I’ll be there to catch you.”

Coming face to face with a psychopath of this caliber, probing the depths of a reprobate mind, perchance discovering the motives behind the madness contorted Ibiki’s lips into a crooked grin. He’d admit it to none other, but the sheer bravado this killer possessed garnered his grudging respect.
What angered him was the realization that bringing this madman to justice wouldn’t give him the peace of mind he needed. Wrapping his hands around the neck of this cold-blooded fiend, feeling his last breath escape from his body and insufflate against his skin, that had become Ibiki’s obsession.

“Ah well,” he said lifting the nearly empty glass in mock salute to the moon. “I always did enjoy a spirited game of cat and mouse.”

Recherché

The crunch of gravel beneath heavy boots stirred him from a light doze long before the frantic rapping at his front door would have; expecting a report about the killer’s apprehension was why the slight bit of rest he got was fitful. He was alert and on his feet in an instant, his overcoat clutched in his left hand.

“Inspector,” the man’s voice pled from behind the oaken door. “Inspector, please … come quickly!”

Ibiki ground his teeth and took a deep breath. Judging from the panicked tone of voice, he knew it wasn’t one of his constables.

Damn it! This wasn’t supposed to happen again!

The ornate brass doorknob slammed against the interior wall when he flung it open revealing a distraught and barely recognizable fisherman; his trademark sunglasses sat crookedly atop the familiar blue bandana, and his sweat soaked blue shirt, flecked with vomitus, heaved with every nervous breath.

“Ebisu,” he snapped as he stooped to pull on his boots, “for god’s sake man … catch hold yourself!”

“But, Inspector . . . the boat . . . my boat . . . there’s a body!”

Running a calloused palm from the nape of his neck, over the smooth skin of his bald head and down a scarred face as he stood, Ibiki calmed himself; it just wouldn’t do to vent his frustrations on a civilian, especially one who just got the fright of his life. He gingerly pushed the other man away with one hand, closing the door behind him with the other as he took off toward the port with Ebisu at his heels, struggling to describe the sight which greeted him before dawn.

“I think it’s one of the . . . one of the Hyuga girls,” he breathed trying to keep pace with the Inspector’s long strides.

When that name rolled off the other man’s tongue, Ibiki felt his stomach drop to the soles of his boots. Wasn’t it bad enough the killer slipped past my men again last night? And if Ebisu’s guess is correct, I’ll have to contend with that posturing, elitist family breathing down my neck. They’ll wield their political clout and sure as salt, I’ll have to fight off another attempt to remove me from office. Damn it!

He shook his head and quickened the pace.

The sun’s rays, not yet strong enough to burn off the cool, wispy fog, through it he saw members of Ebisu’s crew on the dock, their heads bowed in respect for the dead. To their left, another constable took statements from fishermen aboard the vessel moored beside Ebisu’s. Suddenly, a figure clad in black from head to foot wriggled free of the fog’s embrace, waving its arms about wildly.

“Oi, Inspector …over here!”

Dear god, he thought, it’s too early in the morning for this flibbertigibbet! Shiranui Genma, Coroner
and mortician, a thin, pale skinned man in his early thirties with kind light brown eyes and a comforting demeanor. Always approachable and easy to talk to, Genma was privy to everyone’s heartaches and dark secrets; on the downside, he was a high-spirited man, enthusiastic about his work to the point of discomfort. As the territory’s foremost expert in thanatology, Genma delighted in explaining the mechanics of death to all who would listen. To be fair, it was during one of his incessant rants about the life cycle of a blowfly, that Ibiki nailed down an approximate time of death in a cold case, which led to the exoneration of an innocent man.

*Maybe in the midst of his blustering he might prove helpful again, but I’m in no mood to hear him prattle on about the marvels of rigor mortis right now.*

“Looks like we got another tough one,” he called out.

Ibiki nodded and kept walking, hoping his demeanor would dissuade further inane conversation. Naturally that didn’t work; soon, Genma was at his right side, peering around him, extending condolences to Ebisu.

“What rotten luck, eh, old man? Not to worry,” he said, gesturing to himself and Ibiki, “between me and the big guy we’ll make this town safe again -- am I right?”

Ibiki uttered not a word, listening intently as Genma continued his line of questioning about the body’s positioning, if a trail or pool of blood was near or underneath the body and so forth. Turning greener with each question, a mush mouthed Ebisu stuttered out his responses.

*Hang on, Ibiki thought, here’s a man with an uncanny knack to meet or beat my officers to every crime scene; a man who embraces death like a long-lost paramour and one who has access to surgical instruments used for autopsies or embalming cadavers. Surely, he couldn’t be the one who was ...no, he talks too much … lacks the finesse our murderer’s shown thus far. Still, it might not be a bad idea to bring him in for questioning at some point.*

“What say ye, Inspector? It’ll be a proud day when we catch this blackguard.”

Ibiki cut his eyes at the other man though Genma didn’t take the hint; he was still smiling brightly, his brown eyes twinkling as tobacco stained teeth clamped down on a silver tipped kiseru.

Once they stepped on the wooden planks of the docks, they didn’t have to go far to find victim number eight.

There she lay in the bow of the boat, her hands folded on her abdomen, a once beautiful face, frozen in the rictus of surprise. Like the others, her throat was ripped apart and her clothing intact; an expensive jeweled brooch above her left breast sparkled as the sun rose. Long jet black hair pinned up behind pale ears and the family crest etched into the delicate pearl earrings were enough to confirm her identity even at this distance.

*Damn it! She is a Hyuga.*

“Constable Sakai … disperse this crowd, the scene now belongs to Mr. Shiranui. And you, Himura, notify the family and accompany them to the Coroner’s office.”

With that, Ibiki turned and headed toward the Administrative center. He’d have to hurry and submit a preliminary report to the Governor before the Hyuga showed up and lodged a formal complaint against him. By the time he found a scrap of paper in his coat pocket and scrawled a note, most of the townsfolk were already gathering in the plaza. He heard their jeers, felt the weight of their angry stares as he slipped the note beneath the door, yet he stood tall, moving briskly through the crowd,
his eyes focused on the building one hundred and fifty paces away.

Once inside the constabulary, he breathed a sigh of relief; the station house was quiet this morning, his men wrapped up in their grief and feelings of powerlessness. Down the hall and to the left was his office, a fortress of silence where he could indulge this bitter disappointment in private. But the flickering light of an oil lamp’s flame against mud brown walls and the sound of conversation from inside his office raised his hackles.

*Must be the Governor and Advisory Council come to curse me to my face.*

Entering the large space, conversation between the three young men came to a halt. Their manner of dress, tailored Western suits, like those the European envoys wore, led him to believe they represented the Hyuga in some capacity; lawyers, no doubt.

"Well that was quick," he said standing beside the open door. "How may I be of assistance to you gentlemen?"

The young men stood as one turning to face him, each bowing politely. The brown-haired man in the middle, the one with a scar across his nose, spoke first.

"Are you Inspector Morino?"

He maintained eye contact with the man as he stepped inside the room and closed the door behind him. "I am … and who would you be?"

"Dr. Umino Iruka and these are my companions. To my left, Mr. Kotetsu Hagane and to my right, Mr. Izumo Kamizuki."

Taking care to avoid the sharp corner of his wide, wooden work space, Ibiki reconsidered his impression of the trio. *Fresh faced, bright-eyed, all of them under fifty years of age … probably aren’t connected to the Hyuga, but it never hurts to err on the side of caution.* "Thought I wouldn’t see you lot until the family was officially notified," he said taking his seat. "I can’t release any information just now, so, if you’ll excuse me gentlemen, I have a great deal of--"

"You were expecting us sir?" the one named Izumo asked.

"Don’t be ridiculous," Kotetsu said. "He obviously thinks we’re somebody else."

"Yes, well … be that as it may," Dr. Umino countered, "we’ve come to assist you, Inspector."

"Of course you have. Leave your information with the watch commander. Good day gentlemen."

"I’m afraid you don’t understand sir," Izumo said. "We’ve traveled a great distance to--"

"Oh no, I understand completely and as I have no time for foolishness, kindly dismiss yourselves."

"Now see here, Inspector Morino," he heard the good doctor say, "I will not leave this place until you’ve heard me out."

"Under your own power or with the assistance of my constables … you will depart my presence."

Suddenly a heavy, brown leather portfolio fell from Umino’s hand, scattering the pile of papers before Ibiki when it landed with a resounding thump.

 "This represents years of research and investigation by my father ..."
Ibiki eyed the thing suspiciously; leaning back with his palms against the edge of the desk, he lifted his head, glaring at this Umino chap who was still talking.

“. . . the same monster. The identity of the murderer you seek is within the pages of this book.

Are you sure you want to dismiss us now, Inspector?”

NOTES:

The Japanese night heron typically inhabits dense, coniferous and broad-leaved forests on hills and low mountains close to bodies of water, i.e. rivers and streams.

In this strange little world, the Hyuga family does NOT have the trademark lilac eyes so familiar to us fans of the anime or manga. The Hyuga however are extremely proud of their lineage in Fire Country and most members of this clan wear miniature replications of the family crest on some part of their clothing or jewelry.

Roisterer: those who revel noisily or without restraint.

Halecyon: calm, peaceful, or tranquil.

Insufflate: the act or action of blowing on.

Flibbertigibbet: a chattering or flighty, light-headed person.

Blackguard: low, contemptible person; scoundrel.

Kiseru: a Japanese smoking pipe.

Thanatology: the study of death and its surrounding circumstances.
This sort of exchange typically happened in the town square or squad room of the constabulary; never before was anyone bold enough to violate the sanctity of his private office.

*Great ... three emotional nutcases; either they're incredibly gutsy or incredibly stupid... I’ll find out in a minute.*

With a sigh, Ibiki steeled himself to take this intrusion in stride, after all, confrontation was the norm on ‘murder morn.’

*Let’s see now ... Umino, you’re brash, like all Europeans ... yet the pattern and rhythm of your speech is unmistakably Japanese. Interesting.*

Umino… the surname didn’t ring a bell, nor did he remotely resemble any of the families Ibiki knew in the territory. He was of average height and weight for a man in his late twenties, early thirties, with chiseled facial features and a stocky build. There was a flicker of indomitability in those cocoa colored eyes, one that was in disharmony with the silly grin on his lips. *What a contradictory fellow; your eyes blaze with anger, your cheeks aflush with embarrassment. What’s this now? A hostile stance, a straightening of the shoulders; is he bracing to attack me or buttressing himself against further opposition or interruption?*

“Pardon Inspector ... hardihood was never my intention,” he said rising from a swift, formal bow.

Ibiki watched the young man smooth the heels of his hands down the lower part of his jacket. *Nouveau riche ... a middle-class upbringing made him mannerable at least.*

Ibiki urged him to continue with a slight incline of his head.

*Aside from a flash paper temperament, the only other thing that stands out about him is the brown; everything about this man is in shades of brown. His skin, the color of black tea mixed with cream; the sort of fellow who could disappear in a milling crowd and yet command the attention of everyone around him. The thin, crooked scar bisecting his face was of a sepia tone and his hair, slicked back with pomade and gathered in a low tail had a rusty, auburn tint.*

Gracefully standing erect, Iruka looked him squarely in the eye and smiled. “I’ll not mince words sir. We have four weeks in which to hunt down and exterminate a killer. Should that window of opportunity pass, the only witness to another slaying will be the next full moon.”

*So, a blusterer then. He knows when the killer prefers to strike, just like everyone else in the territory does.*

Another subtle tilt of the head acknowledged the truth spoken, a flick of his wrist granted the three men permission to retake their seats.

*It’s all too neat. Their sudden appearance, the information they’re eager to share; is this a small mercy from the gods; an answer to the prayers of those who believed the deities were omniscient and benevolent?*

His secular nature prevented rejoicing; he’d seen men of their ilk before.

*Mouthpieces ... shills for a killer, posing as learned and reasonable men. Conservatively dressed marionettes they were, morally and ethically bankrupt willing to hide behind a veneer of*
As to the portfolio lying in the middle of his desk, it was as a bucket of bloody chum, bait to draw him close, to entice him to open wide his mouth in the hope of extracting information. Then again, if these men weren’t puppets of a madman, they were something far more despicable; thrill seekers – perverse, unnaturally fixated on or sexually aroused by accounts of the macabre. Still, they were nothing like the usual wild-eyed conspiracy theorists, the ultra-religious fear mongers or the moonstruck plain folk which daily paraded through the outer office demanding to be heard. They reeked of salt air, obviously come from afar to gorge themselves on the rancid fat of thrice damned superstitions and old wives’ tales.

The indiscriminate buzz around town, the rumors flittering through the shops, seedy taverns and the docks … suddenly the things Ibiki took for granted these past months, began gnawing at his conscience. Those tales from the dark side he couldn’t quarantine had finally wormed their way into the ears and out of the mouths of braggadocious sailors, washing up on distant shores like gaudy trinkets of gospel truth. For those with an unslakable thirst and ears itching to hear tales of the mysterious and dangerous Orient, the endless repetition of these embellished fabrications was manna for the masses abroad.

And if this triumvirate of dandies know of Konoha’s misfortune, there’s no telling how far and wide the news has spread. No stopping the venom poisoning the minds of those who could bring trade aspirations with Europe and the Americas to a screaming halt.

The very idea set Ibiki’s teeth on edge.

Recherché

The measured click of the brass pendulum in the squat grandfather clock, the unvaried tick of its second hand … these were the only sounds in the tense room. But silence and occasional eye contact were the only offensive tools a good investigator needed in the interview process. If Ibiki said or did nothing long enough, his subjects would reveal their true intentions via subtle nonverbal cues. With his elbow propped on the chair’s armrest, his brawny fingers, one curled over his lips, the others pressing into his cheekbone, Ibiki’s eyes darted between the leather bound folder on his desk, the unperturbed Dr. Umino, the engaged Mr. Kamizuki and the sullen Mr. Hagane.

Hagane Kotetsu; he was an easy read.

He stood out from the others simply because of his facial hair; as silly as that seemed on the surface, for Ibiki it was an indicator of a paradoxical personality. His goatee, thin, neatly trimmed, perfectly symmetrical and jet black, was in stark contrast to the hair on his head; thick, dark brown and unkempt. From the time he took his seat, Hagane’s heel tapped uneven rhythms against the floorboards; his fingers, when they weren’t brushing at his goatee, drummed at his thigh. Nervous, unable to sit still for longer than a minute … a man of action; one given to ‘doing’, rather than thinking overmuch. There was an earthy shrewdness about him, a feral instinct for survival his two intellectual pals lacked. His eyes, blacker than a starless night and deeper than a pit in the ocean … this one was definitely hiding something. But of the three, Hagane was the one most relatable; a man more at ease in the wide-open grasslands or tramping through the moors. Plucked from his natural element, handcuffed by social etiquette and friendship, his eyes flitted over everything in the office, as if he were searching for an escape route.

The last young man, Kamizuki Izumo was most interesting. A gallimaufry of his friends with a unique viewpoint. He bore a passing physical resemblance to Umino, and possessed a guardedness more pronounced than the young Hagane. A regal bearing; never once averting his eyes from mine, as if determining my worth; this wasn’t haughtiness, but the mark of a self-assured man. Just like
Hagane, there was a dangerous edge behind those intelligent, piercing brown eyes; like Umino, he had book smarts, fortified with a healthy dose of common sense.

The sound of heavy hurried footsteps in the hallway disrupted his thoughts and brought the acid in his empty stomach to a boil; someone moving with that kind of urgency always meant bad news. There was a light rap on the door a second before the smiling man in black entered.

“Oh! Excuse me gents. Didn’t realize you were in a meeting. Heh ... so quiet in here, felt like I was back in my own shop for a minute.” Tapping the brim of his hat, he nodded to the young men as he walked toward Ibiki’s desk. “Keep your seats ... I’ll just be a moment.”

Genma was grinning like a hungry cat in a room full of lame, juicy mice, as he triumphantly waved a slip of paper before the irritated Inspector’s eyes. “Representatives of the family just left my place … got you a positive identification. You know, I never could tell those Hyuga girls apart … ‘stair steps’ they were, practically identical if you ask me.” Turning his back on Ibiki, he stuck out his hand. “Name’s Shiranui Genma, coroner and undertaker. ‘I know everybody in town … can’t say I’ve ever seen you three before though.’

Ibiki rolled his eyes. Genma, always flapping his gums or poking that pointed nose into things that don’t concern him; damn fool’s about as subtle as a herd of elephants in a glass factory.

“Umino … Dr. Umino. My friends, Hagane Kotetsu and Kamizuki Izumo. We just arrived from England last night.”

As their conversation, rather Genma’s monologue continued, Ibiki made himself concentrate on the form in his hand; the soft leather of the chair back melting around him after he read the first three lines of text:

Hyuga Hitomi, twenty-three years of age.

Cause of death, exsanguination.

Manner of death, homicide.

A beautiful young woman, a lifetime of opportunity and happiness stretching before her, was now a cold, impersonal statistic. Hers had been a life of privilege, she wanted for nothing, yet she defied her family and struck out on her own, determined to serve the underprivileged, neglected and the forgotten. Quite a ruckus accompanied her decision to intern as a pediatric nurse in the slums of London, or so he’d heard from the mounted patrolmen.

Scarce a month passed since she returned home.

As he closed his eyes, Ibiki could still see her mother standing on the wharf, weeping bitterly as she bid bon voyage to her eldest daughter. And on a warm autumn night one year later, the entire family turned out, welcoming her back on that same wharf; he could still see her, running down the gangplank, falling into the embrace of her parents clutching a nursing certificate in one hand and a valise full of memories in the other. Elegant horse drawn carriages lined up by the wharf that night to fetch the entourage to an extravagant welcome home party. How odd it seemed in retrospect; her parents, anxious about her safety while she wandered about a foreign land, yet, they allowed her to wait unaccompanied for a ride home one fateful moonlit night. Now, this vivacious young woman lay on a porcelain slab in the morgue, fifty feet from the wharf ... brutally slaughtered five miles from her ancestral home.

Casting aside the coroner’s report, Ibiki leaned forward, his eyes lingering on the unopened portfolio
lying in the middle of his desk. Expertly tooled, its stitches weathered by time and careful handling, were of a darker brown than the case itself.

*And Umino wants me to believe this piece of animal hide holds the key to a murderer’s identity?*

In the very center of the case was a familiar kamon, one he’d seen numerous times in the military. Slowly tracing the raised emblem with his finger, he interrupted Genma’s rambling. “Umino … that’s your surname correct?”

Iruka tilted his head, his smiling eyes falling on Ibiki’s finger as it hovered over the embossed design. “Yes, that’s right. Shimizu was the surname of my mother’s family. That portfolio, was a wedding gift my maternal grandfather crafted … it’s one of the few things I have left to remember my parents by.”

“Dead, are they?” Ibiki said pulling the portfolio closer to himself.

Every eye in the room latched onto him – Genma, stunned to silence by the crude tone of his voice, Kotetsu angrily fidgeting in his seat. The combined weight of Kamizuki and Umino’s grief almost bowled him over.

“Yes, Inspector … they are deceased. My mother died years ago … my father passed away in May of this year. That’s why it took us so long to arrive, I had to settle his affairs, close up the house and-”

“This isn’t a Fire Country kamon. Where exactly was your mother’s family from, Doctor Umino?”

Iruka’s eyes misted over and he swallowed hard before answering. “Water Country sir, they were buraku, tanners by trade; the finest saddle makers in the entire five country region--”

“Water Country … well, that explains your name.”

Kotetsu shot forward in his seat, “What the hell does that have to do with anything? Thought we came here to prevent another murder, not--”

“Please,” Iruka stretched out his arm to restrain his friend. “I’m certain our goal and his are one and the same.” His hand fell to his companion’s wrist and he gently shook it. “The Inspector doesn’t know us from a hole in the ground … we barged into his office without a letter of introduction preceding us or a confirmed appointment--”

“Won’t you ever listen? I’ve told you time and again, soliciting law enforcement isn’t going to work,” he snapped, jerking his wrist from the gentle grip. “We need to handle this thing ourselves!”

“Tetsu, we need to work in conjunction with and through the proper channels,” said Izumo. “Like it or not, the constables will--”

“Get in our way and waste our time! We know what we’re looking for and we know how to deal with it when we find it! This meeting’s just going to end with him thinking we’re crazy before he kicks us out of here!”

A terse conversation in an indistinct dialect ensued as Iruka and Izumo pleaded with a reluctant Kotetsu for patience.

“Gentlemen, you have not, because you ask not,” Ibiki said. “Why don’t you tell me what you’re looking for, who knows? Maybe I can help.”
“Pardon, Genma, isn't there something, or rather, someone that needs your undivided attention?”

“Nope, but thanks for asking, Inspector,” he said, slipping his hands into his pockets and leaning against the desk. “Miss Hyuga will keep for a few minutes more, besides, I’m curious about what’s inside that solander. While you were ignoring us Inspector, I found out the elder Dr. Umino was a physician … reckon you’ll need my help deciphering the medical lingo in there.” Looking over at Iruka, he hastily added, “No offense, but you’re a Doctor of philosophy, not medicine, right?”

“My doctorates are in anthropology and archaeology, Mr. Shiranui. My father was a physician,” he said reaching for the portfolio, “later in life he became obsessed with the occult and paranormal.” Opening the leather case, Iruka slowly flipped through wrinkled, tattered pages filled with detailed drawings of wolves, bats and hideously deformed humanoid beings. Images of grotesque creatures sailed past Ibiki’s eyes until they came to rest on an ink splotched page filled with notes.

“What we’re looking for Inspector, is a class of demons known as Jiki-Ketsu-Gaki; wailing corpses who thirst for blood.”

Knew he had a screw loose somewhere. “Well, I wish you luck in your quest for a being that doesn’t exist outside of fairy tales. What I’m looking for Dr. Umino, is a human being, not a phantasm or figment of an overactive imagination—”

“Inspector, Jiki-Ketsu-Gaki have shape shifting abilities, they can transform into animals or take on the form of a living human being at will. Some of the oldest and most powerful of these beings can and do stalk their prey invisibly—”

“I’m certain they can, but that’s of no interest to me. You’re in need of a shaman or an exorcist, not an officer of the law. On second thought, perhaps the monks at the Fire Temple might be intrigued by your father’s research about preta ... why not share it with them?” Slamming the portfolio closed, he pushed it under Iruka’s hand. “Once again, I bid you good day gentlemen.”

“But, Inspector,” Iruka said as he stood, “I believe—”

“I said good day, sir!”

The noise of the office door opening was covered up by the sound of Ibiki’s booming voice. Silently, a tall, thin woman with short black hair approached and stood beside his desk.

“Morning Miss Shizune,” they all heard Genma say. “Not looking for me, are you?”

“Afraid not,” she said, bowing before the four men and then to Ibiki. “My apologies Inspector but the Governor requests your presence immediately.”

“How fortunate then, we’ve just now adjourned.” The abrupt manner in which he stood signaled meeting's end to all present. "I'm sure you can see yourselves out gentlemen."

“If it’s alright with you Inspector and uh, Dr. Umino, I wouldn’t mind having a look see at that research. Always been curious about the supernatural myself—”

“Some other time perhaps, Mr. Shiranui,” was Izumo’s respectful response. “A visit to the Fire Temple wasn’t on our agenda, but as the Inspector pointed out, it might prove beneficial.”

A flummoxed Kotetsu snapped, “But we’re supposed to go to the--”
“Come along Tetsu,” Iruka said. “If we hurry, we might catch the monks before mid-morning prayers.”

"Huh?" Angrily glancing between his friends as if he'd never seen either of them before, Kotetsu wonders aloud,

“The hell’s the matter with you two?”

NOTES:

Indomitable: that cannot be subdued or overcome as persons, will or courage; unconquerable.

Aflush: fully or generously supplied with something.

Hardihood: audacity or impudence.

Secular: not spiritual; of or relating to the physical world; controlled by the government rather than the church or temple.

Paradoxical: having seemingly contradictory qualities or phases.

Moor: a tract of land preserved for game.

Portfolio: a large, thin flat case for loose sheets of paper such as drawings or maps.

Hitomi Hyuga: a conveniently disposable character; rest assured, I would never kill off the shy, yet strong-willed Hinata or her younger sister Hanabi.

Kamon: a family crest, a Japanese heraldic symbol.

Gallimaufry: hodgepodge, jumble, confused medley.

Shimizu: “Pure or clear water.”

Buraku or burakumin: “hamlet people,” an outcast group at the bottom of the Japanese social order, in the feudal era. These were people considered ‘impure,’ tainted by death because of the work they did (executioners, undertakers, butchers or tanners).

Solander: a case that held maps or other large documents. It was made to resemble a book, having the front cover serve as a lid. Genma incorrectly refers to the portfolio this way.

Jiki-Ketsu-Gaki: creatures of Japanese myth. Because of the way they’re depicted as skeletal beings with distended bellies, abnormally small mouths and long thin throats, they are also known as “hungry-ghosts”; these nocturnal creatures or spirits have been cursed with an insatiable hunger or thirst for blood, in particular as a result of their bad deeds or the evil intent they possessed in their lifetime. Also known as classes of preta, Buddhist monks conduct a special day of observance in mid-August to remember the gaki.

Pretas: often depicted in Japanese art (particularly that from the Heian period) as emaciated human beings with bulging stomachs and inhumanly small mouths and throats. They are frequently shown licking up spilled water in temples or accompanied by demons representing their personal agony. Pretas dwell in the waste and desert places of the earth, and vary in situation according to their past karma. Since 657, some Japanese Buddhists have observed a special day in mid-August to remember the gaki. Through such offerings of food and drink and remembrances (segaki), it is believed that the hungry ghosts may be released from their torment.
Gaki: hungry dead or spoiled child.
Recherché: Routines and Revelations

A civilian stumbled upon the latest victim - frantic, he'd beat down the front door of the Chief Inspector’s home. *Routine.* But no ordinary deceased was this; her family’s pedigree predated Konoha’s founding, their social standing, higher than the stars in the welkin. And then, there was the voluble Coroner, chock full of cheesy grins and fallacious expectations. *Routine.* Now, a summons to appear before the Governor with a winsome escort to guarantee prompt attendance; she’d also record what promised to be an ear-blistering, ego-deflating reprimand. *Routine.*

“The Governor’s mood was … unreadable,” he heard her say. “Least she wasn’t cursing a blue streak when I left … that’s a good sign, right?”

“Too early to tell; Lady Tsunade is a woman of mercurial temperament. Starting to think I picked the wrong week to quit smoking.”

A heartening touch to the tip of his shoulder, a wan smile and the intendment of comfort shone in her eyes. But nothing she could say or do now would make him believe this meeting would end better than his carefully laid, perfectly executed and completely empty trap had last night. Perhaps, nothing would satisfy the restless feeling, deep inside. *Revelation.*

As they turn the corner and step over the threshold of the squad room, they were swept into a vortex of sight, sound and smell; splashed down in a sea of dark blue uniforms, the officers navigate crooked paths around them like frothy waves. Flotsam and jetsam of superfluous conversation, boisterous jesting and spirited laughter sprung up from scratched, dusty floorboards; clambering through the windows, briny breezes scatter the tang of bay rum, unwashed, sweaty men and fragrant pipe tobaccos over them ...

*Guess I was wrong,* he thought.

It was rare when the noise level in this room rose above a dull roar, paydays being the exception of course. The duties of a constable kept them outside these brick and mortar confines, attendant upon keeping the peace, they worked and moved with the pace of the people. Settlement the occasional squabble between neighbors, rounding up kids playing hooky or stealing fruit from vendors – that sort of thing, their constant presence used to be a source of security for the people . . . now it was just a reminder of how fragile and uncertain life was. Yet this morning, it looked like every uniformed officer on the force had shoehorned themselves in the building. On the brink of chaos, Ibiki felt himself stand taller. Yes, this was his brand of normalcy and these men . . . his saving grace.

*I see … leaning on one another, they rebound from malaise, providing the unspoken support which the public cannot.* Hope, feeble at first, stirred in the corner of his heart. *They haven’t given up yet… why should I?*

To his right, about fifteen feet away from the watch commander’s desk assembled the usual complement of assorted, but harmless nuts. A concerned citizen’s choir singing a familiar refrain of questions, their voices modulating in harmony as they ridiculed the constable’s mental competency and railed against the inept handling of a homegrown horror. In between stanzas of this oft heard medley, was the childlike reprise begging for assurance of their continued safety. *Routine.*

To his left, at the far end of the squad room, four constables stood between a disgruntled merchant and an offended ship’s captain. A loud, vulgar dispute centering around delivery of damaged goods and refusal to pay for said items. *Routine.* Exhausted from last night’s excursion into futility, a crooked line of civilian patrol members, propped themselves against the wall nearest the restroom
behind the desk sergeant’s area. Some of them were watching the show put on by the merchant and
the seaman, others dozed off right where they stood, all of them waiting to receive a chit for their
service.

Lastly, seated at a desk nearest him was a broken hearted elderly woman weeping into her apron; she
was another regular. Her fourteen year old grandson snuck out of the house late last night as was his
habit. The wringing of worried hands would eventually become the shaking of an angry gnarled
finger when the boy finally turned up -- unharmed and apologetic. Seems the kid had an appetite to
watch longshoremen load and unload cargo by the light of a full moon. Routine.

Wending through the roiling sea of people, having lost Shizune somewhere along the way, Ibiki
stopped to snatch a cigar off a desk nearest the front door; this too had become part of his routine. At
first, it seemed the wizened, balding man behind the desk hadn’t noticed the blatant theft, too
occupied was he in sorting through a small mound of paperwork. But without warning, the older
man lazily slapped away the hand hovering over a small box of matches before Ibiki could grab them
as well.

“You’ll have to be a mite faster than that Ibiki,” he chuckled. “Besides, I thought you and tobacco
parted ways some time ago.”

“Ryota, a fine cigar, that’s been dipped in cognac, is a necessary evil for me,” Ibiki said. “And a
successfully pilfered, fine cigar that’s been dipped in cognac, tastes a thousand times sweeter. You
wouldn’t understand old-timer; I have a love/hate relationship with tobacco, almost like the one you
have with doing paperwork.”

Takenaka Ryota – this man had been a constable since Ibiki was in knee-britches; he’d trained just
about everyone in this squad room, Ibiki included. Because of his keen, analytical mind, no
nonsense disposition and exceptional leadership skills, he was sought after to fill the post of
Commandant each time the position was vacated; he chose instead to remain as commander of the
watch that he might share his wisdom and experience with each new generation of law enforcement
personnel. Over the years, he became a confidante, a mentor and an unstoppable fount of
encouragement when the pressures of the job became too great and one who wouldn’t hesitate to
give him a swift kick in the pants.

“You’ll get the matches, as soon as I get your signature on these,” he said, fanning out several
documents before Ibiki. “And if you do it without grumbling, I’ll give you some ginger candy to
settle your stomach.”

It felt good to laugh, for Ibiki had little time to do that sort of thing over the last few days. “How
could I resist, especially when you phrase it as a bribe?” Just as he was about to sign another
overtime request, someone bumped into him from behind. Given the amount of people in this place,
that wasn’t surprising; but this was no accident. He turned to see Hagane Kotetsu high-tailing it out
the front door. A curious glance to the left and there stood Genma speaking with Umino and
Kamizuki near the seating area in the middle of the room. Probably giving them directions to the
Fire Temple, he thought. “Ryota … see those men talking with Shiranui over there?”

“What about ‘em?”

“Assign a team to keep an eye on them.” With two pieces of candied ginger and the match box now
in his possession, he leaned closer. “I wanna know where they go and what they do from the time
they walk out of here until the time they leave the territory. Understood?”

“Wait a minute, I was the one who took them to your office this morning … they seemed okay to me.
What you think they’re up to?”

“Ryota, a fine cigar, that’s been dipped in cognac, is a necessary evil for me,” Ibiki said. “And a
successfully pilfered, fine cigar that’s been dipped in cognac, tastes a thousand times sweeter. You
wouldn’t understand old-timer; I have a love/hate relationship with tobacco, almost like the one you
have with doing paperwork.”
Ibiki shook his head. “Not sure … just keep ‘em under surveillance until I say different. Got a meeting with the Governor--”

“There’s a surprise. Just so you know, a civilian patrol found skeletal remains scattered in a forest clearing last night. My guess is they belong to a hunter; poor bastard, either dropped dead of natural causes or got mauled by a bear. I sent Raidou and Aoba to investigate.”

“Hmm . . .” Ibiki murmured rolling the tip of the appropriated cigar over his tongue. “Do me a favor, pull up the--”

“Way ahead of you. I’ve got every missing person report filed since January of last year right here,” he said pointing to a thick manila folder.

“Good …. but mums the word. Governor’s gonna be all over me like ugly on a gorilla about the Hyuga girl, I don’t need any more rumors flying around--”

“Got it; I suggest you get over to the Administrative complex on the double. Our Governor isn’t a patient woman and I’m sure you don’t want her to come looking for you.” Sorting the signed documents into smaller piles, Ryota inclined his head toward the weeping grandmother. “Oh, and if you’re looking for your escort, she’s standing over there.”

After catching her attention with a wave of his hand, Shizune gave the old woman a warm hug and hastened toward him. “That poor lady,” she said as Ibiki grabbed her by the elbow and guided her toward the door. “It’s just so sad.”

“That grandson of hers needs to dance to the tune of a hickory switch a couple of times -- that oughta straighten him out.” Chucking the matchbox at Ryota’s head, he called, “Thanks again old man.”

The smell of sulfur made his nose twitch and the tiny puff of smoke blowing back into his face made his eye water a happy tear. Thick blue grey smoke danced around on his tongue delivering a jolt of nicotine with that first inhalation; soon he was grinning like a Cheshire cat. He heard himself give an involuntary sigh of content despite the disapproving look in Shizune’s eyes as he emerged from a columbine haze.

“If you need a few more minutes to unwind,” she said gesturing to his cigar and the dissipating brume around him, “I don’t mind waiting.” She stood apace as he hurriedly puffed away. “Lady Tsunade understands how busy your morning’s been and I’m certain she won’t fuss too much if we--”

“Tempting, but I’d rather get this over with as soon as possible.”

The people milling about in the plaza parted before them as they walked, many bowing their heads in deference to Shizune; the sad eyed smiles or angry glowers were reserved for and directed at him – again, this was another facet of normalcy.

“By the way, Hitomi’s father and his lawyers have already met with the Governor this morning.”

Ibiki rolled his eyes and took another long drag.

Having arrived at the Administrative complex sooner than he wanted to, he leaned against the building with a weary sigh, stubbing out his cigar against the bottom of his boot and tucking it away in between two widely spaced bricks.

In contrast to the noisy constabulary and the lively plaza, once they stepped inside the interior double doors and into the foyer of the Administrative offices, the place was as quiet as a tomb. It smelled
fresh in here too; the fragrance of frankincense still loitering in the air, weaving a lattice of tranquility long after the monks had given their daily blessing upon this office.

He’d traversed the glossy inlaid floor bearing Konoha’s seal -- a spreading sugi tree, with such frequency these last few months that he could almost feel where each bough of the tree bifurcated under the soles of his boots. To the right was an area, a small museum really, which housed artifacts, relics and brief historical sketches of Konoha’s progress through the years; this was the place where dignitaries were entertained as they waited to meet with the Governor. Portraits of the men who established and settled the territory hung from mahogany paneled walls, each of them smiling down on the plush leather upholstered chairs and the hand loomed carpets of silken threads that overspread sections of freshly waxed cedar floors.

On the left side of the space was a large seating area for the public; it’s surprisingly comfortable wooden chairs neatly organized in a semicircle, providing room for people to congregate and chew the fat while they waited to file or receive copies of vital records. Large, terracotta pots filled with indigenous plants, wildflowers and dwarf trees were arranged before floor to ceiling windows that opened onto the plaza. Straight ahead, a massive orbicular reception and hospitality desk separated the accommodation areas from the great hall and the Governor’s private suite of offices. Of the five clerks assisting the people, all but one of them turned their backs as he approached – only the robust, oily faced woman smiled benevolently when she caught his eye. This too was something that shaped the routine of these past months.

Deftly steering him away from the sharp clucking tongues of the clerks, Shizune ushered him into a conference room beside the reception area. This room, with its knotted pine walls was usually where he spent his time, watching Lady Tsunade pace alongside the conference table, listening to her curse up a storm over his inability to collar a killer even as tears streamed down her cheeks. But when he moved to take his customary seat, Shizune waved him off.

“Oh, no, no Inspector, Lady Tsunade wishes to speak with you in her office.”

Crap, that wasn’t a good sign.

The Governor’s private office was where the rich and powerful met to broker agreements, sign concords of peace or trade agreements between nations and exchange meaningless blandishments over premium sake and rich food. Last time he was in there was the day of his appointment as Chief Inspector; how fitting to end his career in the same place it began.

“That you, Ibiki? Come on in,” he heard the Governor say in response to Shizune’s rap on the door.

She had her back to them when they walked in and Ibiki was stunned to see her looking like this. Long blonde hair tumbled in loose waves down the back of a forest green haori; it was usually piled high on her head and held in place by ornately lacquered pins. The black hakama and the low-heeled slippers she wore meant either there were no official events on her calendar today, or she’d been roused from her bed in much the same way he’d been. She turned to face him with a cheerful smile, not the scowl he expected, a small book in her hand and pince-nez resting on her nose. She almost looked pleased to see him.

That had to be a bad omen.

A light dusting of rouge tinted impossibly high cheekbones, her eyes, bright and saffron yellow twinkled above flawless, smooth skin, ecru in color like raw silk. Hard to believe the woman he was looking at was rumored to be in her mid-fifties. Tall, not as willowy as her assistant, still she cut a figure envied by women half her age.
“Morning ma’am.”

“Hope you’re hungry …I ordered a massive breakfast from one of the inns. Shizune, be a dear, and fetch it please. Have a seat Ibiki.”

Unsure what to make of this gracious welcome, he did as instructed, warily sitting on the edge of a plump cushioned chair.

Her glasses swung from a sterling silver and ebony brooch as she walked toward him. “Don’t imagine your day started any better than mine; had to deal with Hyuga Hiashi and his solicitors first thing … you know how much fun that usually is. They left about half an hour ago, outraged of course,” she said, taking the seat across from him. “Wanted your resignation or failing that … your head on a pike. Tea?”

“Yes, please,” he laughed. “Can’t say I’m surprised, ma’am.”

“Underneath the righteous indignation, Hiashi was disconsolate; blames himself more than you for what happened.”

There was another light rap at the door before Shizune entered with a silver tray weighed down with several small dishes and another pot of tea. She gave Ibiki one of her encouraging smiles and an extra helping of steamed rice before quietly exiting.

“So, you and your men, how are you holding up?”

“Rather well, thank you.”

“Liar ... you look like you’ve been ridden hard and put away wet, Ibiki,” she joshed gathering up a helping of tarako with ivory chopsticks. “The only criminal activities your men encounter are pickpockets and scam artists during the festivals, and the only violence they see comes from breaking up fights in the watering holes near the docks.” Cupping a small soup bowl under her nose, she inhaled deeply and sighed. “And then there’s the occasional disturbance at the cathouse . . . err, pardon me, the boarding house,” she said, lowering the bowl and reaching for a spoon. A sip of creamy miso soup elicited a groan of delight. “That’s about as politically sticky as anything they’re accustomed to, am I right?”

Ibiki nodded.

“And we both know why the ‘cathouse catalogs’, aren’t included in official police blotters, don’t we?”

“The boarding house generates substantial revenue,” he said around a mouthful of omelet. “Most of that income is from the arrangement of liaisons for visiting dignitaries and some of Konoha’s upstanding and very married men.”

The ceramic spoon came to rest atop the nearly empty soup bowl. Rising from the table, she walked back to her desk. “Ibiki … you’d lay down your life for the people of this territory if need be.” When she turned to face him again, she held the little book tightly in her hands. “I know you’ll leave no stone unturned to find the man responsible, but--”

“You let me keep my job and my head, I'm grateful. I'm most appreciative for your impeccable timing … drew me out of three very exasperating situations this morning.”

“Is that so? Keeping you and Hiashi separated was one,” she said draping her napkin over her lap, “and the other two were--?”
“Being talked to death by the Coroner and getting me out of a maddening meeting with three young men. They just arrived in the territory last night … seemed intent on frittering away my time with tall tales and an ancient picture book.”

“Sounds typical for a murder morn,” she said flipping pages in the book beside her plate. “At least tell me you’ve developed some leads on our murderer.”

“Nothing solid yet ma’am, however, skeletal remains were found in the forest last night and I--”

“Damn,” she said, slamming the book closed. “Now we have nine victims?”

“Nah … probably a hunter. Once Genma’s finished his bit, I’ll give you a definite answer.”

Recherché

_They know how important this meeting is_, thought an anxious Iruka as he sat in the waiting area near the reception desk. _Hope they’ll forgive me for abandoning them to Genma._

"Next," called the robust clerk.

“Not sure what the protocol is,” he flashed a winning smile and handed over the envelope, "but I’d like to see the Governor as soon as possible, please. I assume this will be sufficient?”

“One moment sir.” She stepped away from the counter and called over another clerk; Iruka strained to hear their conversation. After a few exchanged nods and whispers, she returned saying, “Well . . . this is definitely the Governor’s stationery and signature. Unfortunately, her schedule is rather hectic for the remainder of this week. Might you be available to take a meeting with her next week, Mr. err, Dr. Umino?”

“No . . . that simply won’t do,” he insisted. “This is a matter of grave import--”

“Perhaps you’d like to speak with her assistant then?”

Notes:

Welkin: the sky; the vault of heaven.

Voluble: characterized by a ready and continuous flow of words; talkative.

Fallacious: logically unsound.

Flotsam and jetsam: specific kinds of shipwreck – flotsam, floating wreckage of a ship or its cargo; jetsam – part of a ship, its equipment or cargo, purposely thrown overboard to lighten the load in times of distress and washed ashore.

Wending: (archaic) – to proceed or go.

Chit: a signed note for money owed to the bearer of the note.

Appetence: intense desire.

Intendment: intention.

Columbine: dove colored; grey.
Brume: fog or mist.

Bifurcate: to divide or fork into two branches.

Orbicular: circular, ring like, spherical.

Pince-nez: a style of glasses supported without earpieces by pinching the bridge of the nose. Uncomfortable to wear for long periods of time, they were usually suspended by a ribbon or chain around the neck. Women made use of a brooch-like device pinned to their clothing which would automatically retract the line to which the glasses were attached when not in use.

Tarako: a salted roe derived from cod, usually enjoyed with breakfast.
Sounds of renovation, the squeal of pry bars yanking rusty nails from large wooden crates, the shush of rip saws biting into dense cedar and the voices of servants directing workmen from room to room; these were muted now as a tall olive-skinned man descended steep slate stairs into the belly of the stately manor. Yellow candlelight weakly flickers against the heavy darkness; nervous fingers seek out gorges in the stone walls to balance himself as the staircase narrowed at its junction with the floor of the subterranean vault.

The news he’d just received ... urgent and extremely unpleasant; it fell to him to inform the Master. Disturbing a numen at rest carried significant risk; his Master, a violent being, derived pleasure by inflicting unspeakable acts of cruelty upon those who dared interrupt his daily routine. Were he to wake him now, so soon after he’d taken his bed, odds were great he’d be splayed open from neck to navel in the span of a breath. Were he to wait until the Master stirred of his own volition, a severe beating was his due for delaying news of great import.

Hands violently shaking toward the antechamber, heart, thrumming against a heaving rib cage, pearls of perspiration turn into rivulets of sweat running alongside his ears. He set down the lantern, afeared he’d drop it that he might flatten down thick, dark brown hair with sweaty palms, he took a breath and pulled together fleeing oddments of courage.

Each breath, measured out as though it might be his last, once more he ignores the thin wire handle of the lantern cutting into his palm. Hinges faintly groan as with a nudge of the shoulder the solid wooden door is pushed ajar. Soft leather soles glide across limestone slates as he servant approached the raised pyramidal structure of finest Cryptomeria in the center of the room. Master’s resting place, widest at its base with three broad steps leading up to the bed itself. Leaving the lantern beside the bullnose, Kinoe cautiously stood on the first tread. By the time he reached the second tread, his body quaked in fear – here he knelt, bowed his head in submission and rapped his knuckles against the riser beneath the bed’s frame.

“My Lord,” he said quietly. “I have exigent news.”

The Master shifted slightly at the sound of his voice but did not awaken. Kinoe thought to rap once more when out of the blue, cold, powerful fingers wrapped themselves around his throat, lifting him upward until the tips of his toes bumped against the first riser, pulling him closer to the side of the bed and squeezing the breath from him.

A voice, deep and menacing rumbled through the stagnant air:

“Damn well better be!”

“My Lord,” he spluttered, “Umino and his cohorts have arrived ... met with . . . Chief Inspector first thing.”

At once, the hand around his throat was gone; his flight through the air, terminated when his back crashed into the stone wall opposite Master’s bed.

“Have Maito track their every step,” he heard over the pain wracking his battered body. “I expect a thorough account of their movements when I awake.”

Scrabbling to his knees, his vision swimming, breathing labored he whimpered, “I will see to it at once, my Lord.”
As he crawled backward, the sound of the Master’s laughter rose above him, echoing fetid and noxious throughout the chamber.

“Let us hope the younger Umino proves a greater challenge than his father was.”

Recherché

Ill tidings flew swifter than swallows; everyone in the territory could speak of nothing aside from the plucky heiress who met an untimely and tragic end. Not surprising then, was the speed at which the summons came. Fully aware his Master’s state of mind grew more volatile as the sun ascended, Maito bounded through the forests; a blur of black and green as he hastened through the groves.

Almost as soon as he walked through the front door, workaday conversation in the grand hall hung in the air -- suspended in mid syllable; every head turned, and every eye fastened upon him. When he cocked his head to the left and then to the right, he could hear the bowels of the burly workmen seizing up -- the smell of their fear so thick, it flavored the atmosphere like a piquant bouquet of sweat and pheromones.

Humans, he thought with a smile, so easily frightened . . . so quickly tantalized by that which they do not understand.

A sly smile from him, so wide and inviting, sent an audible rush of relief through the entrance way where he stood; arms akimbo, he countenanced the furtive glances, drank in equal parts of their attraction and reveled in their repulsion. Many of the assembled navvies roused themselves from stupor, pretending to carry on with their assigned tasks while some moistened dry lips with a swipe of their turgid tongues. A jaunty nod of his head meant the show was over and he strutted through the horde of hirelings. The drawing room at the end of the hall was where he’d been summoned and it was there he focused the whole of his attention. Making his way down the hall, household servants scurried away like cockroaches, pressing themselves against the walls as he passed them; bowing low and shielding their eyes as they’d been taught.

“Hey Takumi,” whispered one of the workmen when he thought Maito was out of earshot, “reckon that’s the Master of the manor?”

“Don’t know, don’t care and since neither of us is getting paid to stand around gawking at rich folks . . . here,” he said, pressing a spud bar into his friend’s hand, “make yourself useful.”

But the younger man’s eyes remained fastened to Maito’s retreating back. “Only men I know that are taller and broader than him are millwrights.”

“So what?”

“Odd lookin,’ don’t you think? And did you see those teeth? Quite a set of choppers; whiter than white they were, and sharp . . . like he could skin you alive with ‘em! And those eyebrows. . . damn near cover half his forehead!”

The crowbar’s pinch point slipped under a rusty nail with a squeal and above the skin-crawling noise, everyone, including the man under scrutiny heard him say:

“I tell ya, that guy looks like a rabid wolf.”

Suddenly, Maito stopped in his tracks; the sensation of eyes darting between him and the obtuse workman almost tangible. Taking mental note of the braggart’s name, he stored away the memory of his smell for future recall. Though everything in him demanded he turn and rip the smaller man
asunder, he denied the insistence of his instincts; couldn’t afford another slip up so soon.

“I swear, Hiroaki, you haven’t got half the brains of a termite,” hissed the man on the other side of the crate. “You insulted that man and I know damn well he heard what you said, fool! If he were to come for you,” he said, slipping the claw hammer in his pants pocket, “you’d piss yourself.”

“Yes, he’d be yipping like a little mutt,” said another workman who’d sidled up beside the young man. “What’s the matter,” he laughed, chuckling the other man’s chin, “aint you ever seen what years of inbreeding looks like?”

From around the corner, the two jesting men heard the rapid footsteps of the foreman and moved away quickly.

“Knock it off you lack wits,” snapped the irritated overseer as his beefy fist bounced off the young man's head. “That'll learn ya to keep your big mouth shut Hiroaki. The rest of you louts . . . get back to work!”

Ah yes, Maito thought. If Master allows,

you’ll make quite the delicious amuse-bouche . . . Hiroaki.

Notes:

Cryptomeria [japonica]: a conifer in the cypress family; endemic to Japan where it is known as sugi. A large evergreen tree, with spirally arranged leaves (needle-like) and globular seed cones; superficially similar to Giant Sequoia.

Oddment: an odd article, bit or remnant.

Exigent: requiring immediate action or aid; urgent, pressing.

Bullnose: where steps are open on one or both sides.

Tread: horizontal part of a stairway that is stepped on.

Riser: vertical part of a stairway between each tread.

Numen: a deity, especially one presiding locally.

Navvy: an unskilled, manual laborer.

Hireling: a person who works only for pay, especially in a menial or boring job, with little or no concern for the value of the work.

Spud bar: crowbar.

Hiroaki: “Widespread brightness”.

Takumi: “Artisan.”

Amuse-bouche (French): to ‘amuse the mouth.’ It’s a bite-sized portion of food to stimulate the appetite before a meal or to clear the palate between courses of a large meal.
Recherché: Gather Round

Miles from a bustling town plaza, worlds apart from the malodorous constable’s den, this scenic shortcut was everything Genma promised. Shielded by a canopy of dragon’s blood red maple trees, dappled sunlight played leapfrog at their feet over the hardened yellow clay path leading to the temple. Creeping ground cover swayed under the weight of pollen laden bees. The steeper the incline, the headier the perfume of shrubbery blooming out of their seasons – jasmine, heliotrope, sweet alyssum and loquat trees. A pity . . . this place, a balm for the weary soul and a delight for the senses, was going to waste, for the one man best able to appreciate its ambiance was probably sitting in a meeting with the Governor. Sandwiched between the multiloquent mortician pointing out the cultural significance of every pebble, plant and paving stone along the way, and the choleric Kotetsu, who’d taken to mumbling humorously creative curse words under his breath, Izumo was hard pressed to keep a smile on his lips and his own temper in check.

And at the rate things were going, the urge to turn back after throttling both of them was becoming harder to resist.

“Mr. Shiranui,” he said, praying his tone wouldn’t give away the irritation he felt, “we appreciate the time you’ve set aside to accompany us to the temple but--”

“Think nothing of it and please . . . call me Genna,” he huffed, putting more distance between them. “Had to go to there anyway . . . huge wake tonight, huge funeral tomorrow you know. Have to . . . finalize arrangements with the priest and monks, make sure the altar’s prepared – things like that. Bet you gents didn’t know the work of an undertaker was so complex . . . oh, that reminds me, have to get back to the morgue before noon. Afraid I won’t be accompanying you back to town . . . coffin delivery and a nōkan to perform--”

“Yeah, yeah, we got it . . . red-letter day for you,” Kotetsu sniped. “How much longer before we get there?”

"Quarter of a mile I reckon, we’re almost at the crest of the hill. Don’t tell me, strapping young buck like you can’t keep up with an old man like me?"

Izumo felt his friend bristle beside him and from the corner of his eye, he saw him open his mouth to say something churlish. Mercifully, Genma was quicker on the draw.

“Could’ve made better time on horseback, but the only stables nearby belong to the constables; they frown on hiring out their mounts to civilians.”

“Not a problem, a brisk walk in the fresh air will do us good,” Izumo assured him.

“Well let me know if you gents need to stop and catch your breath. Meanwhile, if you look to your left, that stone lantern over there was a gift from the Land of Earth … I think.”

As their nescient cicerone moved up the path, Izumo nudged his friend in the ribs drawing his attention to a brace of colorful waterfowl zigzagging their way through the bulrushes and sword ferns near shallow ponds. Soon, they formed a cluster of shiny orange and black beaks and flapping feathers as they waddled closer to the winding footpath.

It took a few minutes before Genma realized they weren’t walking behind him, and when he turned about he chuckled saying, “Don’t mind them. Little buggers, used to getting handouts from the
pilgrims along this path. Once they realize you have no bread fragments or sweet corn kernels to give them, they’ll quiet down and leave you alone. Now, let me direct your attention to--"

"Wonder what it will take to make him quiet down and leave us alone?"

A shared, guilty snicker rippled between the two young men. "Cut it out Tetsu, we’re being rude to our host."

"Like he cares. We’ve hardly gotten a word in edgewise since we left the Constable’s office, you think he’s paying attention to us now? I say we ditch him--"

"That’s unwise." Holding up his hands to forestall interruption he added, "Consider this, we show up on law enforcement’s doorstep the very morning a high-profile murder victim was discovered; we didn’t exactly keep it secret that we have information about the killer terrorizing these people. You saw how well that sat with Inspector Morino--"

"Exactly why I hate involving the police … always end up being scrutinized and spied on."

Shoving his hands deeper into his pockets, lukewarm hostility tinged Kotetsu's voice, "Why can’t they see we’re just trying to help them?"

"Tetsu, how well did we understand upon first hearing such things?"

The look of exasperation slowly slid off his face, though his body was still wound tighter than a spool of silk thread. "Yeah . . . well, Iruka’s father had lost most of his marbles toward the end and this hoo-hah about gaki did sound ridiculous--"

"Of course it did." He threw an arm around his friend's shoulder and pulled him close. "Try to understand, the people are paranoid, practically jumping at their own shadows; the police are walking around in circles, looking for a scapegoat to parade before the people. If we ‘ditch’ Genma now, he’ll report everything we’ve said and done to the Inspector in excruciating detail; that would make us look even more suspicious to the police." He stepped back and looked his friend in the eyes, "Two rakishly handsome young men, gussied up in tailored suits, surrounded by kimonos, hakama and pushcarts, we stick out like two sore thumbs . . . well, you more so than me. For now, it's in our best interests to lay low and follow Iruka’s lead like we promised." Watching the fat little ducks come closer as they stood on the stair, Izumo reached into his pocket, pretending to throw a fistful of nothing toward them.

"Now what are you doing?"

"Just watch." The knot of ducks instantly scattered when Izumo's arm dropped to his side, each of them scrambling for a morsel of imaginary treats. They all gave up at the same time, but once reassembled they quacked louder as they boldly closed in on them. "See that? To you and me, that loudmouth mortician’s a nuisance," Izumo said, "but Genma’s like these ducks; fat, happy … stuffed full of confidential information. He’ll quack louder and struggle to keep us close on the off chance of getting a ‘treat’ like learning of our plans before the time is right. All we have to do is throw bits of general information his way." The twinkle in Kotetsu's eyes let him know that he understood. "If we keep his little brain occupied, he might give us something we can use."

"Zumo, he’s thick as two planks--"

"Fortunately, he’s also a blabbermouth. Just settle down and stay focused. We promised Iruka we'd move at his pace, and we’re going to stick to the plan," he said, as he further invaded Kotetsu’s space. "We mobilize on his say so, not a moment sooner. We clear?"
“I’m not stupid, I’m just saying … can’t believe Iruka ran off and left us with this insufferable gasbag--!”

“Shush, he’ll hear you!”

“Please, the man loves the sound of his own voice too much, jackass still hasn’t realized we’re not walking behind him anymore.”

Another intentional and very sharp poke to the ribs doubled Kotetsu over this time, sending the ducks squawking and flapping when he stumbled off the path.

“Oi,” Genma turned and said. “You alright back there?”

“Yes, all is well,” Izumo volunteered. “My dear friend here is somewhat of a klutz … bless his heart.”

An extended hand was pushed away by the angry, out of breath Kotetsu who glared daggers at the other man.

“Long time at sea will do that; probably didn’t get much sleep last night either, considering the last passenger ship didn’t disembark until well after midnight. You were on that ship, right?”

“Yes, you’re right … the journey finally caught up with us. But not to worry Genma, he’ll be fine … won’t you Tetsu?”

Notes:

Multiloquent: speaking much, very talkative; loquacious.

Choleric: extremely irritable or easily angered.

Nescient: unknowing.

Cicerone: tour guide; leader of a sightseeing tour.

Nōkan: a funeral ritual; the body is washed and the orifices blocked with cotton or gauze. The mortician wraps the body, and dresses it; in Hitomi’s case, she’ll be clothed in a white kimono. The body is then placed on dry ice inside the coffin and certain items like a pair of sandals, another white kimono and six coins for crossing the River of Three Crossings are placed in the coffin as well. The body is normally arranged with its head toward the north, or as a secondary choice, toward the west. In Buddhism, the western orientation reflects the western realm of Amida Buddha.
“When was the last time we shared a quiet breakfast Ibiki?”

“Never,” he said without thinking. “I know you didn’t ask me here just to watch me chew ma’am, so … let’s have it.”

“Promise to hear me out,” she asked, laying aside her chopsticks, “no back answers, alright?”

“Fine.”

Tsunade leaned back in her seat, arms draped over the plump bolsters. “Well, after the third murder, I took a meeting with some of our elderly residents … to calm their fears, that sort of thing.”

“Yes … and?”

“The way they told it, this isn’t the first time the Land of Fire was targeted by a killer exhibiting the same characteristics as the one we’re looking for now. The victims, all young women, their bodies drained of blood, abandoned out in the open with no clues left behind. According to them, the murders continued with the rise of every full moon for about a year, and then suddenly … they stopped.”

“News to me. I don’t remember reading accounts of anything like that–”

“A horrendous loss … the Great Tsunami of 1771 destroyed most of the settlement and it’s records. Back then, people lived in the countryside and those who inhabited the town proper were transients here to learn a trade. What is known of that time came from the retelling of tales from those who survived.”

Ibiki pushed away his plate, his eyes riveted to hers. “Would you have me believe we’re dealing with a copycat killer or are you suggesting our murderer is some decrepit old man?”

“Don’t be ridiculous … oh, you’ve finished already? I’ll take that last onigiri if you don’t mind.”

He watched her eyes light up when she plunked a triangular chunk of rice from the communal plate onto hers. “Lady Tsunade, it’s a waste of time getting riled up over the ravings of the senile or otherwise mentally deficient–”

“That’s what I thought too, at first.” Giving the onigiri captured between her chopsticks a delicate sniff, she popped it into her mouth; immediately, the space between her eyebrows wrinkled with disgust. Frantically seeking a discreet way to dispose of the offending food, she inelegantly spat it into a napkin of ivory linen. “Umeboshi,” she spluttered reaching for a glass of water. “Yes, well … after that meeting, I tried not to think about what they told me.” As she was speaking, her left hand slowly moved upward, her fingers absentmindedly caressing the Manju-netsuke that hung from an exquisite jade necklace. “However, after the fourth murder I realized I needed to conduct my own research. You know, I remember when my grandfather used to tell me stories of bizarre happenings in this land; used to think they were fanciful retellings of folklore to frighten impressionable children.”

Ibiki heard those same stories as he sat on his grandmother’s lap. They were tales of imps and hobgoblins that played tricks on unsuspecting humans, these angry spirits often destroyed crops or made away with livestock. “Retribution for those who dared defile this land by building factories on sacred ground,” his grandmother used to say. “All we need do is increase the number of patrols
“If our killer were a deranged human, then yes, I believe you would have arrested him before now.” Still stroking at the pendant, her eyes took on a hazy appearance. “I found several scrolls chronicling life during my ancestor’s time … they all bore witness to the truth of the elder’s stories.” When she spoke again, her voice sounded as if she were far away. “By the light of a full moon, Senju Hisao and a group of men were hunting in the forest when they happened upon a ‘creature’ in the clearing. This being and seven other ghostly apparitions were engaged in a ritual sacrifice or so it seemed to them.” She bowed her head suddenly, as if whispering a prayer; her hand covered her mouth as if holding back a curse.

He’d never seen her like this before; pale and trembling as if her words had the power to make manifest these beings of antiquity.

“Before they could get closer to the scene, a pack of wolves appeared out of the mist and chased them from the forest. Those wolves,” she whispered, “were taller and broader than full grown men.” Finally breaking free of discomposure, she added, “Strange days are these Ibiki. Konoha stands at a crossroads. Striving for modernity … chained to the past by something older than the land itself. We’ll have to take extraordinary measures to purge the land—”

“So you want the priest and monks to ‘exorcise’ the territory?”

“No … well, not exactly. I know it sounds crazy, but I’ve sent for an expert … a ‘demon hunter’; practically begged him to come help us.”

“Why would you do that, ma’am? Have you no confidence in me or my constables?”

“I trust you implicitly—”

“Poppycock! If you trusted me at all you wouldn’t have—”

“Mind your tone, Inspector. I can’t undo what’s been done. Any day now, Dr. Umino Tadashi will arrive in Konoha; I want you to be present when I meet with him. You’ll need to keep an open mind—”

“Umino? Lady Tsunade … he’s dead!”

“What?” She lurched forward in the chair, ”Who told you that?”

“He did … I mean, his son did. Umino, such an odd surname around these parts—”

“Son?”

“Yes ma’am. Umino Iruka was one of the three young men I met with this morning; said his father died in May this year.”

“Impossible! I received Tadashi’s response to my letter in April—”

“Hardly think he’d lie about something like that—”

‘Of all the rotten luck,” she said, sinking back into her seat with a sigh, “here I was, pinning my hopes on his advice and guidance—”

“As I’ve said, we don’t need a ‘demon hunter’—”

Once again, her fingers found and rubbed at the netsuke. “Well if he’s dead now … that’s a
problem--"

“And I expect, a major inconvenience for him as well. How do you know of these people anyway ma’am?”

“Don’t you remember? Oh … maybe not, you were still in the military back then. Dr. Umino Tadashi … worked at our hospital for years, his wife was a clerk in the old Admin Center.”

“Wouldn't have met ‘em anyway … my mother and grandmother were our family doctors--”

“Right. The Uminos … small family, two sons, one daughter; the brothers married into the Shimizu clan. Tadashi and … can't remember his brother's name, right now, but they studied medicine in Water Country then moved here for advanced training; their children were born in Konoha …”

No wonder I couldn’t pinpoint the dialect, he thought. It's a mishmash of language from Water and Fire countries.

“... Japanese medical students traveled to England to learn new techniques, unfortunately, they didn’t have enough translators for their textbooks or teachers for the classroom, so Koichi, that’s his name... the elder brother, accepted a position in London, or was it Cornwall? No matter. Tadashi and his family went to live with Koichi a few years later. My aunt and Tadashi’s wife Amaya, were good friends ... they maintained correspondence for years …”

Explains why his accent was so strong; received the bulk of his education abroad.

“Last time I saw Iruka, he was about five or six years old. Painfully shy, very mannerable little boy with chubby cheeks and a big smile,” she wistfully said. “Shame, he couldn’t follow in his father’s footsteps as a doctor; didn’t have an interest in biology or the stomach for the blood and guts of anatomical dissection. Anyway, Tadashi developed a close friendship with a man named Yamada Kenichi, a teacher of philosophy, student of ancient religions and the supernatural. Tadashi was something of a detective himself, an authority on things that go bump in the night.”

Ibiki rolled his eyes and huffed, “Lady Tsunade, I fail to see how any of this information pertains to our current situation--”

“Part of my research led me to a box filled with my aunt’s old letters, it’s what prompted me to contact Tadashi in the first place.”

Shifting about, Ibiki tried to keep his expression bland, and his eyes open; the combination of a rest broken night, a big breakfast and the Governor’s historical ruminations were easing him into a cozy kef.

“After Mr. Yamada died, Tadashi took up his research, became obsessed with it; some, including his wife, said he’d gone quite mad. He spent the last fifteen years of her life tracking down a killer like the one terrorizing Konoha. The last letter I found informed my aunt of his wife’s passing.”

Ibiki straightened in his seat at that. How could the same murderer be in two places, a continent and an ocean apart at the same time? “You’ll pardon me but, this talk of the occult is something I can’t stomach.”

“What? Inspector ‘I’ve seen everything and nothing rattles me,’ Morino, jelly-legged about the supernatural? That’s rich.” Toying with the lump of rice hidden inside her napkin, she went on to say, “I understand this is hard for a logical mind like yours to take in and process, but I’ve a feeling Iruka and the book he has will be quite informative. If nothing else, we get a good laugh from it. What I need you to do is find out where he’s staying... we’ll set up a meeting and talk things over--”
“There’s nothing to discuss. Be it known right now, I want nothing to do with this foolishness!”

Suddenly, her face flushed and eyes narrowed when she stood. “Doesn’t matter what you want or what you’re comfortable with. We’ve eight murders and no suspect in custody; face it... traditional methods of investigation have failed us. You will do as I’ve asked, and that ends our discussion. Good day,” she said, stiffly nodding her head toward him.

Rising deliberately, he curtly bowed, his eyes icily locked on hers. “Thank you for breakfast... ma’am,” he said, turning on his heel.

Once outside the complex, he retrieved his cigar and bit down hard on its tip. *Has everyone except me lost their damn mind?*

*Demon hunters... exorcists... the writings of crazy old men taking precedence over reason and sound police work!*

*The hell’s this world coming to?*

When he strode toward his office, the people parted before him again, this time in fear; he looked as if he’d snap the neck of the next person who dared speak or even look his way. Veering toward the stables behind the constabulary, stung by what he perceived as betrayal, he snapped in the direction of the hapless stable master who’d come to greet him. “Saddle up my mount! I want him outside the front door of the Constabulary and ready to go in five minutes,” he said gruffly, flinging a chit toward the man. Thankfully, the squad room was somewhat empty, save for a few patrols handing in their reports; they had the good sense to lower their voices and step away from him as he approached the watch commander’s desk.

“Ryota, where were those bones found this morning?”

"Guess I don’t need to ask how your meeting with the Governor went.” A side drawer squeaked open and before Ibiki could draw in the first puff of a fresh cigar, Ryota was spreading a map of the town across his desk. “Here,” he said pointing to an area of the forest west of the lumber mill. “The bones were delivered to Genma’s office about ten minutes ago.”

“Those three young men that were in here earlier,” he ground out, "find out where they’re staying. Governor wants to meet with them as soon as possible.”

“Shouldn’t be a problem, the inns are relatively empty since the Tsukimi Festival was a bust. I’ll get that information to Miss Shizune personally,” he said refolding the map.

When next he looked up, Ibiki, the map and his matchbox were gone; the sound of horseshoes clattering over cobblestones in the town square was all he could hear.

**Recherché**

After a brief meeting with the Governor’s assistant, Iruka returned to the inn. Bolting the door, he covered the room in less than ten paces. From its hiding place beneath the bead, he retrieved the valise. He knelt in silence, letting disappointment subside as the familiar aroma of pipe tobacco rose from deep inside the case. He found himself rubbing his hand across the smooth cool leather, fortifying the connection to his father’s spirit. When he was able, he plopped down on the bed, separating the upper compartment of the valise from its lower half, revealing a small cache of weapons. Knives and ancient talismans lay beside vials of water and holy oils blessed by the priests in England; they’d offered prayers on his behalf, believing as he did, that demons walked among the living. Next to them were notebooks written in his father’s cramped handwriting; the old man’s
eyes, dimmed by sickness, his mind, inflamed with fever when he penned these notes. At the center of the valise was a scroll bound with leather straps – it contained Umino Tadashi’s final instructions and precautions for using the weaponry and the other tools of the trade.

By now was Iruka’s vision distorted by tears which refused to fall; his hands trembling with rage as he unsheathed one of the knives.

“Father, I swore to avenge you,” His left hand swept over the talismans, ”today, I reaffirm that promise. As I come one step closer to fulfilling my purpose in this life, may your spirit guide me. I vowed on your grave to carve out the heart of his seed in tribute to you for the suffering experienced at his father's hands.”

This very knife his father used to strike down two members of the same family line Iruka was determined to bring to its end. The weight of the blade, comforting in his right hand.

“As predicted, he's returned to the land of his origin. Across foreign soil and one continent, I’ve tracked him down. Here in Konoha he intends take a bride and spawn legion of demons more powerful than he. I’ll not allow that Father.”

At this point was his breathing labored, he feared the same madness which brought his father to ruin, was staking its claim on him as well. The knife’s blade dug into his palm, the pain serving to strengthen his determination.

“The life of your only son depends on it … grant me wisdom and cunning.”

A twist of the wrist, the face reflected in the shining blade stunned him; eyes wide and wild as he brought the cutting edge to his lips. The kiss of cold steel, a trickle of warm blood filled his mouth as he spoke these words against the two-edged blade:

“I will not fail Father.”

NOTES:

Manju-netsuke: Netsuke, miniature sculptures invented in 17th century Japan to serve a practical purpose; it was a carved button-like toggle used to prevent the contents of a pouch from spilling out. A Manju-netsuke was thick and flat, with the carvings usually done in relief; they were sometimes composed of two ivory halves.

Umeboshi: pickled plums, very sour and salty.

Tadashi: “correct, loyal, righteous.”

Kenichi: “strong, healthy, first son.”

Yamada: “mountain rice field.”

Kef: a state of drowsy contentment.

April 12, 1771, the Great Yaeyama Tsunami was triggered by an earthquake.

Koichi: “light/shining first child.”

Amaya: “night rain.”
Jarred from a trance like state by the noise of metal striking against stone, Iruka shot up, scanning the room for intruders; his hand frantically skidding across the mattress top as he caught his breath.

*Have they found me out already? The envelope … the valise … where are they?*

Bits and bobs of free-floating memories jumble together as the twilled cotton under his fingers gave way to the smooth surface of heavyweight paper. His heart jumped in his chest; of course, he remembered now, meticulously returning the weapons to their places, tucking the valise under the bed before propping his head against sinfully soft pillows and stretching out. *Imagination getting the better of me. Why the devil is there a handkerchief tied around my … oh, right, Father's knife. He used to say, ‘if ever a man desires to make the gods laugh, all he need do is adhere to the plans his limited mind conceives.’ Still, the hours behind me haven’t been a complete waste.*

Leaning back against the headboard he comforted himself with the thought that this injury was another minor annoyance, a slight twist on the winding path he’d chosen. The meeting with the Chief Inspector went exactly as expected; quiet opposition, a curt rebuff and terse dismissal. Their planned survey of the cemetery deferred out of respect; even if preparations weren’t underway for a burial, a curious sexton would surely take notice of three strangers wandering about the graveyard.

And then of course, there was the intrusion of a fast talking, overly accommodating Coroner. He rolled his eyes as an image of Genma surfaced in his mind. *Definitely a fly in the ointment.*

But the gods humored him, sending an angel in the form of a sympathetic clerk at the Administrative building. Masuyo was her name, the cheerful, rotund woman who left her station at the reception desk and led him into the private office of the Governor’s assistant, where she interceded on his behalf, vouching for the authenticity of the letter he’d presented as proof of and reason for his visit.

*He swung his legs over the side of the bed, forearms at rest atop his thighs.*

“The Chief Inspector is a hard nut to crack, unlikely to give up any information. I’ll have to count on Izumo’s charm to make inroads with one of the higher ups in the constabulary. That way we stay abreast of their investigation and keep them from interfering with our prime objective. Now then,” he sighed as he stood, “what to do about Kotetsu? Lord love him, he’s quicker with his fists than his wits.” He wandered over to the open window, peering through lace curtains at the forests just west of the inn. “Hmm … that should do. Need a proper base of operations … somewhere far from the town center. I’ll have him secure a small hunting lodge where he’ll be in his element and we can come and go without attracting undue attention. Perfect.”

His hand was throbbing like mad when he flopped down on the edge of the mattress again. *As for me, he thought pushing at the makeshift compress, the Governor requested my father’s assistance. Shouldn’t be hard to make her understand the reasons behind these murders and why I’m the only one who can stop them. Speaking of stopping things, better attend to this.* He tried not to gag while carefully unwrapping his hand. Bright red blood slowly pooled in the creases of his palm every time he flexed his fingers. *Damn, that’s deep.* Shaking his head, he sucked in a breath, laughing at himself. “The one person in our group made woozy at the sight of blood is the same one determined to reach inside a chest and remove a heart.” Pocketing the cloth, he staggered to the bathroom. *Have to destroy his resting place and that means finding a way inside his lair.*

Cold water splashing over his hand slowed the bleeding and he bit back a groan when the powdered alum burned into lacerated flesh. “Things shouldn’t work much differently here than they do in England,” he said with a wince, “architects have to register copies of their blueprints with the office.
of land management. Assuming the old estate still stands, the information I need is over a hundred years old.” Searing pain made him squeeze shut his eyes and when he opened them, the first thing he saw was the floor. Wood … that’s it! They’ll have information about every domicile in the territory close to hand and they won’t question the validity of an official looking document!

Running from the bathroom, he grabbed his jacket from the chair side nearest the bed; tucking the envelope in an inner pocket, he cast a final glance about the room. All right then, all I need do now is figure out where the fire brigade is, he thought as he slipped on his shoes in the hallway.

Recherché

Against a backdrop of stationary taupes and variegated greens, how wondrous the synchronization of their rapid breaths; Ibiki’s tawny flesh, swathed in dark blue, his partner beneath him, ebony, formidable and sinewy. Wrapped about an experienced hand, supple cowhide slides through his fingers, slapping against his wrists each time the one between his legs rockets forward. Astride a partner so powerful, responsive to his mood and eager to please, how good it felt to have control freely restored. Shards of exasperation pierce the leather beneath him, translating into stentorian hoof beats against flagstone streets. How sweet the adrenaline singing in his veins as they bolt from the plaza, how satisfying to catch glimmers of respect in the eyes of the people, to hear their collective gasps as he and his mount zip through the side street markets. Over hard packed dirt roads, clods of earth erupt in dusty explosions as they breeze past tracts of tidy wooden bungalows; divots of soft grasses fly up in their wake as they gambol through parklands dotted with aesthetically pleasing flowerbeds and lined with trees. By the time they reached the outskirts of town, a chunk of his harbored anger broke free from its moorings; the sting of the Governor’s words, the pain inflicted by her lack of confidence, clung to and twisted around his emotions. The winds wildly whipping past his ears taunt him, whispering the same question over and over:

What if Lady Tsunade was right?

Ever onward he rides, refusing to entertain such notions, fleeing like an escaped felon to the only place in the territory where succorance lay. The bosom of the forest, it was his sanctuary, his island of objectivity, far removed from the maddening cries of civility. Here in the dense woods, every major decision of his life was made; here he was imbued with strength, anointed with the fresh oil of perseverance. Today, he’d walk into the vast weald, not knowing whether he’d walk away from his post in infamy or if he’d stumble across inspiration amidst the majesty and serenity of the timberlands.

Recherché

How softly fell the filtered light through overhead windows, splattering across tense shoulders as Tsunade hunched over her desk. How gently it warmed delicate fingers splayed over papers filled with row upon row of blurred lines of text. The need to stay busy occupied a mind and heart brimming with regret; it was at once, urgent and impossible. Twinges of compunction which began the second her office door clicked behind him, transmogrified into a burning lump looking for a means to escape the pit of her stomach. This new revision of the trade agreement had to be reviewed and passed along to the Advisory Council members by close of business today. With a shake of the head, she chided herself stay focused on the task at hand. Yet, as they’d done before, the static rows of black lettered legalese tap dances across their off-white parchment platform, melting together and spiraling downward into a blob of grandiose nothingness. The image of Ibiki’s face ghosted over the papers under her hand; she saw the corner of his lip twitch as her words, like a scorpion’s tail, lashed out and stung him. That disillusioned look in his unblinking eyes as her words became daggers plunged into his soul and then there was the bitter refrain incessantly screeching through her brain:

What if Ibiki was right?
Pushing the hummock of papers out of sight, her pince-nez silently retracts to its rightful place as her elbows crashed against the desk’s surface; shaky hands sweep over and keep covered tired eyes that no longer wish to see. “I’ve lost his allegiance,” she breathed. “the only man in Konoha I could rely on … alienated; shoved away, the one man who understands how weighty the obligation, how vehement the opposition which comes with protecting the public.

What the hell was I thinking?

Acupressure to stave off a blossoming headache, that’s what she told herself as the delicate jasmine scented heels of her hands ground against her eyes . . . no time for frustrated tears. Could’ve walked across the street, looked him in the eye, talked this thing over with him, but no, I reached across an ocean, begged assistance from a relative stranger, a man considered lunatic by his peers. Nearing the end of a swiftly unraveling emotional tether, she flung herself against the chair’s back, unsure whether to scream, cry or break something; the sudden movement sent the small notebook in her lap tumbling to the floor with a thump. Eyeing it with a measure of disdain, she leans down and salvaging the artifact penned by a long forgotten ancestor. Reverently, she laid it in her lap once more, smoothing down several pages bent after an indecorous plunge. “Worried myself to sleep each night when trade between Europe and Konoha was but a pipe dream,” she whispered to the little bound tome. “I turned to you, the wisdom of my ancestors and found peace.” A solitary, salty tear skidded down her cheek and splashed against the book. “These last months, each morning after a full moon, after a madman skulked through the land, I turned to you … and you supplied me with fables. What am I to do now?”

From across the room, there came a tiny voice. “About what ma’am?”

Loose pages flung themselves into the air from the tourbillon created as her palms slammed onto the desk. “How many times have I warned you about sneaking up on me Shizune?”

“Sorry milady” she said over the noise of the silver serving tray clattering to the ground. “I knocked . . . twice. When you didn’t answer, I just walked in . . . you were so deep in thought . . . figured if I were quiet, I wouldn’t disrupt--”

“Calm yourself,” she said rising from her seat, the book in her hand and a tight smile on her lips. “I’ve been cooped up in this office too long today … the walls, closing in on me … didn’t mean to snap at you.”

“My fault entirely,” she said stooping down to clear away the mess. “Should have waited till you called for me.”

“If I don’t step out for a breath of fresh air right now, I’ll go mad.” Coming alongside her wide-eyed assistant, she patted her on the shoulder. “Be a dear ... reschedule my afternoon appointments--”

“Already taken care of. Figured you might need a lay down before tonight, which reminds me … should I lay out your clothes now or do you wish me to wait until later?”

“Clothes . . . for what?”

Shizune cocked her head and carefully studied her mistress’ face where irritation was striving for dominance over confusion. “Hitomi ... tsuya ... tonight? The Hyuga and the Advisory Council members expect you to make an appearance at the Temple--”

How could I have forgotten?” Tsunade’s back bumped against the office door and for a moment, it looked as if she’d slide right down to the floor. “I trust you’ll find something appropriate for the occasion ... call my hairdresser, tell her I’ll be back in a few hours.”
“One more thing before you leave, ma’am. A young man came to see you . . . claimed to have very important information for your eyes only. I couldn’t get him to divulge the nature of—”

“Can’t deal with another lawyer now, Shizune—”

“Ma’am, this young man is a Doctor, just arrived from England—”

“I don’t give a damn if he’s the Daimyo descending from the heavens on a cloud! I’m not in the right frame of mind to discuss anything with anybody,” she barked over her shoulder while fumbling with the doorknob. “Shoo him out of the building with a smile and a shove.” Once the door finally swung open, she said, “On second thought, give the little pissant an appointment for next week sometime.”

“Yes, ma’am but —”

SLAM!

And . . . she’s gone. Oh dear, I shouldn’t have pressed her.

Seconds later, fine china slipped from the tray and onto the rug again when the door swung open.

“This young man Shizune . . . you said he was a Doctor . . . from England?”

“Yes ma’am. Doctor Imono . . . I think that’s what he said—”

“Umino, was it?”

“Yes,” she said brightly. “I’m sure that’s the name! He wanted to talk with you while the Inspector was here. I spoke with him for a few minutes and as I tried to say earlier, he refused to tell me why he needed to see you so urgently. Rather pushy he was, insisting he’d traveled to Konoha at your behest, even had a letter signed by you to back up his story. I gave him an appointment for tomorrow afternoon—”

“What? Tomorrow is too late! I need to see him immediately,” she roared as she stooped down to still Shizune’s wrists. “Where is he now . . . in the waiting area?”

“That was some time ago . . . I doubt he’s still out there. Lady Tsunade, please, you’re hurting me.”

“Did he mention where he’s staying?”

“No, but I have to imagine he’s in one of the inns down the street. What’s wrong . . . what’s going on?”

“I’ll explain later,” she said running back to her desk. A note, hurriedly scratched across the back of a fallen piece of paper was thrust into Shizune’s hands. “Leave that mess where it is . . . take this to Ibiki, and tell him to meet me here in an hour!”

Recherché

Notes:

Masuyo: “benefit.”

Stentorian: very loud or powerful in sound.

Weald: wooded or uncultivated country.
Hummock: an elevated tract of land rising above the general level of a marshy region; a knoll or hillock.

Tourbillon: a whirlwind, or something resembling a whirlwind.

Tsuya (Japanese): a wake, the night before the funeral.

Sexton: a church officer or employee who takes care of the church property and performs minor duties such as ringing the church bell or digging graves.
Recherche: The Path to Perdition

For the workmen … it was an experience.

Sure, they’d seen rich folk up close before, they knew the rules; bow politely, never initiate conversation and avoid direct eye contact if addressed. But this man made forgetting the rules easy. Tall, dark, powerfully built, he was nothing like the local landowners they were used to. His carriage regal, and yet his stride, like that of a rouster employed down at the docks. Most of the monied would pinch their noses as they passed by them, but this man’s smile was so warm and friendly, as if he didn’t mind breathing in the same air they did. Though kindly affectioned toward them, it was clear the household servants greatly feared him.

It was a puzzlement.

Ah, but what stories they’d whisper round humble hearths or shout across roughhewn tables inside the taverns tonight

For Maito … this was torture.

These men of simple minds and strong backs, the sweat stained clothing which adhered to their chunky physiques; their easy, unrefined laughter and grunts of exertion … these awakened in him appentence forbidden. Commingled musky scents trapped inside the foyer, funneled down the corridor, making him sick to his stomach; bitter reminders were they of what soon would be denied him. The smile he wore hid the ravening beast within, concealing the panic ripping at his innards. He walked among them, a peckish man in a well-stocked market; mightily anhungered, without means to purchase or craftiness to steal that which he craved. The yearnings of his belly must needs wait, for something more terrifying than cupidity lay ahead.

For the first time in years … Maito was afeard.

When summoned to the manor in times past, ere the full moon rose, he’d stride through the maze of underground tunnels leading to Master’s chambers; there would he give his report and there would the collar of his subjugation clatter to the ground; the reward for a job well done. Acting as the eyes, ears and strong arm of his liege, his recompense was more precious than refined gold.

Liberty.

A reprieve from this clunky suit of flesh, freedom to revel and indulge in his nature most primal. For three wondrous nights each month, he’d choreograph a hellish band of minions through the sacred hunting and mating rituals of his people. Imbued with a portion of Master’s authority, he orchestrated the voices of a lupine choir, leading them in songs of worship and praise to the Lord of the Lycanthropes.

Seventy-two hours of surfeit,

feasting on the flesh and the fat, drinking deeply from the fountains of blood spurting from his prey; their terrified screams ringing down in his ears. With the coming of the dawn, he’d stand majestic in the glistenning dew, fragments of bone, splatters of blood clinging to his fur. In the soft moss of a forest cave he’d make his bed as the sun rose; his belly full … his body satisfied.

Alas, it would not be so this time.

Called inside the manor proper while the sun ruled the heavens, recompense would surely come;
punishment - swift and severe, that was his due,

for now, was the Master at his vengeful best

’twas true.

For his error, a hue and cry for justice now sounded throughout the town; the citizenry in an uproar, the constables in stymied readiness,

for a mad dog killer, they must needs bring down.

Alas and alack, poor Maito … from his fate was no escape.

Recherché

As he walked along the corridor, he couldn’t help wondering, *Where did I go wrong?*

When his eyes fell upon her as the ship pulled into port weeks earlier, he knew she was the one. Though scores of people thronged around her, their eyes searching the assembled crowd for a familiar face, their arms raised, waving as they caught sight of friends or family members, his target stood alone. Enveloped in a bubble of melancholy, her eyes downcast. Her manner of dress, simple and proper for a young lady her age; her long flowing ebony hair, free of ostentatious adornment, billowed in the breezes.

These, he assumed were signs she’d left behind any and all familial attachments.

Of course he’d seen the rows of elegant carriages lined up at the port’s entrance, impossible to miss them, yet he presumed they waited for someone other than her. He left the port long before his target disembarked, confident that he’d found a prize for Master to claim. In the following days, he hounded her steps, taking careful note of where she lived and the company she kept.

Her residence, the nurses’ dormitory; her daily frocks bespoke her status as they were the standard issue of medics working to receive certification. She had no close friends to speak of and rarely socialized with her peers outside the hospital. At ease among the downtrodden, the aged and the ill . . . no hint of haughtiness or high bred mannerisms had she. Nothing about her life indicated the presence of a family, especially an influential and politically connected one – one which had an adversarial relationship with the ruling family of the territory as well as their peers.

*And now, he thought, what defense have I, the basest of creatures against an omnipotent being? What words can be drawn from a limited human vocabulary to express the regret which buffets me about the head and shoulders with an overwhelming sense of shame?*

Recherché

Standing in a wedge of yellow sunshine stretching under the drawing room doors, Maito leaned forward, breathing in the fused scents springing from the enormous salon. There was a hint of fresh ink from a newly filled pot . . . the fragrance of warm spiced tea and the spicy aroma of pine sap from the logs stacked by the fireplace. And then . . . of course, there was the distinctively masculine and unappetizing scent of that *house servant* - Kinoe.

*Blasted cockalorum,* he groused as the inviting light warmed the tips of his shoes.

Like the other puny humans before him, Kinoe was overcome by the Master’s odylic force;
spellbound by his mystique and unearthly power. He lapped up the Master’s abuse like a sponge even as he hungered for scraps of the Master’s power. Unlike the others, this one was shrewd ... possessed of great intellect, a head for business and a tongue sharpened by deceit and flattery; it was to him their Lord turned over control of the estate’s everyday affairs. His latest project - oversight of renovations to the manor that would serve as their base of operation. Later, this would become the home where Master and his bride would spend eternity. The morsel of authority granted Kinoe pushed him into fostering a desire and chasing a dream that one day, he alone would stand at the Master’s right hand ... the heel of his boot crushing Maito’s head into the dust.

What an arrogant fool. For all his intelligence and savvy, he never understood the bond betwixt myself and the Master; a sacred covenant, a claim against and a seal engraved on my soul which forever secures my position.

In exchange for his mortal soul, Kinoe was cursed to an eternity of brutal servitude; his sustenance would come in the form of vermin, arthropods, reptiles and amphibians. But the loss of esteem in the eyes of his Lord was too heavy a burden for Maito to bear. Master never forgot a wrong committed and never forgave those who disappointed him.

The thought of banishment left a taste in his mouth bitter as wormwood and as potent as gall.

Fear’s cold fingers claw at his mind, flashing snippets of his life outside the reach of the Master’s beck and call.

Separated from the one who gave him liberty and life,

a shriveled, tangled mass he’d be inside,

always hungering and never satisfied.

As he leaned closer to the door, he couldn’t sense one iota of his Lord’s powerful aura nor was there any trace of the Master’s uniquely enchanting scent inside the room. A disappointment, for Master smelled as one who bathed in the moon’s glow . . . a being who wrapped himself in the night’s mist like a regal robe. His scent, refreshing like the forest loam on a humid night and underneath it all, faint traces of copper, iron and phosphorous … the blood of his prey. My Lord is a powerful being, able to conceal his presence and even his scent if he wishes. Come now, quit yourself, prepare for his wrath. But wait, the windows have been flung open, he absently thought as mild breezes licked at the hems of his pant legs. And the drapes, they’ve been pushed back, giving access to the heat of the day. Master would never put himself in jeopardy just to punish me. So, it is Kinoe alone I must face.

Angry fingers comb through his hair and sweaty palms brush along the front of his jacket. Though I long for his dismissal, I cannot kill him. Another deep breath and he closed his eyes.

Silver door handles, cool under his palms, were to him a lifeline as he stood there, mustering his courage and dampening his temper. He felt himself cringe at the sounds of rustling paper and the scratch of a pen’s nib moving briskly across the lines of a ledger book; swallowing down a curse, he grit his teeth when the strident voice beyond the closed doors sang out.

“Do come in Maito.”

No sooner than he’d pushed open the doors, intense light lunged at him from behind heavy burgundy brocade drapes; dust motes and dog hair pirouette in the sunbeams.

“I’ll thank you to close those doors quickly, the noise of the workmen has been driving me to
distraction all morning,” said the pompous man seated at the desk to his right.

Maito did as instructed out of respect for the home of his Lord, completely ignoring the other man as he stood stock still near the entryway of the salon. Pointedly turning his body away, his eyes wistfully take in his favorite part of the room. Far to his left, stood a marble front fireplace and slightly away from its hearth sat two high backed leather chairs; their brass brads no longer shone, having spent years being discolored by the soot from the fireplace. A round table of mahogany topped with the finest slate stood between the chairs; a crystal decanter and two snifters, rest on its surface. On either side of the fireplace, floor to ceiling shelves housed a portion of the elder Hatake’s most beloved books.

Long forgotten memories spark a tiny, sad smile. Of all the rooms in the manor, this was one of the few that remained just as Hatake Sakumo left it.

Having spent the majority of his life living abroad, it reflected a European sensibility that resonated with Lord Sakumo’s soul. And if he closed his eyes . . . just for a moment, he could still smell the special blend of pipe tobaccos Sakumo-dono favored . . . he could still hear his voice, could feel his power, pressed down and encapsulated within these four walls. He and his father before him, frequently shared this space with the heads of the household; Maito sitting at the feet of the Master’s son, while his father sat on the floor beside the late, great Hatake Sakumo. Since their return from England, it was here on cool nights he and the current Master sat side by side in those old chairs, sipping cognac . . . watching the fire crackle in silence.

What a lumbering, bumptious oaf, Kinoe thought as he watched the other man stride off in the opposite direction.

“Now pay attention, you hairy goon . . . I’ll make this simple enough for even you to understand,” he said. “Umino and his companions have arrived in the territory; I’ve already informed the Master.”

Maito turned and was standing in front of the other man before he could take in another breath; his fangs bared and his paw full of the soft material of Kinoe’s shirt as he lifted him up and away from his seat.

“What else did you tell him?”

Kinoe stared the partially transformed beast in his glowing yellow eyes, his voice never once giving any indication of the fear his shaking limbs were only too happy to show.

“Release me, unwashed philistine! Our Lord is already aware of your ineptitude!”

As Maito’s grip tightened and his claws dug into the yielding flesh of his chest, Kinoe wrapped his hands around the massive paw holding him aloft. “Hatake-dono wants you to keep an eye on Umino,” he gasped. “He expects a report on where he’s staying and to whom he’s spoken with as soon as we return from the tsuya tonight.”

At the mention of the Master’s name, Maito’s natural form retreats under the surface of his human skin. Cautiously, he released the other man with a slight backward push. “So, he’s tracked us here at last . . . persistent little shit, isn’t he?” When he rounded the corner of the desk, he saw Kinoe struggling to regain his balance and it cheered him. Now standing halfway between the desk and the drawing room doors, he said, “I’d rather snap Umino's neck and be done with it--”

“Ah, but then, our Lord will surely banish you from his presence for tampering with another one of his prey. Much as I’d like to see you permanently removed, I’m sure even you aren’t that stupid.”
His mind, still fogged with rage urged him forward as the other man’s words harnessed the wrath rising within him; when he turned about, Kinoe had retaken his seat with a smirk on his face and a silver dagger lying beside his hand.

“What of the others?

Master’s interest is only with Umino so, I’m at liberty to kill and eat the rest . . . right?”
Recherche: Stitches in Time

Alas and alack, poor Ibiki.
No matter how fast or how far he ran,
from this dilemma there was no escape.

This place, always his refuge, a bastion of tranquility where the weight of the world slipped from his shoulders; today the sun beats against his back and the frigid fingers of anxiety stutter step along his spine. Artifices of the mind deceive eyes and ears; the reins fall slack in his hands as the leaves of the trees become accusations of those he’d sworn to protect. Babbling brooks in the distance are now the murmurs of a government whose laws he’d sworn to uphold. Bushes stretch forth their brambles, piercing his heart like the skepticism and contempt of the men he was charged to lead.

Finally at the place where flat landscape reached its terminus and jagged outlines of the forests begin, Ibiki guides his mount off the well-trodden path. They stand before a sentry of ancient conifers guarding the passage into the wilds.

Though soft breezes impregnated with intoxicating attars of wildflowers tug at his lingering bitterness, the sense of melancholy never falters; the weight of betrayal clings to him as a mouldy shroud. He shook his head, closing his eyes and shutting his ears to the conjured images and sounds as his mount adopts an ambling gait. “Unbelievable,” he said, as he sharply pulled back on the reins. “A woman so intelligent and perceptive, kowtowing to the fairy stories of her ancestors. Ridiculous!”

Without warning was he pitched forward, his forehead colliding with Mayonaka’s poll when the horse came to a standstill. “I apologize,” he whispered into a flickering ear. “Been years since I worked you this hard old friend. You’ve earned your rest … here’s as good a place as any to take it, he said, smoothing his hand down the muscular neck. Gingerly alighting the saddle, a flick of the wrist brought the reins over the horse’s head. “If memory serves, there’s a little creek beyond that clump of trees … let’s go.”

The horse took a few timid steps and paused; a slight tug on the reins, he took a few steps more and pulled back against the lead.

“Okay … what’s your problem?”

Mayonaka responded with a snort and a jerk of his massive head in the opposite direction. Digging his hooves into the soft grasses, he refused to budge.

“You realize this is conduct unbecoming a patrol officer, don’t you? Come along now, I’ve had my fill of contrariness for one morning.”

This time, Mayonaka almost jerked his arm from its socket.

“Fine! I’ve no time for your nonsense either!” He stalked off toward the creek, rifling through his pockets as he went. Eyeing a smooth wide tree stump, he skirted around it, too angry to sit just now. Under the resplendent shade of towering trees, humid winds tote the call and response of the komadori and cool waters splash over smooth stones in the belly of the creek as he paced alongside the mossy bank. He stops short near a clump of eye high spindly foliage veiling his view of the town.
"I know the answer is staring me in the face … why the hell can’t I see it?"

In the distance, faint strains of a steam whistle issue from the lumber mill calling workers back to their posts; as it does, Ibiki found himself wishing to trade places with them; to daily expend his strength producing something of value. He allows himself to think how pleasant it would be - returning to his abode by evening, an honest day’s work having leached his energy that he might rest in the bosom of dreamless sleep by night.

But it was never to be so; that he knew right well.

The stillness of the forest takes him captive once more - the crunch of his teeth tearing away the tip of the cigar he’d fished from his pocket, almost deafening. Sweet cognac and bitter tobacco douse his taste buds as he turns his back on the town and stands transfixed, watching the end piece of his cigar gracefully arc as it shoots from his mouth; an embittered laugh rises from his chest as his eyes follow the ragged wad as it bobs and floats in the dark cool creek water.

*Well if that doesn’t sum up my life these past months, nothing else can.*

Months pass and the center of his desk filled with paperwork about these murders; day by day, malicious whispers and distrustful eyes of the masses adhere to his back everywhere he went. These things had ripped out a chunk of his confidence and spewed it forth like tainted meat. Now, he floundered in the slow moving currents of failure with little time before the waters of bureaucracy engulfed and dragged him down.

Back to the tree stump he wandered, taking a seat and striking a match against the sole of his boot.

“Here I thought you were the only one who understood me. You know, I’ve never faced anything like this before Mayonaka; scares the hell out of me. And you, a friend … a fellow officer no less, refusing to mitigate my concerns, well .. well.”

Mayonaka quietly approached, his pasterns brushing over tender ground cover with a *swish* and crisp leaf litter *crunching* beneath his hooves. He stands to Ibiki’s right, fixing him with the equine equivalent of empathy.

“No apple till you hear me out,” he said with a chuckle, “deal? Alright, here it is in a nutshell … if I go along with this piffle about undead creatures on a rampage, there’s no way I can justify that nor encourage my men to continue investigating. Calling in a demon hunter takes the constables out of the equation and make us an even bigger laughingstock.”

Mayonaka snorted.

“My sentiments exactly. But, if I follow my gut that’s telling me this is the work of one or more deranged human beings … how the hell do I prove it to the Advisory Council and the people of the territory?”

Mayonaka shook his head as he drew closer to his troubled master.

“The way I see it, Umino is an agent from another nation jealous of our prosperity; by sending him, they hope to scare us away establishing trade with the West. Then again, he could be working for the religious nutcases inside the territory. Either way, I figure Umino is an accomplice or accessory to murder. Wait a minute,” he said as he stood. “There is another powerful and extremely vocal faction who oppose trade with foreign lands, though their worries have nothing to do with the loss of culture or heritage. On the contrary, trade would increase their wealth. What they fear is losing control over the minds of the people.”
“Shimura Danzou and Kokucho Orochimaru … two of the oldest and most influential members of
the Advisory Council; they spend their days exerting pressure on the Governor and me by extension
to get a handle on these killings so it looks like they have the interests of the people at heart. But
with the murder of Hyuga Hitomi, each of them gains leverage to unseat the sole heir of the Senju
legacy. They know I’d never consider them suspects and they’ve tolerated me this long, because
I’ve been discrete . . . kept my mouth shut about their . . . unnatural relations.” With his mount
quenching his thirst, Ibiki rumbled through the saddlebags. The water in his canteen surprisingly
cool, fresh and sweet; a backward swipe of his forearm sopped up the moisture clinging to his lips.
And with the other hand, he absently cards through Mayonaka’s silken mane. A cloud of smoke
enfolds him as he leans against the sinewy shoulder of his mount. “I’m damned either way I turn . . .
aren’t I? No idea how to proceed . . . not sure if I want to anymore.

Whether intended to bat away a biting insect or to knock some sense into the dejected officer beside
him, Ibiki laughed at himself when the tips of the horse’s heavy tail thumped against his back.

“Okay … message received,” he said with a sigh, “should be an apple or two in your saddlebags.
And, if you’ll just go with me to the crime scene, I promise to stop feeling sorry for myself . . .
okay?”

Recherché

It was quarter past the hour when she left the office. Squaring her shoulders and scurrying across
the plaza, she saw a fresh troop of horses and their handlers lining up for inspection outside the
constabulary; she immediately considered doing an about face.

No, Lady Tsunade is depending on me.

The mounted patrol. Over the last four months, they’d seen an increase in their workload as more of
the concerned rich demanded protection around their estates. Cocksure and enterprising, several of
these men earned money under the table working as private security forces; for this she did not
begrudge them. Yet it was the selfsame reason she didn’t fancy being in their presence. In her mind,
some of them were no better than thugs, wearing uniforms to cover their cowardice, willing to fleece
the rich as long as they could and ready to flee at the slightest hint of a bugbear.

With the changing of shifts Shizune realized the Inspector might be unavailable for an indeterminable
time. Nevertheless, leaving the Governor’s note with anyone other than him was out of the question.

Taking a deep breath, she squeezed through the clutch of officers as they entered and exited the
building, nodding in acknowledgement and smiling politely as they passed her by. Once inside the
squad room, she ducked into a corner; out of the patrolmen’s way yet with an excellent vantage point
to catch sight of the Inspector. To the left of the watch commander’s desk stood an orderly line of
constables, laughing and talking as they waited their turns to sign in. Over the din, Ryota called out,
beckoning her to come alongside his desk.

“Shift change” he said. “What can I do for you ma’am?”

“Need to see the Inspector . . . is he here?”

Ryota shook his head sadly.

“Lady Tsunade ordered me to put this note directly in his hand; have you any idea where I can find
him?”
“Nope and I can’t promise he’ll see it today, but I’ll make sure he gets it,” he said, holding out his hand to receive the small envelope clutched against her obi.

“I can’t.” Looking around the room once more, she held the note tighter. “Are you sure he didn’t sneak past you? Perhaps he’s in the restroom? I mean with all this commotion, he could have?”

He gave her a big grin as another officer dropped off his report, “Nothing or nobody comes through here without my notice. And, if the Inspector were in the building, we wouldn’t have all this hubbub.”

She glanced around the room a final time, “I don’t mind waiting--”

“Hope you packed a lunch then.” Turning to straighten the pile of papers at the corner of the desk he said, “Ibiki was a wee bit ‘preoccupied’ this morning; whatever happened during that meeting with the Governor… brought out the worst in him--”

“We had an interesting morning on my side of the street too; that meeting did nothing to improve Lady Tsunade’s state of mind either.”

“Now, now, I’m just stating fact; no need to get yourself riled up.”

Just then, the clock in the station room chimed the half hour and the noise level in the room dropped down to hushed whispers as the men clustered together in the center of the room.

“No one’s heard from Ibiki yet, I guarantee he ain’t coming back til afternoon, if at all.”

“Those two, like peas in a pod. Lady Tsunade excused herself from the office as well. Claimed she was going for a long walk but I know she didn’t get far. Probably sitting under her favorite tree in the park, people watching or else she’s holed up near the sea, watching the waves roll in.”

Quickly looking his left and right as a few of the constables milled about, he leaned over and whispered, “The Inspector, the Governor, stubborn as two swaybacked pack mules under heavy loads. With everything going on lately, is it a wonder they’re frazzled?”

Shizune bent down propping her elbow on the desk. “They’re cut from the same cloth” she whispered. “Completely unyielding when they think they’re in the right … quick to apologize when they find out they aren’t.”

Jotting down a few notes from the thin manila folder before him, Ryota mumbled, “With that swarm of solicitors descending on her like fussed up hornets and tragedy striking one of the richest and most powerful families in the territory weighing on Ibiki’s mind, both of ‘em were pushed to their limits--”

“And when they bumped heads” said Shizune, “there was an explosion--”

“Exactly,” he said, closing the folder. “They just need a little time and a lot of space to cool down . . . that’s all.”

“Right,” she said tucking the note inside a ruck of her obi, “not like this was the first time they fell out.”

“They’ll meet up at the tsuya tonight, dance around each other as if nothing happened … by tomorrow, all will be forgiven and forgotten.”
“Thanks, Ryota.” Standing taller now, Shizune smiled at the sage watch commander, “Just in case the Inspector does come back, would you ask to stop by the office?”

“Sure thing. See you tonight Miss Shizune.”

Recherché

The closer they came to the appointed place, Mayonaka exhibited a growing reluctance to follow his lead; that was unusual, yet forgivable, for there was an intangible eerie sense in the atmosphere. A few gentle strokes of his hand along the velvety soft nose and a couple of calmly spoken words made it possible to tether the reins around a tree trunk. But before going deeper into the gloaming, Ibiki extracted one of the daggers holstered inside his boot.

He no longer needed the map; the forest floor was swept clean in this space and not by the winds whistling through the trees. Sawdust and straw meticulously raked in a circular pattern made it hard to miss the footprints of Raidou and Aoba. All of the trees in here were hewn to the same exact height, which wasn’t unusual. Lumberjacks often tied ropes around a clump of trees at a preselected height, he’d long since forgotten the reasons why. However, at the base of each tree stump lay a garland of dead, dried flowers; that wasn’t something lumberjacks did as a rule. One thing more; the bark of the trees had diagonal lines gouged in the wood. Again, he shrugged it off.

_These gouges are deep and randomly spaced, torn off by an animal’s claws no doubt. Our hunter likely met his fate at the paws of a hungry bear or a famished mountain lion. But wild animals don’t leave behind memorial garlands._

He ascended a ridge above the trees and from this vantage point two things were clear; at least six feet of space separated the trees on each side; their uprooting and culling from the cluster was recently done. “Together,” he mumbled to himself, “they resemble an arrowhead with its tip pointing due north.

Why the hell is it pointing toward the cemetery?”

Notes:

Komadori: robin(s).

Poll: name for a part of an animal's head, referring to a point immediately behind or right between the ears. This area has a slight depression and is very sensitive. Since the crown piece of a bridle passes over the poll joint, a rider indirectly exerts pressure on the horse's poll by means of the reins, bit and bridle.

Pastern: parts of a horse’s leg between its fetlocks and hooves.
There on the crest of the hill stood Genma, his chest puffed with pride. "Brought you up this way on purpose, behold …the Fire Temple," he said flinging wide his arms. “Beautiful, isn’t it?”

"Don’t tell me," huffed a weary Kotetsu, "there was an easier way to get here, wasn’t there?"

“Maybe, but you have to admit it’s majesty was worth the trip.”

Ignoring the murderous gleam in his friend’s eye, Izumo positioned himself between the men. “It’s not every day we see something like this Genma. I don’t know how to thank you--”

“Well I do Zumo." Rubbing away the stitch in his side Kotetsu wheezed, "Soon as I catch my breath… I’m gonna strangle him … and then …you."

“We’re doing this for Iruka,” came the snipped reply from the side of his mouth. “And you’re right, Tetsu, they did do a remarkable job of incorporating the additions.”

"Naturally." Genma said, his yellow toothed grin stretching wide, "the finest artisans and construction workers in the five nations make their home right here in Konoha. See that building over there? That’s where the first group of monks used to spend their days meditating, studying bugei and practicing bujutsu; they were the Daimyo’s original guards and protectors of the cargo ships back in the early days. Bout sixty years ago, Hashirama Senju gifted the monks with another five acres of land and they … wait a minute Izumo, how’d you know about the additions?"

“I was born in Konoha, remember? Spent the first seven years of my life here. Matter of fact, they were finishing up two of the newer building right before we moved to England.”

“Oh, right,” said Genma, “it’s coming back to me now.”

"Amazing … if I close my eyes, I can still smell the incense the monks used on special occasions; winds used to carry the fragrance through the town on summer's days--"

“Damn shame, this couldna happened at a worse time.”

“For cryin' out loud! This idiot can’t stay on one topic to save his life," Kotetsu hissed. "All this stoppin’ and starting … getting on my nerves--”

“Shhh! Sorry, Genma … you were saying?"

“Hyuga girl's death … hell of a way to kick off mating season.”

“Her death relates to the temple buildings and the ‘mating season’, how exactly?"

“Huh? Said that out loud did I? Sorry … sometimes I forget I'm talkin' to live folk.”

“There's a big surprise,” Kotetsu mumbled. "Jackass."

“Shame … half the territory turning out to see her on a sad occasion; her tsuya is tonight, … sure I mentioned it. How fragile this mortality, you know? Had she lived, a select few would’ve seen her at her brightest and best at this same temple … her wedding day, I mean.”

“We’re with you so far,” Izumo said, “but what about--?”
“The 'mating season'? We’re in it right now. Yep, it's that time of year when rich folk and their lawyers get together with the matchmakers so's they can plan next spring’s nuptials. No romance, just combining fortunes ... keeps the money flowin' in the same ponds. And since Konoha is about to ratify trade agreements with Europe, that means new money is gonna pour into the territory. Well, anyway, the building over there is the lecture hall; most of the monks are in there this time of morning. I’m gonna head off to the gardens on your left. If we hurry along, I might catch the chief priest before he starts meditating. Gotta say though, feel sorry for the new kid,” he said as they began their descent.

“Let me guess ... you're not talking about the chief priest anymore, are ya?”

“Did it again huh, Mr. Hagane? Sorry bout that, terrible habit. Somebody once told me I’m a 'stream of consciousness' kinda guy; nice way of saying I blurt out whatever I’m thinking.”

“If you ask me, ‘psycho’ is a more accurate term. Zumo, I don’t know how much more I can take of this guy before I bust him one--”

“Yeah, it was bout a year ago when he got here,” Genma continued, "the new guy I mean; fancy lookin' fella. Came home to bury his father’s ashes. I heard he used to live in Europe.”

Izumo and Kotetsu held their tongues, having agreed silence would squeeze more from their ‘fat little duck’.

“Comes from old money, you could almost smell it in the air around him; they, the other rich folk, talked him into hosting one of their shindigs. Makes sense of course … got a big fancy house full of servants, he's a bachelor too,” he said tapping his pipe against the palm of his hand. “His father left him bout fifty acres of land further to the west; I hear he's got interests in silver and copper too ... hell, I'd marry him if he asked. Businessmen been flocking around like vultures on a corpse since he got back ... picking his brain, seeing if he’s still got contacts over there in Europe they can exploit too. Yep, feel sorry for the new kid.”

“I can tell you’re a world traveler,” Kotetsu mocked. “Europe is vast ... care to winnow it down for us?”

“Hmm,” he said tamping the tobacco down in the bowl, "somebody said he came from London.”

“Well, exciting news ... at last. I mean,” Izumo explained, “there were only fifty Japanese people where we lived, so it’s possible we know him. What's his name, Genma?”

“Huh, names of folks I don't see on the regular get away from me, but I never forget a face. Saw him the night he arrived," he said, patting down his pockets for a matchbox. "Tall, lanky fella ... remember thinking how strange it was to see a head full of gray hair on such a young man. Must be a family trait, that, or somebody gave him a good fright. And something’s wonky with his left eye too, that silk eyepatch barely covered a right wicked lookin’ scar.” The biting smell of phosphorous and tobacco brought tears to their eyes as Genma puffed away. “Surname is Hajame or Hataji … or some such.”

Kotetsu and Izumo turned to one another smiling broadly.

“Hatake,” they whispered.

**Recherché**

*Should have followed my first mind, she thought as the last of the well-wishers dispersed. Too late for a nap now. Might as well go back to the office ... Ibiki oughta be there directly.*  As she stood,
most of the newspaper slipped free of her lap, scattering itself across the bench. With a mumbled curse and a quick pivot, she turned to retrieve it. Suddenly, something sturdy collided with her hip and the ground rose to meet her.

A brown arm shot across her chest, shielding her from impact with the sharp gravel surrounding the bench; a warm hand caught her by the elbow, and the concerned face of a panicked young man abruptly appeared in her line of sight.

"Gosh, I’m sorry ma’am ... wasn’t watching where I was going."

“Obviously ... I’ll thank you to unhand me please,” she gruffly said, glancing down at the arm smashed against her bosom.

“Sorry. Didn’t hurt you, did I? Again, I'm so sorry.”

Set to give him a piece of her mind once she could stand unaided, the moment she saw those kind brown eyes brimming with fretfulness, she lost the will to chew him out. “I’m fine … question is,” she said pointing to his bloodied bandaged hand, “are you alright?”

Recherché

“Damn it… more stairs Zumo?”

“What did you think those long white stone things leading up to the temple gates were ... flocks of seagulls?”

Kotetsu stroked at his goatee as he stared off into the distance. “You’re a regular riot, but if you look at ’em sideways, like this,” he said tilting his head, “kinda look like slices of coconut layer cake.”

“Coconut layer cake? Oh no, it’s happening again!”

Genma nervously looked back and forth between them, “What? What’s happening?” Watching Kotetsu stagger off the steps toward an open area ringed with fruit trees to their right, he grabbed at Izumo’s wrist, “What’s wrong with him?”

He waited quietly as Kotetsu tottered onto a patch of grass and unceremoniously dropped to his knees. He’s playing this to the hilt. Guess I’ll have to step up my game too, he thought, turning to the mortified mortician. “Having one of his spells,” he whispered. “Before we left London, he was diagnosed with a serious illness ... narcolepsy, that's what the doctor said. Ever heard of it?”

“Never, and I pride myself on keeping abreast of the latest illnesses. Death certificates are legal documents, don’t you know; hafta provide an accurate cause of demise. Narcolepsy,” he sounded out the word carefully, “that’s a new one on me, and he’s so young.” He paused, looking around Izumo to the shallow breathing man on his knees. “Seemed healthy he did. This illness ... it’s not fatal, is it?”

Excusing the anticipative note in the undertaker’s voice, Izumo kept a straight face saying, “Thankfully, no. More than anything, it's embarrassing. He’s awful sensitive about it Genma so, please … don’t tease him about this when he comes around.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it!” Kotetsu keeled over, crumpling onto his side as Genma’s eyebrows disappeared under the hat’s headband. “What’s happening to him now?”
“That my friend, is cataplexy . . . a sudden, uncontrollable loss of muscle tone triggered by intense emotion; usually happens before the narcolepsy takes firm hold of him. These episodes come on stronger when he’s overtired or famished,” he said as they walked to the place Kotetsu lay.

“Had I but known he was in poor health ... could’ve taken the shortcut.”

“Relax, this isn't entirely your fault. I should have made him eat something before we left his morning. Come on, help me get him to that tree over there and onto his back.”

Dragged a short distance and shifted into a supine position between them, Genma leaned over Kotetsu’s body. “How long you think he’ll be out of it?”

"A few minutes, maybe a half an hour," Izumo said as he leaned back against the tree, "he’ll wake refreshed, completely unaware of how he got here."

"Sickly, huh? Who'da thunk it? Not to worry, some of the best doctors in the world live here you know."

"You really should work for the tourism department. And, uh," he cautioned as Genma moved to check Kotetsu's pulse, "wouldn’t do that if I were you. He's been known to come out fighting after one of these attacks... learned that the hard way. I say we just let him rest ... make the best of this situation."

Glancing down on the stricken man, up to Izumo and finally toward the temple, Genma said, “Feel kinda responsible for his state, real sorry about that. But since the head priest isn’t going anywhere, guess we can take a break.” Flipping off his hat, he dabbed at the sweatband with his handkerchief. “You two been friends a long time have you?”

“The three of us practically grew up together—”

“Explains why you look alike then.”

“Who, me and Kotetsu?”

“Nah, in profile, you and that Umino fella bear a striking resemblance. I’d bet my last dollar you're related.”

“Good eye … our fathers were brothers, half-brothers actually—”

“Consanguinity,” he said, slapping his thigh. “I knew it! Look, I think he’s coming to.”

Izumo gave his friend the once over and a subtle kick to the shin, declaring, “I think not. Yeah, those were fun times growing up in London ... we got into such mischief,” he laughed. “So what else can you tell me about this Hajame person?”

"Practically a recluse, I hear," Genma said as he turned the hat crown side down on his lap. "Then again, them creative types usually are; sleep all day, work all night—"

“So, he’s an artist or musician, I take it?"

“Nah, he's the brainy type; used to be a medical doctor, surgeon or somethin' ... now he's just a writer. Fluent in four languages, travels extensively and translates textbooks in his spare time, so says the rumor mill.”

"My father and uncle worked with anatomists and illustrators, translating English medical texts.
Small world ... we traveled halfway round the globe just to meet someone who probably lived across the street from us." Izumo closed his eyes for a moment and sighed, "Imagine that, renewing acquaintance with somebody who might have worked with my father and uncle." Suddenly his eyes popped open and he turned to Genma. "Sorry, must sound like a babbling idiot to you. I'm just thrilled with the notion of reconnecting with someone from the old stomping grounds--"

“No, no, I got it ... but like I said, the guy’s a long beard away from being a hermit. Wouldn’t hold my breath waiting for an invitation to tea with him--"

"I'm sure you're right, Genma."

"And while I'm at it, let me correct myself. That guy ain't from London proper, I heard he's from a place called Cornwall . . . that's a suburb of London, right?"

“If you consider a seaside town 250 miles southwest of London a suburb--”

“Oh.. well, maybe this guy isn’t who you think he is.”

“Yeah,” Izumo blew out a long breath, “maybe he isn’t.”

Suddenly, the body between them stiffens; Kotetsu’s legs start twitching and his entire upper body is shaking like a leaf in the wind.

“Izumo! Is he having a seizure? Should I fetch a doctor?”

“Probably just an anger stroke, he’ll be fine.”

“A what?”

“Nothing. Listen, you’ve already done us a huge favor and I know how much lies before you today. Why don’t you just go on without us?”

Genma was on his feet in an instant. "If you insist," he said, considering the grimacing face of Kotetsu and the vacant eyes of Izumo, “you sure he’s gonna be okay?”

Notes:
Consanguinity: relationship by descent from a common ancestor; kinship.

A bit of history geekage: the first milestones in media history were newspapers in the Meiji period; the first one being the Nagasaki Shipping List and Advertiser, founded in 1861.
Kakashi never shows up when expected and when he does, he manages to overshadow those around him. Thank you kindly for allowing the other characters to shine before he appears and eclipses them.

Bout time they got that sign fixed, he thought bringing his mount to halt at the front gate. Expanded the stables, I see and the paddocks look full too. “Lot of changes since we were here last, eh, Mayonaka?” As they head up the gravel path, several of the farm hands shoot incredulous looks their way, while the older ones stop to chat him up.

“Hold it right there! The hell are you doing here?”

Inuzuka Tsume, the wild-haired, snarling woman blocking his path was proprietor of Konoha’s veterinary hospital, matriarch of a powerful clan and his acid-tongued in law. Ibiki mustered a fake grin saying, “Thank god everything around here hasn’t changed. How’s it going?”

“We’re busier than one-legged men in a butt kicking contest or haven’t you noticed? Kiba!” she yelled over her shoulder, “Come get this horse! Well, Biki? Unless you’re here to arrest somebody ... we could use another set of hands. Kiba! Damn it, where is that boy?”

“For heaven’s sake Mother … what’s all the shouting about?”

Running from the doorway of the house, a leather apron draped over her arm was his sister-in-law. Inuzuka Hana, the fresh faced peace maker of the family; hard to believe she was related to the woman with her hands entangled in his mount’s reins. Ever the optimist, she saw only the good in people, even me, he thought. “Hana! How’ve you been?”

“Afraid I’ll have to catch you up on all the news over dinner. Mind taking these to the stable? Oh, hang on … you’ll need a pair too.”

“No, you don’t understand ... wasn’t going to stay ... just came to--”

“Don’t be silly,” she turned and said, "we haven’t seen you in ages, of course you’ll stay for dinner--”

“I can’t. Quick question for Idate is all,” he called after her as she ducked inside the house.

“He aint got no time for chitchat neither,” Tsume growled, “we got two mares in foal--”

“In foal?” He spared the tall, sturdily built woman an awkward glance. “A bit late in the season and too early in the day--”

“Yeah? Tell the mares that why don’t ya? Now dismount and get your ass over to the stables! Damn it Kiba! Where are you?”

“Behind you Mom,” the young man said with a smile. “Hey uncle Biki! It’s been a while.”
“Sure has and what a strapping young man you’ve turned into,” he said, alighting the saddle. “Looking like your old man every day.”

“Don’t insult the boy,” Tsume snarled. “There’s work needs doing ... no time for gum flapping the two of ya--!”

As his feet touched the ground, Hana was bounding out the front door with an armlode of supplies. "Hate to press you into service like this ... it’s been nuts around here," she said, shoving a pair of obstetric sleeves toward him. "Idate will be grateful for your time--"

“I’d only be in his way--”

“Nonsense,” she smiled. “He’ll appreciate someone experienced beside him.”

“Hana, we haven’t spoken since ... the incident--”

“Silly man, that was a hundred years ago, ’sides,” she flashed him a smile as his eyes searched hers for reprieve, "we're family. Families fall out, they fall in and they mend bridges, it's what we do.” She gave him a pat on the shoulder and a slight shove toward the stable. "You’ll have a few hours to talk things over. He’s changed Ibiki; not the hothead he used to be--”

"Still, it’s been a long time since I did the foaling thing. Not sure I remember how--"

“Aw, cram it! Idate knows what's what; just do as he says and you’ll be fine,” an irritated Tsume snapped. “Damn it girl! Aren't those vaccines ready yet?”

“Not yet, ma’am.”

“Well hurry it up! Do I hafta do everything around here myself? Oh and Biki,” she called over her shoulder as she headed toward the main house, “try not to get yourself trampled.”

Recherché

A glimmer of recognition and a glut of insincere smiles; these highlight the minuet of saving face as Tsunade and Iruka dance around the issue of:

‘Why can’t I remember how I know you or where I know you from?’

He, hesitant to speak first for fear of making another blunder, humbly averted his eyes; she, reluctant to concede another memory lost to time’s onward march, boldly searched the young man’s face. Her eyes swept down over his suit, settling on the arm which he held close to his belly.

“Your hand,” she said. “What happened?”

So much for remaining inconspicuous, he thought glowering at his traitorous upturned palm. "This is what bad timing and poor judgment looks like,” he said, stretching his hand toward her. The tone of his voice in his own ears was steady and filled with enough self-deprecation to squelch further questioning. When she didn’t recoil in shock at the sight of the blood, Iruka huffed out a humorless laugh. “Reckon it wasn’t a good idea to slice through an apple using my palm as a cutting board, was it?”

Unfazed both by the handkerchief and his scrawny wit, Tsunade spared him a disbelieving glance as she took his hand into her own.

He wanted to protest the intrusion when she pulled loose the sloppily tied kerchief, but he couldn’t;
he wished with all his might he were brazen enough to snatch away his hand when she roughly bent backward his fingers, but he didn't. Good manners allowed only a wince and a swallowed down grunt as concessions to his discomfort.

The stern look on her face and the soft hand holding his, made him uncomfortable as time plodded along - soon the brittle sound of his nervous chatter flooded the gulch of reticence dividing them.

“Sprinkled some alum from my shaving kit on it earlier,” he said when she squeezed the underside of his hand. “Stung like a nest of angry bees … guess it wasn’t adequate, huh?”

“Course it wasn’t. The wound’s too deep … lot of damage to the tissues.” A fresh line of crimson welled up, pooling along the crease of his palm when she bent his hand toward his body. ”And if this is your dominant hand, it won’t stop bleeding until properly treated.” From the squinting of his eyes, the tense set of his shoulders and the tight smile on his lips, it was clear she’d embarrassed him. All right, she thought. Go easy on the kid . . . yes he’s a klutz, but don’t scare him to death. “See here young man, get over to the apothecary; have them prepare a mixture of powdered Mitragyna Parvifolia and Calendula Officinalis--”

“But wouldn’t yarrow root do just as well ma’am?”

The moderately peeved look she gave him was on par with the ones his mother affected, right before she tugged on his ear and served up a scalding tongue-lashing. Without conscious thought, his left hand flew up to shield a vulnerable earlobe. She was still fixing him with a look which brokered no backtalk. “When you get home, mix a pinch of the powder with warm water until it becomes a smooth paste and apply it liberally. Then wrap your hand, with a clean bandage . . . you can get those from the apothecary too. Leave the paste and the bandage on overnight to staunch the bleeding and lessen the swelling.”

“Yes, ma’am ... thank you for your concern.”

They stood silent for a time, his hand in hers . . . her eyes still searching his face. “You’ll pardon me young man but, you look very familiar--”

“I have that kind of face,” he joked. “People say I remind them of--”

“Related to the Mitarashi family, aren’t you?”

Mentally scrolling down a list of names from the old country, Iruka sadly shook his head. “The name doesn’t ring a bell, but my parents were from a small village so … I guess it’s possible.”

“Lovely little family, the Mitarashi’s,” she said, never looking up from the task of rewrapping his hand. “They had two children, a daughter named Anko and a son, whose name escapes me presently – you look just like him though.”

“Pretty sure I was an only child, ma’am. Sorry … must've left my manners in my back pocket today--"”

"What are you mumbling about?"

"I mean to say ... should have introduced myself earlier," he said straightening to his full height. "My name is--"

“Oi . . . that scrap of paper there,” she gestured to her left with their joined hands, “not yours, is it?”
Tsunade stifled a giggle behind her hand watching the intrepid hunter take off on a stumbling, twisting chivy, always lagging three steps behind in the wake of his quarry. She had to pinch her arm to prevent an outburst of laughter when a wayward gust banged the paper against a nearby tree trunk. Surely, he’ll capture it now, she thought. Alas, was the young man was left standing at the base of the tree, his fists at his hips, looking up helplessly as the paper ascended on the back of a playful wind. Just outside his reach, it slapped smack in the middle of a bough, seven feet from the ground.

Poor little biscuit, she found herself thinking when his shoulders drooped in defeat. “I take it that was something sentimental.”

“Not really,” he sighed, “just a map.”

After a third attempt at jumping up and grabbing the paper failed, Iruka made another half circuit around the overgrown acorn factory. “It took her so long to finish,” he said more so to the oak than Tsunade. “She even added notes of interest . . . landmarks and such. Now I’ll have to go back and tell her I’ve lost the darn thing.”

The outbreath of resignation and the hollow sound of his back colliding with the scaly ridges of the tree’s bark when he sagged against it, tapped into Tsunade’s maternal side against her will. “Looks like I’m not the only one who had a rough start to the morning. You almost sliced your hand open for breakfast, pert near knocked an old woman to the ground and now you’ve lost your little map.”

He cut his eyes at her, looking all the world like a little child who’d broken his favorite toy.

“If it weren’t so early in the day, I’d invite you back to my office for a stiff drink; looks like you could use one.”

“I’ll have to pass,” he said turning to face her with his arms huffily folded across his chest. “And I’m not going to let this drive me to drink just yet. I’m sure if I keep heading in this direction, I’ll find what I was looking for--”

“So, you aren’t from here . . . no wonder I had trouble placing your face.”

“I’m not exactly a tourist either ma’am,” he said, pushing away from his sad post. “I was born here … been away for ages though and the territory has changed so much --”

“Well I’m overdue for a good deed this month, maybe I can help. What is it you’re looking for young man?”

“The fire brigade,” came the almost inaudible response when he cast a final glance over his shoulder.

Taking into account his slight build, natty attire and overall carriage, this time Tsunade didn’t hold back her laughter. “Don’t tell me,” she snickered, “you’re looking to sign on as a volunteer?”

Beneath them, a duvet of emerald grasses; above them, azure skies and slow moving puffy white clouds. Kotetsu lazily sprawled while Izumo rested at the base of an ancient elm, both men savoring the quiet made possible by Genma’s departure.
Rolling onto his side he smiled and said, “Well, am I a genius or what Zumo?”

“More like ‘or what,’ as in what were you thinking?” Izumo bumped his head against the smooth bark behind him, “I thought we agreed the ‘coconut layer cake’ bit was only for use in emergency situations.”

“I was on the verge of garroting Genma just to keep him quiet. Doesn’t that count as an emergency?”

“Tetsu you’re too much," he laughed shaking his head. "For goodness sakes, he's is an undertaker! With you making out like a scoop of lard in a hot skillet, it was all I could do to keep him from running over and measuring you for a coffin.”

“Yeah, well with a dolt like him, I had to lay it on thick," he said flexing his fingers beneath his head and flopping onto his back. "In the end, it came down to results; you needed ‘em …I got ‘em.”

“Overly dramatic if you ask me--”

“Says the man who makes up nonsense words like ‘narcolepsy’ and ‘cataplexy’ on the fly – what the heck was that about?”

Without even looking, Izumo sent a badly aimed punch that connected with his friend’s elbow. “Weren’t made up words you goof ... they’re real medical terms for real physiological conditions, which you faked rather poorly.”

"Blah, blah, blah,” Kotetsu teased shaking off the prickly sensations running along his arm. “Whatever you say Doctor Killjoy.”

“Never mind that, we'll need to get a move on eventually.”

“Now you’re talking sense. After a short nap, I say we grab a bite to eat and head back to the inn.”

“Nap time will have to wait,” Izumo laughed. "Right now, we’re going to the Fire Temple.”

Kotetsu sprang up like a trip wire. “You loopy from the altitude or something? Genma is long gone and the man he was talking about obviously isn’t the one Iruka is looking for. What possible reason have we to go to the Temple now?”

Maneuvering himself into a standing position, Izumo stretched out his back. “Inspector Morino and the Coroner believe that’s where we’re headed, that’s why. It’s not gonna hurt our cause to be seen talking with the monks for a few minutes--”

“Come on man! We climbed up the side of a small mountain and listened to Genma natter on for what felt like seventeen hours. You’re the goof if you think I’m gonna tramp all the way over there to--”

“Have you forgotten we’re being tailed by a pair of constables? We’ll seem more suspicious if we don't follow through. Now, quit your whining and get up.”

"Don't know why I let you talk me into these crazy things, Zumo. You’re a gigantic pain in the butt, you know that?"

“Yes, yes, I'm a pain, but results my friend,” he said extending his hand to the scowling Kotetsu, “that’s all that matters, right?”

Recherché
Notes:

Mitragyna Parvifolia: a deciduous tree found in Asia and Malaysia; the bruised leaves of the tree promote healing of wounds and alleviate pain. Extracts of the tree’s fruit can be used as an anti-inflammatory agent.

Calendula Officinalis: marigolds, to you and me; the flowers are considered a beneficial antiseptic and help to reduce inflammation.

Yarrow root: fresh leaves of this flowering plant were applied to wounds to stop bleeding and fight fever; it also has antimicrobial properties.

Chivy (British): to run about.
Recherche: Mending Fences, Building Bridges Part Two

Sagging against the door, he sucked in a breath. “Idate … Idate! Where are you?”

“Third stall from the right! Oi! Fetch my wife or Tsume … this one’s presenting breech too. Go on then, shake a leg,” he said, peering over the stall.

“Biki? What … what are you doing here?”

“Sign out front says you’re looking for a stable hand—”

“Been meaning to change that sign,” he said with a wry smile. “Hmm … long arms, stocky build … reckon you’ll do in a pinch. We need to repel this foal, think you can handle it?”

“I’ve forgotten more than you’ll ever know about horses, sonny boy.”

“Big talk for a soon to be outta work Police Inspector. Get over here, old timer, show me what you can do.”

“Let’s be clear, they haven’t run me out of office yet,” he said pushing himself away from the stable door. “And I’ll thank you to show some respect for your elders.” In less than twenty strides, Ibiki was inside the stall, sliding between his brother’s back and the wall. “The key to calming a mare is to speak softly, with authority.”

“You don’t say. Here I’ve been doing this wrong for twenty odd years; thanks for the tip, kind stranger.”

“Smart aleck kid,” Ibiki chuckled.

“Know it all geezer,” Idate whispered with a grin. “We haven’t much time. I’ve tried to keep her standing so the foal could turn on its own, but it’s not working.”

“Understood,” Ibiki said as he slipped on the sleeves. “Is this her first time? I mean, she seems awfully underdeveloped—”

“That’s cause she’s not quite a yearling; we didn’t even know she was pregnant til the membranes broke. Barely had time to get her in the stall and wrap the tail.”

“Hold her steady now. With the next contraction, I’ll check the position of the foal.”

“Gotta feeling we’re going to lose this one too, Biki. Mare in the first stall dropped a stillborn twenty minutes ago.”

“Don’t give up, I feel a heartbeat. I don’t understand why they’re foaling so late in the season—”

“Who the hell knows why anything is going on around here lately? The whole of nature is out of whack I tell ya. We got sheep dropping their wool, roosters brooding eggs and cows mounting bulls; abnormal is the new normal.”

“I’m sure you’re exaggerating, Idate … things can’t be that bad—”

“Oh yeah? Talk to me about it after you’ve spent months trapped in one house with twelve Inuzuka and their dogs. The howling and barking all night every night is driving me crazy and their dogs are a pain in the ass too.”
“Why’d you invite ‘em in the first place?”

“Weren’t you listening? Told you about the weirdness with all the animals didn’t I? Our caseload got so heavy, Tsume had to relocate the veterinary clinic just to help us out.”

“Caseload? So it’s not just this farm?”

“Nope … everybody out this way is having problems with livestock. Seems the closer a farm is to the cemetery, the more problems. Speaking of which, how’s it going on your end?”

“Just about got the foal turned. How long has this been going on?”

“Ever since they started excavating land and renovating that big house east of the cemetery seems like. Eight, nine months, I reckon--”

“The old Hatake estate?”

“You been living in a cave or somethin’? The Hatake heir moved home from England almost a year ago. The last of his line, you know; folks say he’s looking to find a wife, start a family--”

“You said something about the cemetery earlier. When I was out in the forest this morning, I saw something that struck me odd. Shit! The contractions are getting stronger … foal’s not completely turned!”

Recherché

Tsunade smiled and patted him on the shoulder “I didn’t mean to laugh out loud, young man, but the fire brigade typically accept volunteers of a sturdier stock; farmhands, millwrights, longshoremen. Brawny, illiterate types, with strong backs to fetch water and calloused hands to clear away debris. You strike me as someone inclined to cerebral pursuits, not manual labor.”

“Rest assured ma’am, I wasn’t looking to volunteer. I’m writing a thesis on the structural integrity of a genus of hardwoods from this region, Konoha in particular. Boring stuff, really … comparing the tensile strength of timber used in framing, mortise and tenon joints--”

“Yes, but the fire brigade? If you don’t mind me saying, that’s an odd place for research; are you … an architect or a building inspector?”

“I’m neither that creative or crafty,” he said rubbing at the nape of his neck. “Archeology and anthropology … those are my fields of study; my thesis examines how hardwoods like the sugi, endure stresses over time. I hope to prove cured timber from this region rivals stone and mortar construction in terms of load bearing capacity, not to mention the changes in its chemical composition after exposure to water and--”

“You’re right,” she said, waving off his commentary with a laugh, “that sounds incredibly boring. But I’m sure Konoha’s archives would better serve your needs--”

“I don’t doubt it .. between you and me,” he leaned closer, “I didn’t want to waste such a beautiful day stuck inside a stuffy library.”

“I see,” she laughed, “shirking your duties, eh? I’m doing the same thing. Had every intention of avoiding social interaction and carving out a patch of quiet for myself. That didn’t work well,” she said, turning to the bench for her newspaper. “I’d best get back to the office.”

He followed a few steps behind her, weighing the propriety of playing escort, opting instead to circle
around and affect a polite bow. “It was a pleasure to make your acquaintance ma’am.”

“Likewise, I’m sure. By the way, what did you say your name —?” In a flash, her face went ashen and a sneer graced her lips. "Bastards! Should have known those sons of a rabid hyena would show up today!"

“Ma’am,” he said, following her line of sight, “is everything ... alright?”

Though the plaza hummed with activity, it was hard to miss a throng of people bowing respectfully as they gathered around three odd looking gentlemen. One, a tall sickly pale man with greasy long black hair, outfitted in a silk kimono of purple. Behind him stood a bespectacled shorter man in a dark green kimono; his hair a dirty grey. Iruka assumed him to be the other man’s valet, his stance protective as he held a parasol over his master with one hand and held back the crowd with the other. The third person, a much older man, his head and one arm sheathed in bandages; his good hand, held tightly a walking stick.

“The apothecary is three doors west of the Administrative Complex,” she said crossing to Iruka’s left. “Follow the path from there and you’ll see the lumber mills in the distance -- the fire brigade is a quarter mile beyond there.”

She was gone by the time he raised himself from another bow, blending into the crowded plaza.

**Recherché**

Their meeting with the head monk, polite and brief, netted them a half cup of bitter tea each and a solemn pledge to pray for success in their endeavors.

“This ticks me off,” Kotetsu grumbled. “Took us an hour to get here, then we had to wait another half hour before we could talk with some old guy who looked like he was half-asleep. Bum rushed after ten minutes--”

“Tetsu, the head monk is a busy man; you saw the line of people waiting to--”

“Let’s just get the hell outta here--”

“Psst!”

“Don’t hiss at me Zumo! We came, we talked, we drank some decidedly awful tea and--”

“Psst!”

“I swear to the gods, if that’s Genma . . . I’m not gonna be responsible for my actions!”

Izumo grabbed a fistful of Kotetsu’s jacket tail as he sauntered toward the open-air passageway. “Hold your horses . . . look, over there.”

One of the monks in training peered around a stone pillar, beckoning them to draw near. “Isn’t that the same guy who ushered us into the meeting Tetsu?”

“How should I know? All these guys in white robes look the same to me.”

“Well that one still has his hair. Come on, let’s see what he’s on about.”

They followed him until they came to a secluded area near the gardens; looking around warily, the young monk turned and bowed low. “Sirs, I am Michio. I apologize for listening in on your conversation and for the head monk’s rebuff.” He bowed again, deeper this time.
“Don’t worry about it kid,” Kotetsu laughed, “we’re not easily offended.”

“Yes, there's no need to apologize,” Izumo told him, returning the bow. “Talk of monsters and such tends to fascinate or frighten--”

“Please sirs,” Michio said as he nervously scanned the grounds. “The monsters you spoke of ... they’re called gaki. We’re taught to believe they’re pitiable creatures to be treated with compassion, not fear. It is also our belief they can be rehabilitated through prayers and sacrifices. The head monk is a hardliner in this regard and it was for that reason he could no longer stand to hear you speak of them as murderous entities.”

Wishing to leave as quickly as possible, Kotetsu smiled saying, “Gotcha. Look, thanks for the--”

“We celebrated Obon recently, the head monk led us through segaki--”

“No wonder the scent of incense was so strong in his private quarters--”

“What are you two talking about? The hell is Segaki?”

“A ritual the monks perform to stop the suffering of the gaki and force them to return to their places of torment . . . am I right, Michio?”

“Yes sir, gaki are depicted in paintings as having skeletal bodies, tiny necks or throats with engorged stomachs and abnormally small mouths. This is the reason they’re called hungry ghosts -- their appetites can never be sated no matter how hard they try. There is also another, higher class of gaki capable of assuming human form and walking among us undetected.”

“So, you’re telling us that--”

“I believe as you do sirs, gaki are demons indeed; no amount of prayer, of leaving sacrifices of food and beverages for them can change that. My training got underway three months ago and by the Temple’s standards, my mind is still . . . unenlightened; perhaps time will alter my opinion. As it stands right now though, I believe the constables have no idea what they’re up against. I must go. If ever there is something I can do to help, please don’t hesitate to ask.”

“Just keep praying,” Kotetsu said, “gotta feeling we’re gonna need it.”

Recherché

Tsunade dug her nails into her palms. “You gentlemen looking for me?”

“Ah, so it is you Lady Tsunade,” Danzou said when he turned to face her. “Almost couldn’t tell you apart from the common strumpets around here, what with your hair flowing about your shoulders--”

“Might I remind you,” she hissed, "you’re speaking to the Governor of this territory. “You will watch your tone and your words, Lord Shimura.”

Skillfully playing to the gathering crowd, Danzou staggered backward. “Bullying a feeble old man … how cowardly.”

With the townsfolk pretending to go about their business even as they cast wary glances her way, Tsunade forced herself to smile. Stepping closer to Danzou, she laughed saying, “How you do go on, sir.”

“Lady Tsunade, I never speak in jest and that you know right well. We’ve come to discuss a matter-
“Yes, dreadfully urgent,” Orochimaru chimed in. “And a rather an indelicate topic of discussion for a crowded thoroughfare.”

Her stomach roiled as he took a proffered silken handkerchief from his manservant and delicately covered his nose.

“Well,” Danzou said tapping his stick against the pavement, “is it because we aren’t European envoys that you hold us captive here under the blazing sun?”

“I’m certain the fault is mine,” came her snide reply. “Right this way, gentlemen. And though I loathe the stench your sun warmed bodies will leave behind, won’t you join me inside?”

Notes:

A mare typically lays on her side to give birth; a normal delivery can take anywhere from 15-45 minutes after the membranes rupture. One foreleg appears first, the other one six inches behind it and then the head. ‘Repelling the foal’ - whenever the hind limbs and rear end of a foal present first, (breech), it must be pushed back far enough in the uterus that it might turn about. If not done properly or quickly, the foal and/or mare may perish.

Strumpet: (archaic) a prostitute or promiscuous woman.

Michio: “man on the correct path.”

Obon: a festival celebrated in mid-August, it is believed the spirits of their ancestors return to this world to visit their living relatives. Obon dances are performed, graves are visited and offerings of fruit and vegetables are left by household shrines and at temples. At the end of Obon, floating lanterns are placed in lakes and rivers to guide the spirits back to their world.

Segaki: “feeding the hungry ghosts.” A Buddhist tradition performed to stop the suffering of the gaki or muenbotoke (the dead who have no living relatives), tormented by insatiable hunger. The ritual forces them to return to their portion of hell or keep the spirits of the dead from falling into the realm of the gaki. The ritual is held at Buddhist temples and there is a custom to place segaki-dana (rack for gaki) or gaki-dana (shelf for gaki) at home and present offerings (traditionally rice and water) for hungry ghosts who are wandering in this world as muenbotoke during Urabone or Obon.
As afternoon stretched toward early evening, Iruka paced outside the inn. Who knew they’d move this quickly? Damn it! I hate keeping secrets, but all the pieces aren’t in place yet. Wanted to hold it together longer before I had to say something, but now--

“Iruka, you haven’t taken up smoking, again have you?”

Startled, he turned to see the scowl on Izumo’s face. “No, of course not,” he laughed.

“Alright … so, what’s troubling you?”

“It’s nothing ... um, where’s Tetsu?”

“Nothing huh,” he said stepping in front of Iruka, “then why are you walking around in circles out here?”

“Because if I walked in triangles, people would think me mad. Now don’t trouble yourself … I’m just trying to sort a few things out is all.”

Catching hold of the other man’s uninjured forearm as he attempted to walk past him, Izumo looked him straight in the eye saying, “I could always tell when you were stressed or lying. And right now, you’re a bit of both.”

“I promise … all is well; tell you everything once Tetsu gets here, okay?”

Izumo still held tight his arm, “Everything?”

“I’ll spill my guts like a fishwife does Biwa trout--”

“Now you’re making me hungry,” he smiled as he released his grip.

“Ruka! You have no idea how glad I am to see you,” Kotetsu said as he rounded the corner of the building. “Your cousin’s a sadist … did he tell you what he made me do? What? Why are you looking at me like that … what’s going on?”

“We were about to organize a search party,” Izumo said as he turned to face him.

“And the jokes keep coming. Why are we standing out here? We're paid through the week, aint we Ruka?”

“Calm down, everything’s squared away with the inn and whatever Zumo did, a hot meal and a few drinks should make things right.”

“Now you’re talkin’ …I’m starving.”

“We'll need to go somewhere our conversation won’t be overheard,” he said inclining his head toward the inn. “Whatcha think?”

“Long as the food’s good, the alcohol's flowing,” Kotetsu was already walking toward the inn’s entrance, "and you’re buying--”

“Excellent! I passed a little diner by the lumber mill. We’ll have no worries about eavesdroppers on the way--”
“More walking?” Kotetsu whined as he turned about. “Good god man! The blisters on my feet have blisters.”

“Don't mind him,” Izumo smiled as he wrapped his arm around his friend's neck. “He’s been a grouch since we left the Temple.”

A snarl and a sharp elbow in the side freed Kotetsu from the chummy gesture. “Only a grouch cause you didn’t let me eat nothing.”

“No time for horsing around you two,” he said walking away from the building. “We have to get moving if we're going to that tsuya tonight--”

“Crashing a wake? That's kinda creepy Ruka … we didn’t know that woman--”

“What if I told you there’s a good chance Hatake will be there tonight?”

He paused at the mouth of the path leading from the inn, “You know me … I’m up for that.”

“Exactly what I needed to hear! I wanna look him straight in the eye and--”

“And do what, Iruka? Embarrass yourself again? The Temple is hardly the place to engage our enemy,” Izumo reasoned. “I swear … everyday that passes, you’re starting to sound more and more like Tetsu … foolhardy--”

“I aint foolhardy …just hate wasting my time. But hell, Ruka, even I know public confrontation is a stupid idea. I mean, for god sakes… this is a demon we're talking about--”

“Hatake already knows we’re here,” Iruka calmly whispered. “Paid me a visit--”

“You’ve seen him? That why you were so anxious earlier?”

“One of the reasons, Zumo and no, Hatake and I didn’t have a face to face meeting. When I got back to the inn, I discovered both the valise and my father’s portfolio were tampered with; thankfully, nothing was missing.”

“Good,” Kotetsu growled as he cracked his knuckles, “least he knows we mean business--”

“No, that’s not necessarily a good thing,” Izumo warned. “We have to be careful, Hatake can use that information against us.”

“Give it a rest old man, not like he’ll run to the constables--”

“You’re both correct … sorta,” Iruka said as he stepped between them. “For now, Hatake has the advantage … but not for much longer. We’re gonna stop him before he takes another victim. Come … walk with me while I explain.”

**Recherché**

At the door of the antechamber, Kinoe softly said, “My Lord … all is in readiness. Would you like me to bathe you now?”

Soft light from his lantern suffused the foot of the bed, surrounding the Master with an otherworldly glow as he sat up, silken sheets pooling at his waist.

“Afterwards. As I have need to spend my wrath before tonight’s solemnities, the Yasha await me in the upstairs bedchamber.”
Watching his Lord emerge naked from a tangle of sheets, a pleasant tingle ran along Kinoe’s spine; an uncomfortable tightness spread through his loins as the Master stretched his upper body. His breath caught in his throat at the realization of Lord Hatake frolicking with a small army of nubile Yasha. Soon, he thought, I’ll stand inside the secret compartment, witnessing my Lord’s pleasure surging through his body as he plunges deep his--

“Are we understood then? Keep the downstairs servants occupied and away from the second floor.”

“Yes, of course my Lord,” he breathed. “How well I remember the last time; blood splattered walls … the feeding frenzy of the Yasha, dismembered corpses littering the hallway, all because those unfortunate souls ran in answer to the screams issuing from your quarters.” With the back of his free hand, Kinoe dabbed away a trail of drool from the corner of his mouth. “It was rapturous.”

“So, Umino … think he’ll show his face tonight?”

“I … I have no doubt my Lord. Who would not wish to be in your presence?”

“Have you taken leave of your senses Kinoe or is it, voyeuristic thoughts cloud your memory? Do you not understand that every fiber of Umino’s being is dedicated to eradicating me?”

“My Lord, he is but a weak and foolish human… no match for a numen--”

“Weak, you say? And foolish? Hardly. Humans are unpredictable … that makes them dangerous. You still bear the scars from his father’s dagger, do you not?”

While the Master spoke, Kinoe’s fingers flew to the thick puckered skin along his breastbone. ”Yes, I wear these scars with pride, as they were sustained to protect--“

"As if I needed your protection. I simply went to talk to Tadashi, tried to convince him to continue the research after he and my father had a falling out. That fool … uttered a curse and drew a blade. You stepped into a fight that wasn't yours Kinoe; those scars are the result of your impulsiveness."

"Master, I never understood why you didn’t take his life that night--“

“You still speak as a fool. I can find a replacement for you anytime I choose … remember that,” he said standing beside the bed. “Umino Tadashi’s life was in the hands of my father … that’s why I couldn't kill him. However, his son belongs to me. Make no mistake, the younger Umino has a heart set on revenge; he’s proven himself a hot-tempered, quick-thinking and resourceful human. Yes, my quarry is wily and brimming with fire. How I live for the thrill of the hunt, for unlike you were, Umino represents an intellectual challenge as well; someone worthy of my interest.”

With bowed head, he answered, “It is as you say, my Lord. I am forever grateful for your tolerance. With your permission, I go now to prepare the upper bedchamber.”

“Begone … oh, and Kinoe--”

“Yes, Master?”

“As you spy on my activities this evening, try to control yourself. Your heavy breathing and choked off moans of release inhibit the Yasha’s enjoyment.”

Kinoe dropped to his knees, his forehead inches from the slate floor. “My Lord … I had no idea you knew of my … I mean, thank you for not revoking this wonderful privilege.”

_What a perverse little creature you are_, thought Hatake as his servant withdrew.
“Still drinking heavily, Biki?” Tsume asked pushing a flask of sake toward him.

“I wouldn’t say heavily--”

“Mother please, that’s not appropriate dinner conversation.”

“What? Ibiki was the only man who could drink me under the table … god, I miss those days.”

“Yes … well,” Hana politely cleared her throat as she turned to Ibiki, “it’s so nice having the family together again.”

“I’d forgotten what an excellent cook you are, Hana … thanks for the reminder. And,” he said glancing at his pocket watch, “I also forgot how early dinner is on the farm. My apologies … afraid I’ll have to eat and run.”

“What’s that? Hot date, Biki?”

“Little time for romance these days, Tsume. Gotta show my ugly puss at the tsuya tonight.”

“Shame what happened to that Hyuga girl,” she mumbled with a shake of her head. “So, you and your brother worked things out?”

“Mother, you’re meddling,” Hana snapped. “If they don’t wish to discuss it, we shouldn’t either. Let’s not dredge up ancient history.”

“It’s okay my lamb,” Idate said as he squeezed her hand. “I’m sure everybody around the table remembers our very public falling out.”

“Everybody except me,” Tsume said. “Go on then, spare no detail.”

“Mother, that’s enough!”

Laying aside his chopsticks, Idate dropped his hand beneath the table and patted Hana’s knee. “I don’t mind talking about it, and considering today’s events, I’m sure we could all use a good laugh. Whole thing was kinda silly in retrospect. You see, Ibiki used to think I resented him for leaving me to run the family business … which I did for a time. Despite that, I was always proud of him and a little jealous too. He ran off and saw the world; experienced things I only ever read about. I won out in the end,” he smiled, raising the back of Hana’s hand to his lips, “never would’ve met the love of my life had I’d been gallivanting about like was.”

“For the love of mud --- I’m tryin’ to eat here,” Kiba said. “All that mushy stuff makes my stomach do flips.”

“You should be used to us by now. One of these days you’ll be glad Idate taught you how to treat a woman right--”

“Well it aint today Sis. Okay that’s it,” he growled pushing away his plate, “I’ve lost my appetite.”

“Told ya … it’s a sin to waste food, boy!” In one smooth motion, Tsume stood, reached across the table, flicked at his ear with her fingers and sat back down. “Now shut up and eat,” she barked. “Go on Idate.”

“Yes … well, after Ibiki was discharged from the military, he moped around feeling sorry for himself … turned into a hopeless drunk. That never sat right with me, I wanted to beat him senseless--”
“You did get in a few good licks,” Ibiki said. “Knocked me on my ass twice, if I remember correctly--”

“Yeah … I did, didn’t I?”

“Wait a minute,” Tsume laughed, “this shrimp beat you? What … were you knee walking drunk, Biki?”

“Nope, happened during a rare moment of sobriety--”

“Gotcha … you let him win. Knew there had to be a logical explanation for that--”

“Moving on,” Idate interrupted, “what brings you here, Ibiki?”

“Grandmother’s stories,” he said around a mouthful of sweet taro root. “You remember any of ‘em?”

“How could I forget? She used to scare us silly with her tales of strange creatures roaming the countryside, drinking the blood of animals and lapping up children’s tears.”

“Seems our fair Governor thinks those same creatures are responsible for the deaths of eight young women--”

“Horseshit,” Tsume snorted. “Everybody knows we got a spree killer on the loose. So, why the hell haven’t you caught him yet Biki?”

“Ignore her, I’ve every confidence you’ll catch this maniac--”

“Don’t know about that, little brother.

I’m starting to think the Governor might be right.”

Notes:

Yasha: female vampire-bat of Japanese lore. A woman could become one of these creatures if she allowed anger to lower her status in rebirth.

Biwa trout: an anadromous fish endemic to Lake Biwa in the Shiga Prefecture, Japan. Called a trout, it is more akin to salmon.

Suffused: to spread over as with liquid or light.
“Good, you’re still here, Ryota,” he said sauntering into the constabulary. “We need to talk.”

“As I haven’t time to shoot the breeze, Inspector, you might wanna take a gander at this one first,” he said pushing a pile of papers near the side of his desk. “The rest just need signatures.”

“Thanks.”

“Sounds like you’re smiling,” he said scrawling a note in the margins of a report. “And not a rumble of complaint either; reckon that means the family is doing well.”

The slightest of grins pulled at Ibiki’s lip as he scanned through the documents. “How’d you know where I was?”

“Please … I can read you like a twelve penny novel, that and you smell like an unmucked stable. Hope you plan to bathe before the tsuya--”

“Probably won’t. So, Hagane and Kamizuki went to the Temple, did they? And what’s this? Umino went to the Fire Brigade … why?”

Ryota shrugged his shoulders, “What am I, a mind-reader? Maybe after talking to the Governor he felt like volunteering. More importantly, we still don’t have a positive identification on those remains.”

“Well that and the rest of this stuff can wait till tomorrow. You’re going with me to the tsuya--”

“Can’t … evening watch commander’s late again--”

“If I gotta show up, so do you. No more excuses old man, we’ve got three capable desk sergeants that can handle things in your absence.” Sliding the completed forms to the edge of the desk he said, “I’ll be back in fifteen minutes; enough time to issue orders and clear your desk. Mind you, got no problem dragging ya outta here by the collar so you best be ready.”

**Recherché**

Iruka and company follow the smell of the incense rolling down the mountain and the wails of the mourning women rising from the quiet town to the Temple court which by now was a swarming knot of humanity.

“We’ll never find him in this crowd, ‘Ruka. I say we call it a night--”

“He’s right,” Izumo said. “No shame in retreating until we can devise a better plan--”

“Nope, his absence would be suspect. I know he’s here … an image to maintain and all that rot. ’Sides, we’ve come too far already. No confrontation, hear me Tetsu?”

“Yeah, yeah … I know the drill.”

They slowly made their way through the crowd, until at last they stood directly across the room from the grieving family. Once the chief priest concludes recitation of the sutra, splinter groups begin forming; some consoling the family, others making small talk. At opposite ends of the enclosure, Tsunade and Ibiki acknowledge one another with polite nods as they’re pushed along with the flow.
of the exiting crowd. To the left of the altar, was a cluster of important looking men. Standing head and shoulders over them was their target, Hatake Kakashi. Hair of silver, slicked back, an ebony eye patch concealing his left eye; his pale skin enveloped in a kimono of black silk. He smiled amiably and nodded politely as inane discussion floated about him. Outside this small group and to Hatake’s right stood an olive-skinned man who spent his time scanning the crowd.

“Iruka … there he is.”

“I see him, Zumo,” he snarled. “I have to get closer … wanna make sure he sees me--”

“Damn it,” he said grabbing him by the wrist, “don’t let your temper get the better of you.”

“I won’t.”

Recherché

Standing slightly to the rear of the crowd on the same side of the room as Iruka, Ryota nudged the Inspector in the ribs. “Umino and friends … three o’clock.”

“Yeah, I see ‘em. Don’t know what the hell possessed them to come here tonight. Be prepared to wrangle them away from the family … can’t have ‘em saying something stupid to the Hyuga.”

“Too late, they’re on the move--”

“Let’s go, Ryota.”

Recherché

Though he never outwardly acknowledged his presence, Hatake felt the heated stares aimed his way and he smiled. *Confronting me in a crowded arena, he has the guts his father lacked. The Inspector’s here too so I doubt Umino will make a scene, but time will tell.*

Recherché

“Lady Tsunade, see that young man moving through the crowd? He’s the one who wanted to meet with you while you were having breakfast with the Inspector this morning.”

“You’ll have to be more specific, Shizune. There are a great many young men walking about.”

“Right there, ma’am … that’s Dr. Umino.”

“Him? Can’t be. That’s the young man I told you about from the park.”

“I don’t think so, I sat right across the table from him today and I know for sure ... that is Dr. Umino.”

“Well, one of us is obviously mistaken. Go fetch him … we’ll get to the bottom of this right now.”

“Yes ma’am.”

Recherché

As Ibiki and Ryota move in, Genma blocks their progress. “Sorry I couldn’t get them remains identified Inspector," he said. "Hectic day. It turned out well though don’t you think?”

Ibiki pushed past him without a word.
They’d covered half the distance of the Temple when Kinoe bumped into Iruka. “Don’t be a fool all your life, Umino,” he whispered as he passed by.

“Hey, watch where you’re going buddy,” Kotetsu hissed. “What an ass … he didn’t even apologize—”

“That was Hatake’s right hand man … issuing a warning,” Iruka said. Ignoring the threat, he pressed closer to the place where Hatake stood. After an exchange of glances and a polite smile from his target, suddenly, Iruka was thrown back on his heels; Kotetsu and Izumo dropped to their knees, clutching at their chests.

As a crowd gathered round the two men struggling to stand, Kinoe and his master slip away.

“The hell was that?” Kotetsu groaned.

“A revelation of his power,” Iruka panted as he reached down for Izumo’s hand. “Sorry, forgot to give you guys talismans—”

“He wasn’t trying to kill us, that’s sure,” Izumo panted, “bought himself enough time to get away is all.”

Suddenly a man dressed in white robes broke through the crowd; Michio, the young monk. “Quickly … come with me,” he said.

“What the hell was that, Ibiki?”

“Amateurs … probably got hold to new wine—”

“Shouldn’t we follow them?” Ryota asked as the three men limped off, ”Looked as if they were struck with great force by something—”

“Leave ’em go; they stayed away from the family which was my only concern. Raidou and Aoba will continue surveillance and we’ll soon find out what they were up to. Come on, let’s get out of here.”

“Well, Shizune … where is he?”

“I don’t understand ma’am. They were standing less than ten feet away from me and then they just … disappeared.”

“Capital idea, think I’m gonna pull my own disappearing act. See if you can find Ibiki … tell him to meet me first thing in the morning. I’ll send the carriage back for you.”
Inside the salon, as the aroma of pine fills the room, Maito stands by the fireplace. Beside Kinoe’s vacant desk, seconds tick down on the clock as footsteps in the hall increase in volume. From the corridor, there comes a swish of leather.

_The cat o nine_, he thinks, quickly removing his jacket and shirt.

As the door creaks open, trembling, he drops to his knees. Master’s footsteps, hushed against thick carpet, his presence overwhelming as he draws closer; waves of anger roll from his body, pushing Maito prostrate against the tiled hearth. Logs filled with sap crackle and pop, sizzling against his skin. The tips of Master’s shoes halt inches from the crown of his head; his body braces for the swift kicks and rapid strikes which will surely come.

His Lord stands before him, considering for a moment and then … he retreats.

Maito dares not lift his head at the sound of hearth warmed leather yielding under Master’s weight. For several unbearable moments is only the sound of his frantic breathing and the dull thud of the Master’s fingers drumming against the arm of the chair.

“My Lord,” he whispers, “your wrath is just … I, your humble servant deserves--”

“Stand to your feet Maito. And for heaven sake... put your clothes back on.”

“Master, I cannot stand before you … my shame and guilt are too great. If it pleases my Lord,” he said crawling on his belly, “allow me plead for the punishment due.” With his breath blowing back into his face from the bridge of the master’s shoe, once more he begs, “I’ve made a fatal blunder. Cast me into the fire, gouge out the eyes which deceived you … cut out the tongue which uttered falsehoods, only do not cast me from your presence--”

“You’ve done nothing worthy of punishment.”

“Yes, but Master … the whip in your hand--”

“This? Kinoe left it on a side table in the hall,” he said with a soft chuckle. “Surely you know I need no weapons to chastise an unruly servant. Come now, take your seat beside me.”

Eyes lowered, Maito reached back for his shirt, quickly covering himself. As the tiny whip falls to the floor, it is accompanied by the squeal of cork against glass, the scent of cognac and the gentle fall of amber liquid splashing against a snifter’s balloon. With a gulp, the empty glass now settles on the marble topped table between the two chairs.

“My Lord, your anger--”

“Has nothing to do with you. I spent the last three hours trapped in a hallowed place, filled to the brim with self-righteous humans; listening to those hypocrites profess dependence and faith in gods made of stone and precious metals … it was sickening.”

Maito pushed himself up to a kneeling position; suddenly, his forearms stretch before his body and his lips graze the carpet, “Forgive me Master. The information I provided was incorrect … I do not deserve such kindness.”

“And if I have to repeat myself … you shall have no more of it. Sit!”
Clambering to his feet, he dared not meet the eyes of his Master. Once more, liquid flows from the decanter and a snifter is nudged into his hand as he settles into his seat.

“Maito, do you understand why I had to return to Konoha?”

“Of course Master. As head of clan Hatake, you must take a bride and provide heirs—”

“Yes, but these are not raison d’être,” he said refilling his glass. “I returned to the land of my ancestors to repay long standing debts and fulfill prophecy—”

“The ancients foretold of a pythonic army united under a supreme ruler … Master,” his eyes widened, “a grievous error I’ve committed—”

“Hush. You can do nothing without my express consent or influence. This supposed error of yours provided the means to exact vengeance.”

“I am certain I do not understand, my Lord. The Hyuga girl’s death … it will only spur enhanced vigilance by the constables and their deputies. Even now are they casting broader and tighter nets over the territory—”

“All for naught, of this you may be confident. Have you ever watched a man’s heart break and crumble to pieces Maito? Ever stood at the right hand of a man as his spirit withered and faded with the passage of each new day?”

“No, Master.”

“The year I tasted the blood of my first kill, my father lost the love of his life and I a mother, at the hands of a Hyuga.” He paused to top off his glass. “In days of old, the Hyuga possessed powerful amulets capable of ensorceling the most puissant of demons—”

“Do these things still exist, my Lord?”

“You’ve lived these many years unaware of our shared histories … for shame Maito.”

“Anticipation of punishment made my mind a jumble my liege.” He threw down his drink in a single gulp. “I remember all too well. This nation came into being when dragon spirits sprang up from underwater volcanoes; these spirits pushed the land masses apart, assigning their offspring rule over parcels over territories; greed and jealousy spawned wars which further divided the lands. When humans began to populate these areas, they began sacrificing their offspring to ensure protection and blessing from the warring numen—”

“All continued smoothly until, along came proselytizers … missionaries spreading the good news of other, so called gods,” Master said as he refreshed his servant’s goblet. “These deities promised sanctuary from demon spirits in the form of blessed pieces of magma guaranteed to strip the numen of its power. Every powerful clan in Konoha … the Uchiha, Hyuga, Akimichi and Nara passed the talismans down their family lines. But much like you Maito, the younger generation is woefully unaware of their power, keeping them as heirlooms from bygone times. Every family that is, with the exception of the Hyuga.”

The room fell quiet as Master and servant turned their attention to the roaring hearth.

Finally Lord Kakashi spoke. “Long ago, the head of that impure family desired an allotment of land belonging to the Hatake; my father refused to sell it, choosing instead to gift the property to the Senju clan. In retaliation for this slight, on the night of the Great Hunt, ere my mother rose from her rest, she was abducted, her attendants slaughtered and a note left behind in her chambers. Father went on
a rampage, killing every Hyuga in the household, save two … a brother and sister hidden away by the servants.”

“Yes, I remember that as well Master.”

“The other night, dressed in all her finery for a gathering with family and friends, Hitomi looked upon her father’s face for the last time. Afterward, she gladly ran to meet me, surrendering herself to a hellish existence as my servant. Such a purity in body and spirit, her blood, ambrosia as I took it into myself and now her soul … forever mine.” He raised his glass to the hearth in salute. “For you my Father. At last, I’ve humbled the clan conceived in incest and propelled to prominence by witchcraft. I’ve stripped a mother of her reason for living, a father of his will to rule and stolen from them the relics which might be used against my seed someday. May the current head of that family know the pain of loss, may it gnaw through his bones and waste away his spirit from this time, until his dying breath.”

“May your curse be as it was spoken my Lord,” he said lifting his glass in like manner.

“Still, it’s not enough. So many years apart, my parents perished in the exact same way; their bodies exposed to the rays of the sun, till nothing remained except memories and ashes. My mother … killed by the Hyuga; my father … vanquished by an ancestor of the one who now hunts me.” He took another sip of his brandy and asked, “What have you learned about the son of Umino?”

“No doubt. The younger Umino is no fool. Have you other information to impart?”

“Just that on the morrow, they have a meeting scheduled with the Governor.”

“How predictable these humans. Though he did surprise me by showing up at the tsuya tonight; he even endeavored to approach me.” Slowly did his hand rise, undoing the eye patch twined in silver strands. “I could not allow that, for my first encounter with him must be on my terms.” His eyes took on an eerie glow as he continued speaking, “The scent of his blood, from a wound self-inflicted aroused not my hunger, but my thirst.” The hands gripping the bolsters of the chair become elongated, his nails transforming into hooked barbs and his voice deeper. “Had to erect a kekkai between us, ere control completely abandoned me. But the smell of anger and fear pouring off his body … intoxicating. Surely you understand what that’s like?”

“I do, my Lord.”

“Another surprise … Umino has the blood of an innocent. A man nearly thirty years of age, untouched by a woman; no wonder he funnels every desire of his into avenging his father.”

“My Lord, with your permission I will gladly dispatch them … the yokai are particularly anhungered tonight—”

“Not just yet. A cautious man is Inspector Morino; surely has them under surveillance. If they vanish without a trace, a bumbling investigation by the constables will only hinder me. No,” he grinned, “I have designed a torture exquisite for Umino, when the time is right shall I execute my plan. For now, continue monitoring their movements. If you do well Maito, I will give his companions into your hands or rather, your belly.”

“Thank you, Master.”
Once more they sat in silence, watching the fire dance in the hearth as they sip at the calming brandy.

“I’ve managed to avoid these things for hundreds of years,” he said more to himself than Maito. “But another ‘season’ is upon us and thanks to Kinoe, I’ll be subjected to a parade of vapid women and meaningless conversation. Damn him … he knows I loathe the idea of strangers wandering about my home, yet even this I’ve allowed.”

“It is possible your future bride will be in attendance, my Lord. At least, that is my hope for your happiness.”

“I’ll hear no more of that. Go... watch over my prey as he sleeps unafraid in his bed.”

“My liege.” He fluidly rose, gathering up his jacket and bowing low before his lord. Impulse dropped him to one knee, his forehead touching the back of the Master’s hand. “I shall not fail you this time, my Lord.”

Without warning and set on fire by the flames of hell itself, the collar about his neck constricted his windpipe.

“Consider that incentive, Maito … a taste of the punishment which awaits should you fail.”

“You are most gracious my Lord,” he spluttered.

“Get thee about my business!”

Scuttling on all fours, the pain lessened as he reached the salon door. As he prepared to leave, there came the sound of breaking glass and the smell of blood as it inched down Master's arm. Above it all, was rich, hearty laughter.

“Yes,” he heard Master say,

“How I look forward to our first encounter … spawn of Umino.”

Notes:

Cat o' nine tails: a multi-tailed whip that originated as an implement for severe punishment. Made of nine thongs of cotton cord often tipped with metal or barbs, designed to lacerate the skin and cause intense pain.

Yokai: class of supernatural monsters, spirits and demons. Yokai which can shapeshift are referred to as bakemono obake.

Raison d’être (French): reason or justification for existence.

Err (archaic): to deviate from the true course or purpose.

Pythonic: gigantic or monstrous; a spirit or demon.

Ensorcell: to bewitch.

Puissant: powerful, mighty, potent.

Proselytizer: one who induces someone to convert to one's faith.

Missionaries: members of a religious group sent into an area to perform ministries of service, such as education, literacy, social justice, health care, and economic development.
Japan is a part of the Eurasia continent made up of more than 6,000 islands. It is formed on the volcanic line, called the ‘Ring of Fire.’ Some scientists believe most of the Japan Islands were under the sea before the Miocene Epoch (a time of warmer global climates roughly five million years ago in which two major ecosystems made their first appearances: kelp forests and grasslands.) Lifting of Japan's islands started in the early Miocene era by volcanic activities which were related to the shift trenches of the Pacific, Eurasia, and Philippine plates. In the late Miocene era, the current Japan Islands were formed by shifting volcanic-arcs from the back-arc to the front–arc when the trenches moved back the trenches. Also, most volcanoes which created the formation of the current Japan Islands exhausted, and they are thought to have disappeared in the early Miocene era leaving scars of their activities on the surface. Japan is located where the Pacific plate collides with Philippine plate; both of these plates are oceanic so the denser one subducts beneath the other. Because of subduction and collision, small islands were formed; over time when the plates moved, these islands came closer together and gradually joined to make the main island of Japan.
Recherche: Resumption

Life in Konoha carries on its normal pace; ships unload their cargo, children scurry off to school and farmers head out from barns to fields. In the waiting area of the Administrative Complex, the atmosphere buzzes with the latest gossip; who wore what to the tsuya last night and how large would be the procession to the gravesite this morning. Inside her private office, in a small handheld mirror, hazel eyes sparkle despite the puffiness beneath them; a smile beams bright, despite heaviness of heart.

“Ma’am … Inspector Morino is waiting in the outer office. Should I prepare tea?”

“What seems his mood?”

“He was pleasant, almost jovial--”

“That’s not good. Run along now … tell him I’ll be there directly. Oh, and hold off on the tea Shizune; this meeting may not last long enough for that.”

A final look at the image in the mirror before a side drawer shushed closed, a shaky hand smoothed down silk brocade as she stands. No need for nerves, she thought rising from her desk. I’ll just walk right in there, tell him the truth and be done with it. Passing through Shizune’s office, she paused to calm her breathing. Ibiki is a reasonable man, he’ll understand … I hope. Standing outside the conference room, clammy palmed and dry of mouth, she again tried to comfort herself. Well, here goes nothing. With counterfeit confidence, she pushed open the door; a tight smile on her lips. “Morning, Inspector … please, keep your seat.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

Encouraging … he’s nervous too. “Sorry we didn’t have a chance to talk after our little bust up, and then again at the tsuya,” she said, sitting across the table from him. “Fortunately, time apart gave me a chance to think.”

“So,” he said with a slight smile, “you couldn’t sleep either huh?”

“Nope,” fell her relieved laugh against the table, ”gnawed at me all night. Felt terrible about the way we left things yesterday--”

“Yeah. About that ma’am... I um ...shouldn’t have ... you know--”

“I started it,” she sighed. “After meeting with the Hyuga yesterday morning, I was sad and angry ... touchy about every little thing. But I’ve come to a conclusion--”

“As have I, Lady Tsunade… you see--”

“I think you might be right,” they chorused.

“What? Ibiki… are you drunk?”

“No of course not ma’am. You?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she laughed, “slightly hungover is all.”

His posture relaxed as he chuckled to himself. “Thank goodness … convinced myself you were still angry; was tempted to clean out my desk before I came over here.”
A genuine smile spread across her lips as she settled back into the chair. “What a couple of clunkers we are Ibiki, like concrete, all mixed up and set in our ways.”

“Too true, ma’am.”

“So, how’d you work off your aggravation?”

“You know me … I headed straight for the woods–”

“And I went to the park for some quiet time; failed spectacularly, by the by. If only we could’ve met halfway, then again, I might not have met that interesting young man.”

“Speaking of interesting, I stumbled across something odd in one of the clearings–”

“Please don’t tell me you found more bones,” she said clutching at her Manju-netsuke.

“No, but what I saw led me back to the old family farm. Going home felt good … got my hands dirty, finally cleared the air with my brother. We even sat around the dinner table going over stories our grandmother used to tell–”

“Ah, wish I could have gone with you. I spent the afternoon trying not to punch two old men in their throats.”

“Huh? Yes, well … lots of strange things happening these days, ma’am. Must be something in the air … even the animals are feeling the effects of whatever the hell is going on.”

Staring off into space, she breathed, “Rumors abound about Hyuga Hiashi. They say he’s ready to give up his seat in local government; explains why Danzou and Orochimaru came sniffing around yesterday.”

“The two old men you mentioned earlier?”

“Bastards! All they want is power over the people and Hitomi’s death removed another obstacle to that goal.”

“Wait a minute. You think Danzou and Orochimaru played a role in her murder?”

“You’re surprised?”

“To hear you insinuate such a thing? Yeah. But to be honest, they were numbers one and two on my suspect list after the third murder–”

“Perverse and unscrupulous men … they’d stop at nothing to get what they want.”

“Ma’am, there were seven victims before Hitomi. Even if they’d hired assassins from another nation, there’s no way–”

“An attempt to show the randomness of a deranged mind,” she said leaning forward, her palms flush against the table. “By instilling fear and unrest among the citizenry, they hope to turn them against the current administration. Don’t tell me you didn’t know of the feud between the Shimura and the Senju–”

“Everybody knows that,” he said. “Since the time of your great grandfather, the Shimura have tried wrestling control of the territory from your family. But surely even Danzou wouldn’t resort to–”

“He thinks me weak because I’m a woman–”
“The fact he's aligning himself with Orochimaru is testament to your strength. But accusing them of murder is one hell of a stretch--”

“I'll be damned Ibiki. By conceding these murders might be the work of deranged humans, I'm officially on your side ... and you're still complaining?"

“No ... it's just ... it might be easier proving these slayings were the work a vengeful spirit than pinning them on those oily worms.”

“Oh, and now you believe a murderous wraith is the culprit?”

“Not exactly, but I find myself leaning in that direction of late; explains why we could never find solid clues at the crime scenes.”

They slumped against their chairs, chuckling at one another and themselves.

“What a difference a day makes,” she said. “Not sure what to do now. I've a meeting scheduled with Dr. Umino this afternoon; can’t cancel at the last minute--”

“A wise woman once told me to have an open mind about such things; said it wouldn’t kill me to hear the man out--”

“Throwing my words back in my face ... nice touch Inspector. So, you will be present at the meeting--?”

“I'd rather not, unless that's an order.”

“Consider it a strong suggestion or a humble request ... your choice. I'll send Shizune round soon as he arrives.”

Recherché

Dressed in his funeral finery, Genma burst into the constabulary. “Morning Ryota, the Inspector about?”

“Haven’t seen him,” he said without looking up from his papers. “Something I can help you with?”

“He'll probably hand this off to you anyway. Went back to the shop last night, couldn't rest ... too keyed up from the tsuya; she looked good, didn’t she?”

“Like a slumbering princess. So ... you at the shop ... couldn’t rest--?”

“Right, burned the midnight oil I did, cause we both know how much the Inspector depends on me.”

Ryota rolled his eyes. “What you got there, Genma?”

“You know, I aint heard tell of that many hunters gone missing of late, you?”

“Just gimme the damn thing, please.”

“Read it and weep,” he said proudly. “… preliminary analysis on both sets of bones.”

Ryota cut his eyes up the arm fanning three slips of paper under his nose. “Both sets?”

“Yep, unless this guy had four arms and four legs,” he laughed as the other man took the crumpled papers from him. “The pelvises ... that’s how I could tell they were men. Both of ‘em bout 30 years
old, fractures confined to the thigh, like something chewed its way down to the femoral artery. Then again, it could be normal animal activity after the fact; a lot of marrow in a big bone like that, you know.”

“Sure they weren’t animal bones, Genma?”

“I know human bones when I see ‘em,” he said leaning down to the watch commander’s eye level. “Not questioning my knowledge of anatomy are ya?”

“Haven’t time for that argument. It doesn’t make any sense; patrols go through those woods every day and nobody ever found bones before.”

“If it eases your mind some, I did find evidence they’d been previously buried. Probably find a lot more of ‘em out there, if your men take time to look.”

“Can you give me some idea of how long they been out there?”

Smiling cagily, he scooped up Ryota’s matchbox. “If the Inspector wants answers, it’ll be a while.” A few puffs on his pipe later he said, “Couple of folks just dropped dead last night … they hadn’t been sick or nothing … go figure. Anyway, I’ll be up to my eyeballs in corpses, what bliss. See ya round,” he said tossing the matchbox on the desk.

Ryota shook his head as the door slammed behind Genma. Shit … *Ibiki is not gonna like this.*

**Recherché**

“Well, my day’s planned,” Kotetsu said as he barged into the room. “Apothecary’s son has a cabin in the woods; sleeps four and the rent’s cheap, so says the lady at the front desk. Wanna come with me Zumo?”

Izumo waved him over to the small side table. “Sit down, lower your voice … Iruka’s working on something--”

“What else is new? Always working on something,” he said taking a seat. “Those papers look too big for origami, so what’s he doing?”

“How should I know? Whatever it is must be important … he hasn’t moved since I brought breakfast up twenty minutes ago. I thought the smell of food would’ve garnered a reaction but--”

“His loss … my gain,” he laughed while reaching across the table, “means I can have his portion too.”

Waggling a serving spoon near Kotetsu’s extended hand, Izumo threatened, “Don’t even think about it. That’s your portion over there, greedy.”

“But it’s gonna get cold--”

“We’ve eaten cold food before and survived. Anyway, I’m gonna see if I can wrangle some information out of the constables this morning--”

“Good luck with that,” Kotetsu laughed as he tucked a napkin inside his collar.

“Remember that mounted patrol lieutenant we met yesterday?”

“You mean the guy that kept smiling at ya funny and laughing at your lame jokes? Better watch your step with that one Zumo,” he said blowing a kiss toward the other man, “he may want to give
“You're being particularly vulgar this morning. I don’t fancy men and you know it.”

“Yeah, I know, but does he? What ... you blushing Zumo?”

“Shut up and eat.”

“Hear that Ruka? Your cousin is gonna "pump" a constable for information.”

“Yes, it is chilly this morning,” came the distracted response from the bed.

“Thought that would have gotten a snicker at least,” he whispered to Izumo. “I know you have a
meeting with Governor later but while I’m working hard and Zumo is playing kissy face with his
new friend, what else are you gonna be doing today, Ruka?”

“Now it makes sense,” Iruka mumbled. “They all lead to the forest.”

“Hear that? Your cousin is gonna "pump" a constable for information.”

“He’s ignoring me Zumo ... wave that spoon all you want, I’m just gonna help myself to his portion-
”

“No, I heard you,” Iruka mumbled, “consonants and cabbages.”

“Ruka, what the hell are you doing over there?” Plate in hand, Kotetsu stomped over to the bedside.
“What is so fascinating about these old maps?”

Iruka looked up, his eyes glazed over, “Huh? Oh, they’re floor plans. I’m hoping one of them is the
layout of our target’s home.”

“Floor plans? Where did you steal ‘em from?”

“I didn’t steal anythi-- Tetsu, give that back!”

“Be careful,” Izumo said as he came to stand at the foot of the bed. “Your greasy fingerprints will
smudge the lines.”

“Where'd you get all this junk?”

“The fire brigade, if you must know Tetsu and they were given to me. One of the volunteers wanted
to help with my thesis, so he let me have building and floor plans for some the older homes in the
territory.”

“I thought you were done with homework stuff--”

“Tetsu, engage brain before opening mouth. Obviously he lied to get these things, okay? Which
one belongs to Hatake?”

“Wish I knew. Found out too late that they're organized by lot numbers, not names. Maybe I
should’ve been more specific with my request.”

“Well I can’t make heads or tails of this stuff, so here, take it,” Kotetsu said as he let the paper slip
from his fingers.

Izumo caught the falling paper before it hit the mattress. “Not sure how helpful this information will
be to whatever you’re planning, Iruka. If I had to guess, I’d say they’re at least seventy years old,”
he said reaching for another drawing nearest him.
“Older than that,” Iruka told him as he scooted off the bed. “That style of architecture dates back over a hundred years.”

“Any renovations since the original build are probably in an archive somewhere—”

“That’s what I think too, still, they’re amazing; notice how tunnels run under the larger homes straight out to the forests? Must’ve been escape routes for the rich in case of attack.”

“So, what’s the big deal?” Kotetsu wondered aloud. “Just ask the Governor if you can see the newer ones—”

“That would raise too many questions… we don’t want anyone catching wise too soon.”

“And speaking of the Governor, what time is your meeting with him?”

“Her, Zumo … and it's at two o’clock,” he said as he sat down before his breakfast. “You two should be done with your errands before then, don’t you think?”

“Wait a minute … he wants us to go to the meeting with him?”

“Tetsu, we talked about this last night … remember? We’re all going to the meeting.”

“Don’t look so glum, the Governor requested my father’s assistance and I have a feeling she’ll be more accommodating than the Inspector was.”

**Recherché**

“They don’t make stuff like that nowadays,” spluttered the foreman. “We had to import—”

“That, my good man, is not my concern,” Kinoe growled. “You and your company were contracted to complete renovations within a six-month time frame. Yet eight months have elapsed and still you’re three quarters finished—”

“Sir, refurbishment of the grand ballroom took more time than we expected. We had a devil of a time finding replacements and once we did, refitting those gas lines was a nightmare—”

“I’m certain I don’t care. Lord Hatake has already paid an exorbitant amount for that room to be as it was in his grandfather’s time. And so it shall be. Need I remind you, … only my entreaties have staved off your firing.”

“We’re working as fast as we can—”

“Then hire more laborers at your expense, for you’ll not receive another stipend from my Master’s purse,” he said before turning on his heel and walking away.

*Rich folk, thought the grizzled foreman as Kinoe strode off, what a pain in the ass.*

Notes:

Wraith: a visible spirit.

Stipend: a fixed sum of money, paid periodically to defray expenses.
Recherche: Unveiling

Base of operations secured, a pipeline of information from the constables laid, Kotetsu and Izumo await Iruka's arrival outside the Administrative complex. Kotetsu having turned himself toward the plaza and Izumo at his back, scouring the shoreline and docks.

"We'll need to lay in store plenty of rice, beans and the like. I trust your skills with bow and arrow haven't gone rusty Tetsu."

"Don't you worry none bout me … we'll have fresh meat on our table every night. Oughta be more concerned about your cousin," he said clicking closed his pocket watch. "Should've been here by now. Maybe I should walk back to the inn-"

"Relax ... it's only half past one."

"Wasn't like he was doing anything important, what's taking so long?"

"I declare … your memory is getting shorter by the day. The floor plans, the ones you accused him of stealing ... important part of the scheme he covered in detail to and from the diner last night? Any of that ring a bell for--"

"Ah, Misters Hagane and Kamizuki," boomed a familiar voice.

Given that condescending tone, Izumo wasn't surprised to see Inspector Morino when he turned about. He stood grinning at them, his arms folded across his chest and a thin brown cigar caught between his teeth. "Always a pleasure, sir," he said with a smile.

"Seems the tripod is missing a leg. Where is the good doctor anyway?" They stood silent as Ibiki bent down, scrubbing the ash from his toby against the pavement. "Have to tell ya," he sniped while rising to his full height, "I was shocked to see the three of you at the tsuya last night."

Kotetsu puffed himself up, "Like everybody else, we came to offer condolences and prayers. That sort of thing a crime in Konoha, Inspector?"

"No... just find it curious. Do have a good afternoon, sirs."

Watching Ibiki stroll to the front door of the Complex, he sneered, "I don't know why, but that man irritates the hell out of me Zumo. Think he's here for the meeting too?"

"Don't let him rattle you. He had a file tucked under his arm ...probably just dropping off a report or filing paperwork."

"If you say so. I hate standing around, shaking the change in my pocket; I'm gonna take a walk … look for Ruka."

"It'll be a short trip; he was standing near the wharf a minute ago."

Kotetsu turned about, straining to catch sight of the man, "Move your big head; can't see nothing. Oh … what the hell was he doing over there I wonder?"

"You know Iruka ... if something's bothering him, idly sitting near a body of water helps him think it through--"

"Pfft … he's just gonna show his face and answer some stupid questions; how mentally taxing can
Maito stands across the plaza, watching as the trio assembles. He follows close behind as they enter the building and listens carefully as the Governor's assistant leads them into the conference room. _This should be interesting_, he thinks, taking a seat in the area designated for distinguished visitors. From his pocket, he retrieves a small vial filled with a purplish liquid; gulping it down quickly, he checks the surrounding area for witnesses before his body is sucked into the woodwork behind him. Into the bright light of the room where the four men are gathered, he stands invisible.

"Who knew our paths would cross this soon," Iruka said as he took a seat opposite the Inspector. "I thought you'd had it up to your back teeth with us yesterday."

"I did," was Ibiki's dry response, "but I'd kick myself forever if I passed up another opportunity to see your smiling faces."

"What joy to accommodate you then," sniped Kotetsu cutting his eyes at the smug man and brushing off the pain of Izumo's warning knock against his thigh.

"Settle down, Hagane. I'm here as an observer ... at the Governor's request."

"Gentlemen," Shizune intervened, "Lady Tsunade will join us momentarily. Would anyone care for tea?"

Iruka opened the portfolio, sliding several of the note filled pages before Izumo. "If it isn't any trouble, I'd like a cup."

"As would I," they heard the Governor say as she entered. Approaching from the right of the trio, she stopped near the head of the table, graciously accepting their regards. "Well, well, the cheeky young man from yesterday turns out to be the son of the esteemed Dr. Umino Tadashi. Looks like I owe you an apology Shizune."

Her assistant smiled, quietly dismissing herself; Iruka on the hand, fumbled about, failing spectacularly at recovering the chair tipped over after he leapt from it. "You're the Governor? When I was... the park ... I had no idea ... who ... I'm so-"

"Clumsy," she helpfully supplied, "embarrassed ... shocked? Give ... then I'll decide whether or not to forgive you." Once again, comprehension escapes him. Grabbing at his hand, she gave his palm a cursory examination. "No bleeding or inflammation ... least you're obedient."

"Thank you, ma'am." Once she'd released him from the crushing grip, he righted the chair and humbly bowed. "Allow me to introduce my companions Kamizuki Izumo and to his left, Hagane Kotetsu."

Both men bowed as she acknowledged them with a bright smile. "Since you found the apothecary, should I also assume you made it to the fire brigade?"

"They were most helpful, thank you-"

"And that drivel about a thesis...it was a lie, wasn't it?"

"That part was," Iruka admitted, "just wanted to see if I could get my hands on a floor plan for the home my parents lived in. Been thinking about settling here, building a home for my own family-"
"I didn't remember you having this scar when you were a child, Iruka," she said, carefully reaching out, her thumb trailing the old wound. "Not another apple slicing accident, was it?"

Reflexively leaning away from her touch, he lowered his head. "No, it was sustained during a fight ... long ago."

"I'm sure you'll tell me all about it later," Ibiki pulled out the chair to his left. "Please be seated gentlemen." Poised serenely near the edge of the seat, her hands folded before her on the table, she said, "Now, let's get down to business. First, I was unaware your father was deceased until the Inspector told me yesterday … you have my condolences."

"Much appreciated."

"Second, homicides are rare in the territory ... when they do happen, our constables are quick to apprehend the guilty party. However, we've had a spate of unsolved murders in a short time under very unusual circumstances; that's why I sought your father's advice. I'm hoping he shared his thoughts on the matter with you."

"He couldn't ma'am. By the time your letter arrived, my father was unable to communicate rationally. But," he said flipping through the portfolio, "there's a wealth of information in his notes which will help you understand the recent goings on. I must warn you, the things you'll see and hear, incredible as they seem, are indeed factual. I will speak only the truth."

"I'm a doctor first and foremost; seen things in reality stranger than anything you could make me imagine Dr. Umino. As to Tadashi's notes, some of my ancestors also left behind writings of things far beyond human comprehension," she quietly said. "Wolf like beings, ghostly apparitions gathering under the light of a full moon to perform strange rituals ... I doubt the information you'll share will frighten me. Proceed."

Ibiki folded his arms across his chest and sank back into his seat with a sigh.

"Very well. What Konoha is currently dealing with are called gaki, indiscriminate killers which strike as their appetite dictates. It matters little to them if the prey is male, female, human or animal; their only interest is the taste of warm flesh and blood." Pushing the portfolio toward her, he watched her flip through pages of notes until she came to the drawings. "Right there ma'am … on the left side of the page; that's a gaki in its true form."

"Good god ... it's horrifying!"

"These sketches were the property of Professor Kenichi Yamada. My father acquired them and added his own research notes as he--"

All eyes turned toward the Governor's assistant as a china teapot violently rattled against the silver tray she carried. "Sorry to interrupt, Dr. Umino, but did I hear you correctly? Those things... eat people?"

"They've been known to do so, yes."

"For heaven sake, Shizune. Either take a seat or put the tray down before you drop it!"

"Yes ma'am, pardon me ... those grotesque images shot a chill up my spine."

Maito looked over the young woman's shoulder as she sat down. Professor Yamada, he thought laughing to himself. Tinkering with spells and hexes, summoning a Yasha one time too many, he tried to make friends with it ... paid the ultimate price.
"As I was saying," Iruka continued, "if these creatures were acting of their own accord, you'd have more victims. I believe they're following the leadership of another; a numen, a prince of demons. They're working in concert with a being more powerful than they to accomplish a specific goal."

"Yes," Izumo said, "the type of gaki orchestrating these murders is an evolved being; he's an ancient, charismatic and intelligent creature that-"

"How on earth can you tell? These drawings depict no external genitalia," Tsunade offered. "What makes you think this thing is male, Mr. Kamizuki?"

Easing the portfolio from her, Izumo flipped back a few pages and turned it round again. "Gaki of this type prey on the opposite sex … here we are … on this page you can clearly see the difference between Yasha and this other creature. They all belong to a class of yokai known as bakemono obake because they can assume different forms. Once they assume the desired appearance, I assure you, Yasha are quite alluring. These teats on either side of the belly become female breasts and this part here becomes--"

"Never mind that. This thing, beside the Yasha … looks like a giant bat with huge fangs to me," she said.

"The creature we're looking for … that is his true form, ma'am. Usually he assumes the appearance of a tall, slender, very handsome and charming man. The murder victims … all women, correct? It's purposefully done, you see, each of them were carefully selected with the intent of presenting them as handmaidens for gaki’s bride."

"And uh," Ibiki interrupts, "how many victims or handmaidens we talking about? I mean, is there a required number to make up this 'bridal entourage'?"

"The power and prestige of the numen determines the number of victims," Kotetsu said. "If he's as old as we suspect, there might be ten, twelve or even fifteen total."

"The chosen bride," Iruka injects, "must be virginal and between the ages of nineteen and twenty-five; a select few Yasha are designated her protectors. They will act as her guardians while the numen claims her. As safeguards of her virginity, they will fight to the death any suitors, to present her chaste before their Master. Once the appropriate number of handmaidens are assembled, the numen invokes a powerful spell to summon these women from their graves--"

"Then I best have my men patrol the cemetery from now on, Dr. Umino. Pretty sure rising from the dead is illegal."

Tsunade kicks him in the shin under the table. "You’ll pardon the Inspector’s cynicism Iruka … this information is difficult to hear--"

"More like … impossible to believe," Ibiki mumbles under his breath.

"I thought these guys were nuts too," Kotetsu laughs, "till I came face to face with one of them damn things."

"Lady Tsunade, these female gaki or Yasha, are more aggressive and ferocious than their male counterparts; they are also possessed of voracious appetite. Yasha not selected to attend the bride, will lure a meal to its deaths with promises of … sexual relations. They kill them during a sex act." Iruka cringed as he continued, "Once the man lowers his pants, the Yasha revert to their true form. A single bite through the thigh, right down to the femoral artery is all it takes. And as he lays bleeding,
the Yasha feast on his flesh; whatever is left, becomes food for other gaki, drawn by the scent of a fresh kill. Nothing is spared. In the end, all that remains of the victim is a skeleton."

After exchanging worried glances, Tsunade finally says, “Indulge us, Inspector; I want you to compile a report of every missing person we’ve had these last seven months—"

"Waste of time, ma’am" Izumo sadly says. "those reports probably don’t take transients into consideration—"

"Cause you see," said Kotetsu, “itinerant sailors think nothing of ‘jumping ship’ to make more money with another crew. Their names are scrubbed from a ship’s manifest and law enforcement isn’t notified of their disappearances; perfect really … Konoha’s ports provide the gaki a daily smorgasbord of—"

"Um … we got it Tetsu, thanks.” Turning attention back to the Governor, Iruka summarizes, “So, we’re looking for an intelligent, powerful being with an army of gaki behind him; a creature with the charisma to manipulate both mortals and immortals into doing his bidding. In the east, he’s known as the Bird of Death, though our European neighbors call him, Nosferatu—"

"Oh, for god sake!" Ibiki roared slamming his fists on the tabletop. "If word gets ‘round that we're hunting a vampire, my constables will look even bigger fools. And what if this murderer turns out to be a psychologically damaged human being … then what, Dr. Umino?"

"Perhaps, we’re both correct in our understanding, Inspector. Some vampires were once human; either placed under a curse of a sorcerer or the recipient of a vampire’s bite, now are they undead creatures of the night. Under the cover of darkness they strike, feeding on the life blood of their victims to maintain immortality—"

Ibiki rolled his eyes and sighed, "Alright, tell me something ... if this being *is* immortal, how are we supposed to kill it?"

Once again, Iruka pulls the portfolio close and thumbs through its pages. "According to my father and Professor Yamada, there are three known ways to kill these creatures. The first, is driving a wooden stake through its heart as it lies in repose. Second, prolonged exposure to direct sunlight and lastly, cutting off its head and pouring holy water or oils into the body cavity."

"I see. And if this 'thing' is as powerful as you claim, how are we to get close enough to do any of that stuff?"

"You'd do well to leave that bit to the experts, Morino. We got the weaponry and know how to destroy him," Kotetsu boasts.

"That I cannot do, sir. If this thing is a monster, as you say, lets drag its carcass into the town square and receive adulation of the people. If it be a man, mores the better. We'll bring him before the courts for judgment. The people of this territory deserve to see someone apprehended and made to stand trial for--"

"Ah, but if we find him first, apprehension and a trial ain’t options; we're gonna kill him, see?"

"Be advised Mr. Hagane, I could arrest you right now for communicating a threat--"

"Ain't no threat …it's a fact. We're the only ones in this room qualified to take him down--"

"Yes, and if we don't kill him," Izumo said, "these murders will continue. Is that what you'd prefer Inspector Morino?"
"Aren't you the cocksure ones? Hang on," Ibiki laughs as he writes their names on a scrap of paper near Tsunade's arm. "Hagane and Kamizuki ... wanna make sure your names are recorded correctly for your tombstones."

Tsunade slams her foot against his instep. "No need to rile yourselves, gentlemen. We're here to exchange information; I'll not let this become a raucous debate."

"Fine," Ibiki snaps, "let's say for a moment, I believe everything you've told us. Care to explain how it's possible for anyone or anything to drain every drop of blood from a body without splattering it all over the victim's clothing, hair or crime scene?"

"I'll field that one," Iruka said as he fished around inside his jacket pocket for a smaller notebook. "I may have neglected to mention this earlier but it is possible for gaki of this sort to move about without leaving a trace Inspector." In just a few moments he'd found the passage he was looking for. "Something to do with the mystical effect of moonbeams or something. As for the victim, my father noted that the first bite puts the victim under the numen's spell, marking her for the Yasha's protection; the second bite cements the numen's hold over the mind of his prey. At the appointed time, the prey is summoned to the numen's lair for the third and final bite; the woman yields herself to the creature, pleading with it to bind her for eternity."

"That," snorts Ibiki, "is the biggest heap of malarkey, I've ever heard."

Iruka ignores him, turning another page. "Yes, well ... moving on, the Yasha carefully divest their Master's chosen of every scrap of clothing before binding her to a marble slab or sacrificial altar, if you will. They cover her from head to foot with a potion meant to purify the body; afterwards, the numen falls upon her, ripping open her throat, cutting through the carotid artery with his fangs and drinking his fill. She's bathed a final time after death ... her body carefully redressed. Another servant then transports the corpse to a location predetermined by the numen."

"Your father witnessed this ritual, Iruka?"

"Whether he saw it for himself or whether it was told him, I cannot say with certainty, ma'am. Given the date of this diary entry, I know he was still in control of his faculties and can attest to the fact that this is his handwriting." Tucking the notebook inside his breast pocket, he pled, "Everyone in this room wants to prevent another murder, which I guarantee will occur in a few weeks time. To that end, I have one request. Inspector Morino, Lady Tsunade ... we need an assurance of immunity; let us track and kill him without any interference or repercussions for what we must do."

"If you wish to hunt a known killer that just so happens to be a mythical creature, I for one won't mourn your loss," Ibiki counters; "but if this be a human being, you're asking me to turn a blind eye to murder, Dr. Umino--"

"He is a monster sir. A monster that will drag the people of this land into deeper terror if we don't act quickly."

"If I didn't know any better," Tsunade laughed, "it sounds as if you already know who this being is--"

"That I do ma'am. The murderer is--"

"Hush!" Izumo hissed. "Don't you dare!"

"Zumo, they're gonna find out anyway after he's exterminated." Drawing the portfolio before him, Iruka assembles the scattered drawings and reverently closes the cover. As he rises from his seat he
warns, "With or without your permission, I will deal with this situation in my own way, to avenge my father's death."

"Avenge? Are you now saying Tadashi was … murdered?"

"My father sustained an injury; sepsis corrupted his blood, rendered him insane and eventually killed him." He dropped back into his seat, his eyes vacant as he mumbled, "About a year ago, this past January, Izumo and I were preparing dinner for my father when we heard an argument coming from the study. We arrived to find my father bloodied, a decapitated man lying at his feet. Before we could reach him, another creature leapt through the window. As it turned away from us scooping up the remains of the dead man in its arms, it screamed … no … howled, one word, over and over …

Father!

"My god ... Iruka," Tsunade gasped, "you're pale as a ghost!"

"My father's killer," he breathed, "was Hatake Sakumo.

The fruit of his loins ... Hatake Kakashi …

has returned to Konoha to sire a new generation of demons."

Note:

Yokai: class of supernatural monsters, spirits and demons. Yokai which can shapeshift are referred to as bakemono.
Recherche: Revolt

His stomach aflutter and mind reeling, Maito absquatulates with the information the same way he’d entered, through the woodwork. He leaves behind a shell shocked Tsunade and Ibiki, paralyzed in disbelief as they watch Izumo and Kotetsu help Dr. Umino shakily stand to his feet.

*Far too dangerous to live,* he thought skirting around the people meandering through the Admin center. *Surely Master will give them into my hands now.*

Inside the quiet room, a tiny chuckle grew into a gale of guffaws as Ibiki threw his head back and laughed, his forearm plastered against his midsection.

“Damn it!” Tsunade snapped, “catch hold yourself! Didn’t you hear what they just--”

“I’ve been sittin’ here …tryna find a subtle way to tell you,” he managed between laughs. “But he did the work for me … Umino,” he chortled, “he’s out of his damn mind!”

“And I see you’re enjoying a moment of insanity too. You three,” she barked lunging from her seat, “get back here this instant!”

A startled Shizune bolted from her seat, running to block the exit with her body.

“Can’t you see he’s overwrought?” Izumo shouted. “I have to attend him!”

“Either you drag his sorry ass back here … or I’ll come across this table and do it myself!”

Stopped cold by the Governor’s threat, Izumo slowly turned about with Iruka sagging against his side. “Then a moment, please. Recollection of that night is adversely affecting him--”

"Long as he's still breathing, I don’t give a damn about his affectation! If you thought I’d let you walk out of here after an accusation like that, Kamizuki you're crazier than he is!"

“Not crazy,” Iruka mumbled against Izumo’s shoulder.

“Yeah, well something’s wrong you,” Ibiki roared. “Hatake Sakumo was man revered and respected in this land and you presume to let his name fall out of your mouth so casually?”

“Hush now, Ibiki. Iruka, get over here, prove what you’ve said and be quick about it!”

“I spoke the truth--”

“How dare you! The Hatake were one of Konoha’s founding families; five brothers who helped the Senju make this a prosperous land--”

“Told the truth,” he slurred.

“Shizune, have you any smelling salts?”

“In my desk, ma’am.”

“Fetch ‘em” she said through clenched teeth. “After that, you’re free to go.”

“But milady, I’d like to stay ... if that’s alright with everyone.”
Helping Iruka into his seat, Izumo pried the portfolio from his hands and laid it flat on the table. “If you’d allow me, I’ll explain from this point onward.”

Tsunade nodded, slowly settling back down into her chair. “Go on.”

He first looked to Iruka for permission and having received it, he began. “His family joined mine in London at my father’s insistence. Tadashi helped my father train Japanese medical students during the day; by night, they struggled to translate the only English textbooks the students had. Professor Yamada introduced my father and Tadashi to Hatake Sakumo … his command of the English language proved a tremendous asset. The elder Hatake maintained two residences, one in Cornwall, the other in London. He’d stop by whenever he could and often worked through the night beside my father and uncle.”

Iruka’s body jerked beside him as Shizune waved the salts under his nose and Izumo’s eyes watered because of the fumes. “Pardon me,” he said wiping away a tear.

“For heaven sake,” Tsunade said covering her nose. “Hurry and replace the stopper in that vial, Shizune.”

“Alright,” Ibiki coughed, “you’ve established the fact you knew him. We still haven't heard proof the elder Hatake was a murderer or a monster—”

“Yes sir, I’m coming to that. The four of these men worked together for years; Sakumo was like another uncle to me and Iruka, even helped pay for our schooling and now and again he’d slip us pocket money—”

“We get it, he was generous with time and money,” Tsunade bristled. “Now please hurry along this trip down memory lane.”

Izumo nodded, “Indulge me a few minutes more, ma’am.” He waited quietly as Ibiki rolled his eyes and groaned and Tsunade huffed out another sigh. “Tadashi was fascinated with Yamada’s writings on the supernatural … it was an obsession, point of fact. On her deathbed, my aunt Amaya begged Hatake to help him. After Yamada and my father died, Sakumo became more involved in our daily lives, was our benefactor when the economy went soft. He put Tadashi in charge of one of his pet projects, figuring it would constructively occupy his mind; would’ve been extremely lucrative for our family, had it panned out.” He looked up suddenly when Tsunade started drumming her nails on the tabletop.

“If you’re waiting for us to produce a written agreement between Hatake and my father, no such thing exists,” Iruka finally said pulling at the edge of the portfolio. “After my mother died, Father locked himself away, slowly descending into madness as the months passed. He burned all their research notes after he and Sakumo had a falling out; even refused to allow Hatake in our home and never spoke his name again … until that fateful night.”

“Oh, my god,” Ibiki whispered to Tsunade, “this is like Genma times two.” Turning his attention to Izumo he snarled, “You have no proof of your claims whatsoever, have you? You’ll excuse me, but I’ve heard enough of this foolishness.”

Tsunade flung her arm across his chest as he attempted to stand. “Nobody is going anywhere, understood?” She leaned back in her seat, slowly cracking her knuckles. “I suggest one of you young men get to the point … my patience is wearing thin.”
Izumo swallowed around the lump in his throat. “I was there the night Tadashi and Sakumo parted ways. I heard shouting, glass breaking and furniture being overturned, so I ran to the study. Pushing open the door a crack, I saw Hatake grab Tadashi by the throat and lift him from the floor. And as he raised him toward the rafters, I saw Sakumo’s body twist and split open as his skin melted away. Right before my eyes, he transformed into this ... hideous creature--”

“And you expect us to believe such an outrageous claim, Mr. Kamizuki?”

“Whether you believe me or not ma’am, I know what I saw!”

“Hatake Sakumo,” Iruka weakly asked, “did you know him, Lady Tsunade?”

“Of course; I was a mere slip of a girl when he lived in Konoha, but yes, I remember seeing him at parties my grandparents hosted--”

“And do you ever recall a time when you saw him in broad daylight?”

“That was over forty years ago, Iruka. I can’t be bothered now to remember inconsequential details--”

“Since his return, can either you or the Inspector say you’ve seen Hatake Kakashi during daylight hours?”

“That man spends most of his time traveling and when he is home, he’s working or sleeping I’d imagine. Why, just the other week, he hosted a symposium at our research facility--

“At night?”

“Yes! The presenters arranged it that way because of my schedule; late evening was the only time I could attend.”

“How convenient. Remember I said, exposure to direct sunlight will kill him?”

“Oh, for heaven sake, Iruka … that’s your proof he’s a monster? I know of and have treated hundreds of fair skinned people who avoid direct sunlight." Jamming her hands under her armpits, she leaned back and asked, "Are those people monsters too?"

“You were at the tsuya last night … you saw what Hatake did to us; dropped us to our knees with just a glance--”

“I saw nothing of the kind--”

“I see,” Ibiki chuckled, “your clumsiness was his fault, eh? And here I thought you three were under the influence of strong drink. Lady Tsunade and I have seen Hatake Kakashi on numerous occasions and neither of us have fallen backwards just because he glanced our way--”

“And how long after his arrival did the murders begin Inspector?”

“I don’t know … few months? Why?”

“Iruka, I’m appalled and disappointed,” Tsunade said with a sigh. “Your father was a great man. If he could hear you now, besmirching the name of an honorable family …it would break his heart.”

“On the contrary, he’d be proud, because I refused to let naysayers deter me from my sworn path. I came back to Konoha to tell the truth … I’ve done so and I will walk out of this office with my integrity intact. You believed the stories your ancestors left behind and yet, even after I’ve identified
a murderer in your midst, still you refuse to look beyond his status to see the truth.” He rose without assistance this time, clutching the portfolio tightly to his chest. “You’ll not see my face again until I’ve accomplished the purpose for which I came.” As he made for the unguarded exit, he said, “Inspector Morino, I’ve no problem standing trial and suffering the consequences for exterminating vermin.”

With a sly grin, Ibiki leaned forward, folding his arms on the tabletop. “That won’t be necessary. I can arrange to have you and your friends detained and deported by midnight tonight.”

“Ah, but you won’t,” he said turning to face them. “Deep down inside, you know I’ve spoken the truth. You know it too, Lady Tsunade.”

“I know you’ve regurgitated what you think is truth, Umino. That marks you as mentally unstable in my book, a danger to—”

“Only to Hatake and his minions. Izumo, Kotetsu … let’s go.”

Recherché

Maito stood at the base of the Master’s bed. “What would you have me do now, my Lord?”

Hatake turned onto his side, draping the linens over his shoulder. “Your orders remain the same as when I issued them. Monitor their movements, report their comings and goings, that is all.”

“But Master, Inspector Morino … surely he will come calling—”

“And I will afford him every hospitality once he arrives. Now, do not my rest further break … depart from me.”

Recherché

They sat quietly, their elbows barely touching as they stared at the closed door. “I don’t want to believe him, Ibiki, but something is twisting round in my gut—”

“It’s called improbability ma’am. First time I met those three, I knew something was off about ‘em.”

Grasping at his hand, her eyes lit up, “My grandfather’s diary! Shortly before Lord Sakumo left for England, there were three gruesome murders—”

“So?”

“The Commandant of Constables had to resign his post under pressure from the Advisory Council. It was the talk of the town for weeks.”

"I’m not about to give up that easily.” he said with a wince, "and what does that have to do with--?"

“The women were discovered in a heap out in the forest. Their bodies bearing signs of violent sexual activity; their heads, held onto their necks by a sliver of skin. After that, the land enjoyed peace for the next thirty years.”

"I'm sure you're going somewhere with this ma'am," he said slowly prizing away each of her fingers, "where exactly, I don't know." The chair creaked beneath him as he stood. “Doesn't matter, I’ve had two men tailing Umino and friends since they got here. If they’re planning something against Hatake, my men will quash it. I promise you … I will find the one responsible for these murders, if it’s the last thing I do.”
She looked up at him with a smile. “If what Dr. Umino said is true, then it just might be. The Bird of Death is a creature of ancient lore … if that’s what Hatake is, you and your constables don’t stand a chance against him.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence ... means a lot. You're not making a lot of sense, ma'am. Been so quick to change your opinion, wouldn't let me arrest them--”

“They did nothing but talk. If you arrested every nutcase with a theory, we’d have to build two new jails.” She stood beside him, linking her arm through his. “I’ll reach out to Iruka again, try and talk some sense into him once he’s settled down.”

“Do as you please, but I'm gonna assign patrols around the Hatake manor, just in case.”

“This talk of avenging his father’s death,” she said as they walked toward the door, “it’s grief. He watched his father die a slow painful death; poor thing hasn’t come to grips with it yet. You saw him turn pale, that’s something you can’t fake.”

“Still don’t get ya,” he said with a shake of his head. “You’ve studied, practiced and taught medicine, but never once did you say a word--"  

“About what?”

“Umino said sepsis killed his father and then in the same breath, he swore his father was murdered by Hatake Sakumo. Can't have it both ways.”

“What about you? Been in law enforcement for the better part of your life; didn’t hear you say anything either. Remember your early days, breaking up bar fights? You could question four eyewitnesses to the brawl and get four different iterations of what happened--?"”

“Ma'am, the eyewitnesses were as drunk as the combatants--”

“Let’s assume Iruka was sober at the time of the incident. Hearing something smash through a window, running into a room and discovering a headless corpse at his father’s feet …is it possible that in the confusion of that night he may have misspoken?”

“Maybe,” he said after a beat, "but I distinctly heard one of them say the window was broken after they arrived in the study."  

“He also said his father was bloodied, could have been nicked by the assailant’s weapon during the attack … that's not uncommon--”

“Granted, but what about Kamizuki … what he claims to have seen? Is that grief too?”

“Maybe his is a vivid imagination or perhaps his remembrances of that night are confused as well. He worked alongside Tadashi and Professor Yamada for years … I’m sure he heard them speak of these things and--”

“Ridiculous,” he snorted. “They spoke what they believed to be true. No telling what they might do next.”

**Recherché**

Not five steps outside the Admin Complex doors, Kotetsu needed to know, “Why the hell did you shoot your mouth off like that? Now they know who we’re after!”
“You done? Go on, get it all out of your system.”

“You’re acting queer Ruka and I don’t like it.”

With a hearty laugh, he clamped his hand on his friend's shoulder. “You know, I never do anything without careful consideration. Did it ever occur to you that I need them to think we’re crazy?”

“Well, congratulations! You did a bang-up job of that. Zum, did you know he was gonna flip out on us like this?”

“Nope. Iruka, look we’re trying to help ya man… least you could do is let us in your secrets—”

“Sometimes I need to play things close to the vest; you would have been less convincing if I’d said anything beforehand.”

“Well … least you found a way to keep Tetsu still and quiet for almost half an hour. That in itself was a miracle.”

“I’ll have to try it again sometime,” Iruka joked.

“When this is behind us and we bail you out of jail Ruka, I’m gonna slap both of you silly.”

“Tetsu, it's a deal. In the meantime, I’m sure Inspector Morino will ring the Hatake estate with constables night and day, thus limiting his movements—”

“Lot of good that’s gonna do, you said this guy can go invisible anytime he wants—”

“He can … but I’ve figured out a way to track him, no matter what he does. I have one final secret which I promise to tell you … when the time is right. Now then,” he said as they walked toward the inn, “I want to have our stuff packed up by nightfall. We’ll need dry goods and cooking utensils … we’ll be living rough for the next few weeks.”

Recherché

“A word, Inspector,” Ryota said the moment he stepped foot inside the constabulary. “In private, if you don’t mind.”

Ibiki rolled his eyes and shook his head. “What now?”

“Relax … it will keep until we get to your office. Shall we?”

Down the long hallway and into the quiet of his office, they kept up inane conversation. Ibiki clicked closed the door behind them saying, “Alright, what was so damned important we couldn’t discuss it in the—?”

“This,” he said shoving the folder into Ibiki’s waiting hand. “Analysis of the remains in the forest. According to Genma, the bones were from two men, not one. He suspects there may be more out there, if we care to look. Some animal attacked those men, bit clean down to their thighbones—”

“Did they find any clothing out there?”

“Oh, yeah. But this wasn’t robbery if that’s what you’re thinking. A small pile of gold coins and foreign paper currency was crammed inside the dungarees around their ankles—”

“Dungarees … so they weren’t local men.”
“Longshoremen, sailors maybe. Genma said he found some sort of insignia on their shirt collars ... I wasn’t really paying attention. What the hell they were doing out in the forests, I don’t know.”

Ibiki walked the short distance to his desk, tossing the folder onto its surface. “Did I tell you what I saw out there the other day Ryota? A clump of trees, in the shape of an arrowhead--”

“Big deal … lumberjacks are an odd lot. Look, we got a bear or mountain lion out there with a taste for human flesh. I say we get a few hunters and kill it before it starts lookin’ around town for its next meal.”

“Garlands strewn at the base of the stumps, circles in the straw … this was no bear or mountain lion-”

“Okay, Ibiki,” he sighed, "then what the hell was it?"

He absentmindedly leaned against the corner of the desk when he turned about. “If I told you what I thought, you wouldn’t believe me. Never mind … assemble two crews of ten armed constables each, have ’em patrol around the Hatake estate until further notice.”

“Big house near the cemetery? What for?”

“Don’t question me Ryota … just get it done.”

“Might be helpful if they knew what they were protecting it against. You aren’t making sense, Ibiki.”

“By the gods,” he said, dragging his hand down his face. “I’m too sober for this conversation. That’s it, I’m off; if you need me, I’ll be home, drinking myself into a stupor.”

“Damn it man! You can’t just take off and run home--”

“Right, you’re coming with me … you’ll need to be drunker than I am to understand what I’m gonna tell ya.”

Recherché

When Ibiki awoke, night had already fallen and Ryota was gone. A glass of lukewarm water and two tablets sat on the table by the couch; he eschewed both and made his way to the stables. Saddling up Mayonaka, they headed west.

Notes:

Absquatulate: (British) - flee, abscond.

Sepsis or blood poisoning, arises when the body's response to infection triggers damage of its tissues and organs. Usually caused by bacteria, it may also result from the introduction of fungi, viruses or parasites into the bloodstream via a laceration. Treatment in those days included the use of quinine, whisky and milk or as a last resort, they would use leeches. If caught early enough, the patient typically showed signs of improvement, though relapse was inevitable. Ultimately, sepsis lead to death.
Recherche: Coin with Three Sides

Chapter Notes

Everybody knows there are three sides to every story. We’ve heard Iruka’s side, and now we’ll hear Kakashi’s, but will truth tell its side? Reckon we’ll have to let Ibiki suss that out.

"Go, inform our Lord that Morino is on his way,” Maito told the wolves at his side. "I will be at his right hand directly.”

Recherché

Save the ancestral home of the Hyuga, Hatake manor was one of the largest estates in the territory; it loomed in the distance as his vision swam. Heavy night air, laced with the alternating fragrances of wisteria, lilac, evening primrose and jessamine relentlessly pounced from every quarter as he drew closer. Up ahead, torchlight lined the path to the main house, illuminating expanses of green as far as the eye could see. Beyond the gates, vineyards as crouching soldiers arrayed to his right, orchards of peach and pear trees stood as hulking leafy armies on his left. The moment they crossed the property line, Ibiki hurriedly dismounted and raced toward the bushes.

Haven’t retched like that in years, he thought wiping at his mouth.

Praying he’d find at least one of the candied ginger lozenges from Ryota, a listless hand fumbled about inside a coat pocket as he caught his breath. Leaning against Mayonaka’s flank, he debated the wisdom of continuing.

‘I hear tell you’re a bloodthirsty monster, Hatake-dono, one who murders women for sport.

Care to change into your true form that I might arrest you?’

He slowly shook his head and once his surroundings ceased from their spinning, he determined to press onward. Leather reins clutched in his fist, Mayonaka gently guided and supported him up the steep incline. Ere he reached the main entrance, servants poured from the house, aligning themselves on the stairs. Those at the bottom of the steps greeted him profusely, offering food and water for his mount as they led Mayonaka away. Oh, that’s right. Rich folk do this as a matter of course … servants stand at the ready for whatever may come. Ere he reached the massive doors, they swung inward, revealing a smiling olive skinned man dressed in a suit of fine woven woolens and silk.

“Welcome to the house of Hatake Inspector. I am Kinoe,” the young man said as he bowed deeply.

“Sorry to disturb at this hour. Hatake-dono, is he in residence?”

“Yes, please, come in. You’ll pardon the state of the manor; renovations are ongoing, and unfortunately, we’ve engaged thoughtless workmen that tend to leave things lying about.”

Crossing the threshold, the first thing Ibiki saw was a family herald emblazoned on the marble floor of the great hall. Under the lights of a centuries old chandelier, thousands of tiny pieces of colored...
glass merrily twinkled. Closer examination was made possible as the servant drew him into the foyer. Dominating the herald’s surface were two massive grey wolves reared up on their hind legs; their front paws supporting either side of the letter ‘H,’ and above their heads floated braided crowns of gold. Two curved staircases of white slate steps and handrails of polished ebony led to what Ibiki assumed was the ballroom. Above the landing, where the staircases merged, portraits of the previous heads of this family stared back at him from pristine white walls.

So, those are the brothers Lady Tsunade mentioned. The current clan head, center most. Its picture frame differs from the others … probably had it commissioned in Europe.

“Your overcoat, sir,” Kinoe said as he eased it from his shoulders.

Ibiki had but a few moments to drink in the grandeur of the foyer before he was ushered into a lush waiting room. “Please make yourself comfortable Inspector. I’ll inform the Master of your arrival.”

Standing in the center of this room felt as if he'd been sucked through a portal in time and spat out in the living space of a samurai. Weapons of war and ancient proverbs decorated the walls, and in the far corner of the room stood a complete suit of iron armor. Other artifacts of antiquity found their homes atop marble pedestals encased in glass. He was denied an opportunity to snoop about at leisure, as a bevy of servants paraded through the space offering trays of refreshments and polite conversation.

All too soon, Kinoe returned. “Master is ready to receive you,” he announced. "Right this way, if you please."

As they walked down the long corridor, servants dashed about on fleet feet, toting heavy boxes of silverware, candelabras of gold and other expensive looking knickknacks. They too bowed and smiled politely before scurrying hither and yon. At the door of the large room at the end of the hall, Kinoe knocked twice before holding the door open for him. Out of the corner of his eye, Ibiki saw a burly man abandoning one of the chairs to stand by the fireplace. Pretty sure that isn't him, he thought, a bodyguard perhaps?

“Inspector Morino,” came a voice near the hearth. “To what do I owe the pleasure of your company this evening?”

Kinoe conducted him deeper inside the salon until he stood before the silver haired master of the manor. “Hatake-dono … pardon my visit at this late hour--”

“It is I who must apologize for the slovenly state of my home; we've laborers bumping about during the day. I declare, they seem bound and determined to leave unfinished work and piles of sawdust lying about. This small salon is the only place I can work in peace and receive guests.”

“I’ll not take up too much of your time, sir.”

Sumptuous leather groaned as the man leaned forward in his seat. “Think nothing of it. My eye long ago grew weary of reading and my hand cramped from writing. Please, have a seat beside me Inspector ... I won’t bite,” he said with a chuckle in his voice.

Bowing before the master, meant leaving his back vulnerable to man standing at the hearth, still, Ibiki drew closer, ignoring his instincts. Whoever this person was, maintained a posture which smacked of violence, his breaths coming as low growls from his throat. I'm imagining things, Ibiki thought, as he rose to see Hatake, a slight smile on his lips and eyebrows raised in anticipation of amiable conversation.
“I was about to pour plum brandy for myself and Maito there behind you. Care to join us Inspector?”

“She was a soft touch, Hatake. That’s why the poor man’s mind went into a spin.”

“Don’t do that,” Ibiki said as his stomach flipped wrong side out. “As I’m here in an official capacity, best keep my wits sir.” He stood there awkwardly for another moment, thinking it rude to position himself on Hatake’s blind side. “Nah, it’s fine … won’t need to look him in the eye to know whether he’s hiding something.

Gesturing for him to be seated once more, Hatake warmly smiled. “My nearest neighbor is the cemetery, surely this isn’t a noise complaint, is it Inspector?”

“Nothing like that,” he managed to say as he eased into the chair. “I’m afraid grievous accusations have been leveled against you Hatake-dono. I’ll need ask a few questions if you don’t mind.”

Reclining against the chair back, the master of the manor said, “Anyway I can be of assistance to the constables, I count an honor. Maito, fetch a seat from the other side of the room … you’ll sit by the bookcase for now. Lazily passing the snifter beneath his nose, he said, “Grievous accusations against me, hmm … do tell, Inspector.”

Ibiki cleared his throat while searching for an empty page in the notebook taken from his breast pocket. “Are you now or have you ever been acquainted with a Dr. Umino Tadashi?”

“Why yes of course … he worked with my father in London for years. A first rate anatomist and a brilliant teacher … until the poor man lost his mind.”

Patting down his jacket in search of a fountain pen, Ibiki lowered his voice, “His son, Umino Iruka, recently arrived in Konoha. He claims you’re responsible for the deaths of eight young women in the territory. What say you, sir?”

Once again, Hatake pushed himself forward, letting the snifter rest on the table between them as he and the returning Maito shared a laugh. “Blaming a string of murders on me … this is a new low for him.” He twisted in his seat that he might look Ibiki in the eye. “The younger Umino … strange little man; followed me around London for weeks after my father died--”

“And did you report his stalking to the police?”

“No,” he said reaching for the snifter and sinking back into the chair. “As foreigners, our claims weren’t always given highest priority.”

Suddenly, the dour husky man stood between them, snatching up the snifter as he looked down his nose at Ibiki.

“Maito, do behave. I beg pardon on his behalf, Inspector,” he leaned to the side of the chair to whisper. “He’s been rather territorial of late … you’re occupying his seat--”

“No,” Ibiki said as he made to rise, “I don’t mind standing--”

“Nonsense, you’re a guest,” he said, cutting his eyes at the servant, “I’m certain Maito will recover good manners in due time.”
The servant immediately straightened, drew back three paces and bowed. “Apologies, my Lord … Inspector Morino.” Returning to the bookcase near Hatake's right side, he continued glowering at Ibiki even as he took his seat and sipped at the brandy.

“The reason I never reported the younger Umino’s actions was because I felt sorry for him. I maintained hope we could forge a bond of friendship despite the unpleasantness between our fathers.” He paused for another sip of brandy, letting it warm him as it sailed over his tongue and down his throat. “Unfortunately, Iruka remains convinced I was somehow to blame for his father’s mental decline.”

“I see,” Ibiki said tapping his pen against the notebook, “so, it isn’t the first time he’s accused you of wrongdoing.”

“Sadly, no. But now that he’s here in Konoha, I must put forth an effort to speak with him … have you any idea where I can find him Inspector?”

“One of the inns in town, I’d imagine. With all due respect sir, I believe you erred by not reporting his actions to the authorities—”

“Rest assured, had this occurred here, I would have brought it to your immediate attention. As it happened abroad, I had no desire to cast aspersions on his character or tarnish my own reputation.”

Ibiki looked up from his notes. “Not sure I understand—”

“You’re a man of the world … think about it. Had I come to you saying a young, unmarried man was relentless in his pursuit of me, you’d think him odd … am I right?”

“I already think him odd sir … but for reasons I will not bore you with.”

"People overseas think us Japanese peculiar as a whole," Hatake softly chuckled, "what with our seemingly mysterious behaviors. Had I lodged a complaint with the authorities, Iruka would have been ostracized as a pantywaist, labeled a dandy and shunned by proper society. We would have been written off as two Oriental men having a ‘lover’s row.’ Probably would’ve jailed both of us for espousing unnatural affections—”

"Yes", the noise of the pen’s nib as it scratched through a line of text filled the silent room, “… I see your point.”

“Umino’s two friends … are they here as well? Those three used to be inseparable.” Slapping at his knee, he laughed and said, “They were always getting into devilment when they were younger.”

“Acquaintances were you?”

“Necessity demanded it. The part of town where Father maintained residence was home to fifty or sixty Japanese people; impossible not to meet everyone at least once.”

“Guess I took it for granted that you lived with your father.”

“I did not, unfortunately … now that’s he’s gone,” Hatake breathed, “how wish I’d spent more time at his side. You see, I lived in Cornwall with a friend of the family most of the year, though I always came up to London at the weekends or during breaks in my studies.”

“Can anyone vouch for your whereabouts on the night Hyuga Hitomi was murdered?”

“He was with me,” Maito said. “We were on our way back from Sunagakure where we’d attended a
symposium. They honored my Master for a journal he’d published. Would you care to see the award Inspector?”

“I would,” he said as Maito stood. “Please understand sir,” he turned to Hatake saying, “I’m merely compiling evidence for my report.”

“You are a cautious and fair man, Inspector … which I appreciate; with a homicidal maniac running loose, we can’t be too careful these days. There was quite the furor surrounding the questioning of prominent doctors and surgeons months ago. I must say, I felt slighted at the exclusion from that cadre of my fellows.”

Maito returned before Ibiki could respond, holding forth a cut crystal bowl shaped object bearing the name, Hatake Kakashi with the date awarded, etched into one side. Damn! It was the same day Hitomi died. Travel from Konoha to Suna is a two day carriage ride, and a day's journey by boat, he thought. Impossible for him to be here and there at the same time. “Thank you for indulging me, sir.”

Maito soon snatched it away, grumbling to himself as he placed the trophy on the mantle.

“Speaking of indulgences, let’s see if I can remember Umino’s friends correctly. There was … Hagane Kotetsu, apprentice to a sword maker. While he wasn’t the scholarly type, he had a wisdom born of the earth. If ever you needed a guide through the deep dark forests, he was your man; dead on accurate with bow and arrow too I’m told.”

"He is indeed world wise, sir."

Hatake tapped at his chin, “Now, as to the other fellow, Kamizuki Izumo … I believe he was a medical student. Someone said he practiced alongside a doctor for a time. Not sure if he completed his studies as I remember hearing he became the sole caretaker of the elder Umino in his last months.”

“Makes you wonder how they became such good friends,” Ibiki said as he doodled along the side of the page.

"Indeed. If memory serves, Izumo's father and Tadashi were half-brothers; same mother, she married again after the first husband died, or was she divorced, Maito?”

The man in the corner simply shrugged his shoulders and slugged down his drink.

“Finally,” Hatake continued, "we have … Umino Iruka. I know of a certainty he received a doctorate in architecture or was it anthropology?”

“I was made to understand his doctorates are in the fields of anthropology and archeology, sir.”

"Yes, of course.” Once more, Hatake leaned forward in his chair. “Umino Iruka, an academically exceptional young man, though he is also a man given to delusions, as was his father. Perhaps if I ignore his ravings, he’ll tire of this campaign against me. What do you think Inspector, is it worth a try?”

“I don't believe so,” he said finishing up his notes. "Umino seems hellbent on ruining your reputation. Crossing an ocean in pursuit of one man … wrongheaded as they may be, you have to admire his convictions. He insists your father, killed his father—”

“After all this time," Hatake sighed, "that poor lost soul still has his facts jumbled about."
“How bout it then,” Ibiki asked as he leaned back in his chair, arms draped over the bolsters, "what say you clarify these facts?"

"Gladly.," Hatake drained his glass before he began. "My father and Umino Tadashi had long been business partners and friends, but they had a terrible falling out. The night my father was killed, he'd gone to see if he and Tadashi could make amends."

"Any idea what caused the rift between them, sir?"

“From what I gathered, they’d been working on a controversial project which needed additional funding. After securing private investors, word of their work leaked to the public. Naturally, Tadashi and my father blamed one another, I believe this contributed to a parting of ways; can't say for certain, I'm afraid.”

“Kamizuki also spoke of a project. Have you any idea what that was?"

“Afraid not. Specifics of their work, as well the accompanying notes fell to the ages." He refilled the snifter saying, "Whatever that project was, it had the ultra-religious folk up in arms. For months afterwards, Father received death threats. He was hounded by fanatics who hurled accusations at him on the streets; they even formed protest groups outside his home by night. I think the pressure prompted Father to make his peace with Tadashi.” Transfixed by the liqueur splashing against the sides of the snifter, Hatake continued, “An assailant tracked him to Umino’s home that night, crashed through a window in the study …” his voice trailed off, “Father was ... decapitated.”

The man in the corner hung his head, a heavy sigh escaping his lips.

“I heard the same thing from Kamizuki and Umino, only they implied you were the one who came crashing through the window.”

“Such a traumatic evening for everyone concerned, Inspector. A rap on the door in the dark of night; the Coroner standing on the stoop of Father’s house and I in my bedclothes. By the time Maito, the undertaker and I arrived to claim his body from the Umino residence, the constables were just leaving. According to their reports, Tadashi attempted to shield my father from the attacker, sustaining wounds to his chest and hands which required medical intervention.”

“Iruka said his father was bloodied, but he left out the part about Tadashi’s attempts to protect your father.”

“As I said … it was a horribly confusing night. I believe I still have a copy of the constable’s reports somewhere ... I’ll have Kinoe search the cupboards first thing in the morning--”

“No need, I’m sure I can send a request for that information. Yes … I think that might be the best way to ascertain all the facts,” Ibiki said.

Maito rose, signaling it was either time for Ibiki’s departure or time for a refill of his drink.

“Hatake-dono, I’m quite familiar with your father’s work, but didn’t you also work as an anatomist?”

“Father insisted,” he chuffed. "Had to give it up though ... the smell of blood and decaying flesh got to me after a while. If I’m honest with myself, I grew tired of being compared to the great Hatake Sakumo, had to carve out my own path as it were. As the eldest son of the Morino Kenta, surely you understand what that’s like?"

“You knew my father?”
“Who didn’t? He was one of the finest equestrian breeders in the Five Nations. Father purchased many a stallion and mare from your family.”

By now, Maito was pacing before the fireplace.

“And how go the renovations to the manor?”

“Slowly. This house was closed up for over thirty years; you’d be surprised how much work needs doing. I’m looking to expand the property, increase its value ... I have a permit to do so, if you’d care to examine it--”

“I’m certain you do sir. Least that explains excavation of the land near the cemetery. I also hear you’re looking to marry ... congratulations.”

“Yet another duty to fulfill as head of a clan… leave descendants to carry on the family name and all that.”

Depositing the notebook and pen in his breast pocket, Ibiki stood and gracefully bowed. “Again, I apologize for interrupting your work. Good evening, Hatake-dono.”

He sat the snifter atop the table and stretched his arms over his head. “I really must get back to work; I've a strict publisher and an even stricter deadline. I do hope we'll have another chance to speak again ... preferably, not when I'm under suspicion. A pleasant evening to you, Inspector ... Maito will see you out.”

As they exit, Kinoe slipped inside the salon. “Master,” he said approaching the fireplace, “the younger Umino’s continued presence presents us with a sticky situation.”

“That is none of your concern. Renovations … how much longer until completion?”

“A few days only, my Lord. Would you care to review the guest list for the soiree now?”

“No,” he waved him away, “you’re far too gleeful about this invasion of my privacy. What I want now are six specially prepared invitations, drawn by your hand.”

Grinning broadly, the servant turned about for the short walk to his desk.

“Where are you going Kinoe,” the master called languidly, swabbing his finger round the snifter’s balloon. “Did I not say six ‘specially’ prepared invitations? Regular ink simply will not do for these.”

Hastening to where the Master sat, Kinoe knelt before the table between the chairs and fetched a small spoon like receptacle from a hidden compartment. His eyes grew wide as the Master reverted to his true form, his breath coming in ragged snatches as razor sharp fangs surrounded the fleshy part of his Master’s finger when it disappeared between his lips. With a trembling hand, he caught thick drops of blood as they splashed against the receptacle. Slowly Hatake took on his human appearance, saying, “You’ll need Maito’s help to do this correctly. Once prepared, this is to be kept in the antechamber until the time of my choosing.” Running his finger over Kinoe’s lips, Hatake smeared the remaining blood from one corner to the other of his servant’s mouth. “This should keep him from attacking you.”

“Thank you Master. Shall I assume these invitations are for your intended and her kin?”

"Assume nothing. Hasten to do as instructed, lest I withdraw my protection. Maito will be waiting for you inside the vault.”
“Right away, my Lord.”

Notes:

Dono: when attached to a name, it roughly means "lord" or "master". It does not equate noble status; rather it is a term akin to "Milord" and lies above Sama in level of respect.

Kenta: healthy, strong or big and stout.

Cadre: a group of people having some unifying relationship; a small group of people, specially trained for a particular purpose or profession.

Anatomist: an expert in anatomy; one who dissects (the human body in particular) to study its structures in detail.

Chuff: a sound of or like the exhaust of a steam engine.

Fountain pens were first imported to Japan during the Meiji period.
At the clang of metal against stone, Maito lifts his eyes. When pale yellow fingers of light scratch under the vault door, the scent of his master’s blood calls him from the glooming. Eons of obeisance did his knees make bend, ere he caught the underlying scent of his nemesis.

“That’s right,” Kinoe said as the door creaked open. “Bow before your betters.”

And as the shadows enfold him once more, Maito let loose a growl of warning, its timbre fearsome as it ricochets round the room.

Kinoe kicks closed the door behind him, proudly bearing a small container of master's blood. “Oh, come now … how long will you linger there, snarling and glowering at me? Up, let us be quick to the task.”

From the other side of the room, the smudged blood on Kinoe’s lips illumines his face, and Maito rises from a crouch. He watches as the swinging lantern is secured in place on a hook above the waist high apothecary cabinet in the center of the room, holds his breath as the receptacle of blood is reverently placed on the counter and grinds his teeth when Kinoe beckons him.

“For my Lord will I do anything,” he said, “even if means working by your side--”

“It’s settled then. Where are the other ingredients?”

Emerging from the darkness with mortar and pestle in hand, glass vials clink together in his pockets as Maito draws near. “My work is already done,” he snaps.

“And the incantation … sure you remember both parts of it?”

This time the power of his roar pushes Kinoe back on his heels. “Spineless cur! You doubt me?”

“Course I do … a walnut sized brain can only hold so much before bursting.” As Maito bristles, he adds with a laugh, “A joke only, calm yourself. We must work as one … Lord Hatake wishes it so.”

The invocation of Master’s name and the beguiling smell of his blood cools his anger. Without another word does Maito place the compounding equipment on the table as he gingerly empties his pockets. “How much time have we?”

“Twenty-five minutes only; surely we can lay aside our differences for that long.”

“You willingly seek amends? Maito looks askance with a snarl, “Spit it out. What is it you desire of me?”

The other man made a show of searching through the lower drawers, a faint smile playing over his lips. “Master speaks often and very highly of one named Jiraiya. I want to know who he is.”

A hoarse chuckle filled the space between them. “The all-knowing Kinoe asks this of a beast? Then it’s true … curiosity maketh strange bedfellows.”

“I’ll have none of your impertinence. That vial at your right hand, extract nine leaves and crush them into the bowl.”

“Jiraiya … close friend and advisor to Lord Sakumo; mentor to Lord Kakashi--”
“Mentor you say? Well then, I look forward to meeting with him at the upcoming soiree.”

Maito paused for a moment, shaking his head. “Best pray your paths never cross Kinoe; even Master’s blood won’t keep him from tearing you limb from limb.”

“Don’t be ridiculous! I’ll not fear him or any other man on your say so--”

“Then are you the biggest fool who ever drew breath. Jiraiya is a creature like unto me … a hundred times wiser and a thousand times more powerful. And like the Master, he can see clean through to the heart. He’d devour you at first sight--”

“Our Lord would not permit such a thing,” he hissed slamming shut one of the drawers. “Our Lord wouldn’t bat an eyelash, for you are an expendable. Such a pity,” he said sliding the marble mixing pot toward the center of the counter. “How desperate your desire to be Master’s right hand, yet you know nothing of his life--”

“Humph … I know one thing, his blood before us compels you speak truth.” A smug grin pulled at his lips as he arranged six blank cards around the mortar’s base. “And by the power of his blood … I command you to--”

“Silence poltroon! It is unwise to presume your words carry the same gravitas as our Lord’s presence.” The pestle clangs against the bowl as he slammed one hand against the console’s surface. “I speak to your shame,” he said, folding those massive arms across his chest, “even the lowliest house servants know of Jiraiya and the important role he plays in the continuance of this family.”

“You’ll pardon me then; I’ve not served the Master as long as you and the others. Quickly now,” he said searching about for the quill, “take four leaves from the blue vial and grind them into a fine powder with those in the bowl.”

Over the noise of the pestle and the crunch of dried herbs, he heard Maito say, “It’s not often I get the chance to educate you. I’ll not forget this.”

Though Kinoe stiffened at the thought, he found himself leaning closer as the other man continued, “At a time predetermined, all Hatake heirs must sit under the tutelage of Lord Jiraiya. Through him they learn the clan’s history that they might assume their rightful place within a hierarchy of demons. Preparing the heir for his first Great Hunt is but one of his duties--”

“Great Hunt? I’ve never heard of such a thing--”

“Will ignorance and arrogance forever define you, Kinoe?”

“Time is ticking against us … just tell me what it is.”

With a sigh, Maito bent down, watching closely as Kinoe measured out the liquid components. “When numen of high order produce offspring, the babe is subjected to a ritual; the spirits of the clan are conjured and a sacrifice is offered. The babe’s first meal is the blood of that sacrifice which spills from the lips of one or both of his parents--”

“Ugh! That sounds disgusting!”

“As opposed to eating cockroaches and rats?”

“Hush now! My diet is but a small price to pay for spending eternity near the Master. Stand aside as I add the liquids.”
Each drop of fluid begins to smoke when it meets the dry ingredients. They watch as the mixture, green at first, begins bubbling as it stains the bowl black.

“Now, Maito … the first part of the incantation … do it now!”

His hands hover above the steaming container as he speaks, sparks dance under his palms as the mixture rises and falls, condensing itself into a thick tar like substance. As Kinoe dangles the quill over the pot, ink leaps to the nib; with each stroke Kinoe draws, the ink, black as the blood first drawn from Master’s veins, glows above the paper.

“The spirits burn a seal into the babe’s flesh,” said Maito, “which confers immortality … with a condition. Over the first ninety-nine years of its existence, the seal will slowly disappear as the child grows. It subsists on the blood of animals delivered him monthly by the Yasha. But his first unassisted kill must come before the one hundredth year or age thirteen as human’s mark time. If the hunt is unsuccessful, the seal reemerges as a curse mark. His parents, bound by an oath, must then fasten the child to a sacred tree and watch while the Yasha destroy it.”

“Obviously, Master survived this ordeal,” Kinoe smirked as he began work on the second card.

“Yes only by a hair’s breadth. Lord Sakumo waited and hoped his son would manifest the powers of his ancestors, but like a night flower, our Master blossomed late … the influence of his mother’s blood.”

“If she was a gaki too, why would her blood pose a problem?”

Maito cast him an incredulous glance. “When our Lord was conceived … his mother was still human.”

Kinoe briefly looked up from his work. “Human? She was Lord Sakumo’s bride … under his control … he could have done as he wished—”

“A numen’s desire is mightier than the will of its intended victim, even so, the victim must yield and ask the numen for the gift of immortality.”

“I knew that,” he huffed. “Still, he could have mesmerized her into yielding.”

“No… never had Lord Sakumo met a woman like her; Mari was both her name and her nature. She possessed neither talismans, or amulets, instead, hers was a fighting spirit, an inner strength which made her impervious to his charms. Lord Sakumo loved her without restraint; she was his strength and ultimately … his weakness,” he said quietly. “He would not violate the one thing which drew him to her. Intrigued and enthralled, he pined for her to the point of wasting. Only Jiraiya understood the happiness the elder Hatake found in her. Theirs was a love forbidden, fraught with many the peril.”

By now was Kinoe at work on the fourth invitation. “Go on,” he said.

“She didn’t bear Lord Sakumo’s seal and that made her fair game to renegade gaki. In this world of demons and creatures, she was an oddity; the softness of her pink flesh, the sound of the blood rushing through her veins proved an irresistible attraction to the other yokai. When it was revealed she was with child, and that she’d refused the third bite, our world was thrown into pandemonium.”

Kinoe stood, stretching his back and flexing his fingers. “Now I see where the Master gets it from. He prefers chasing after willful, cunning targets—”

“He is not unlike his father in many respects. As the pregnancy progressed, Lady Mari’s obstinacy grew. Lord Sakumo left her in Jiraiya’s care while he searched the Five Nations for any potion or
spell to extend her longevity. Finding none, he returned home in time for the birth of his son. He alone subjected the babe to the ritual. So sure was he the power of the Hatake would bypass his child, Lord Sakumo and Jiraiya conspired to keep the Master hidden. For years, these men defied the spirits of the Hatake ancestors, risking the scorn of the spirits to protect them. Beloved of his mother,” he said with disgust, “Lord Kakashi progressed through life as a normal human child.”

“You make it sound appalling--”

“I wouldn’t know what it must have been like for him, never had a desire to understand it--”

Finished,” came the triumphant sigh from Kinoe as he straightened from the table. Maito waved his hands over the cards, reciting the last stanzas of the incantation while the ink turned a glistening ebony as it soaked into the paper.

Gathering up the vials, he said, “Months passed, the gaki grew in number with each full moon as they surrounded the manor. They knew the seal and its protection were vanishing from the Master’s body. They waited for a chance to strike when Lady Mari and the child were unguarded. They would have tortured him--”

“Thought protecting the Master was your job too.”

“Even then, I was still under the protection of my father; the gaki would’ve torn me to pieces as well. However, one week shy of the hundredth year did his powers awaken while Lords Sakumo and Jiraiya were away.”

“I knew it! Master defeated them all, didn’t he?”

Maito left the question hanging in the air as he walked to the other end of the room. “Our Master went on a killing spree, that much is true, but it was contained to the manor. In one night, he slaughtered ten of his servants.” As he returned the vials, mortar and pestle to their places he said, “Next morning did our Lord awake screaming at the top of his lungs as he stumbled over the bloodied and broken bodies littering his bedchamber. He ran to the safety of his mother’s arms. Lady Mari had no idea what was happening to him and Lord Kakashi had no memory of what he’d done.”

“Surely you lie Maito! Are you saying the Master was unaware of his destiny until that night? Why couldn’t you have stopped--?”

“He’d shown no signs of his heritage beforetime; that night was the Master beyond reason and I, no match for the fury boiling inside him. Lords Sakumo and Jiraiya sensed the turmoil as it reached its peak within our young Lord, arriving from the Land of Earth in time to prevent further destruction. Jiraiya only had a few days in which to teach him to channel his instinct to kill. The night of the Great Hunt found Lord Kakashi ill prepared for the challenges which lay ahead. And yet … the Fates smiled on him and the spirits of his ancestors guided him successfully. That same night, Lady Mari who feared for her child, relented and received the final bite, though she would not live to see her son come through this rite of passage.”

Removing a wide slender container from one of the drawers, Kinoe broke the quill in several pieces, dropping them into the ash box and setting them aflame. “Well … what happened to her?”

“She pushed Lord Sakumo from her side, insisting she’d greet him and Lord Kakashi as they returned home victorious. He left reluctantly, so I was told. But Lady Mari, weakened through childbirth, was beyond the time limit that third bite would have given her necessary strength,” he said bracing himself against the far wall. “Her determination was not sufficient and in a vulnerable
state, both she and her handmaids were defeated before she could quit herself of her chambers; they
dragged Lady Mari from the manor—"

"Who? Other gaki?"

"The third bite sealed her as Lord Sakumo’s true bride; they could not raise a hand against her. The
assailants that night were human … of the Hyuga clan. Armed with talismans most powerful, they
pierced through her heart as she prepared to join the hunt; they tied her body to a tree with ropes
intertwined with the same talismans."

"No wonder I’ve never heard the Master speak of his mother."

"It was a terrible loss. The power of the third bite made her vampirical as was Lord Sakumo. A note
left in her chambers, a frantic search through the woods; her screams of pain as the rising sun ate
through her body, guided Lord Sakumo to her location. It was for naught. The place where she’d
stood was marked only a silvery pile of ashes."

"Ah, I understand … Hitomi … she was sacrificed for revenge?"

"Her sacrifice set right a heinous wrong," he said walking back to the center of the room. Maito
turned his back on Kinoe, leaning against the console. "I remember the frustration my father felt; the
elder Hatake, inconsolable over lady Mari’s death … my father unable to comfort him. For months,
Lord Sakumo couldn’t bring himself to talk about her death to his son … they grew distant, the elder
Hatake wallowing in the belly of anguish, blaming himself, the resentment of our Lord growing
toward his father as time passed."

"Maito … you knew all of this, you should have told him--"

"I learned the truth the same night as our Master. At Jiraiya’s urging, Lord Sakumo sat us down and
explained everything. Such news was too great … Lord Kakashi lost control of himself … went
prowling beyond the manor gates, seeking vent for his anger."

"Who could fault him? Aggrieved he was--!"

"Yes … but by the time he learned the truth, other factors were coming into play. The power of his
ancestors was taking root, sorrow aged him and the rapid changes in mind and body adversely
affected him--"

"I was once human and I know exactly why he changed," Kinoe boasted. "You said a gaki’s one
hundredth year is equivalent to thirteen human years … that’s the age when mortals enter
pubescence."

"Puberty … I’ve heard of this phenomenon. It is powerful indeed. Before the Great Hunt, Master
was possessed of equanimity, studious and obedient; afterwards, did his temper flare quickly and
burn hotter, he became foul of mouth and dark of mood. He killed not to feed, but for amusement
sake, skinning alive his victims as they pleaded for death. Lord Sakumo allowed him free rein, living
vicariously through the rage of his son … until the night he killed three young women. Their bodies
brutalized, torn asunder by his repeated sexual assault. Dumped in the forest like so much garbage
they were, all because humans happened upon the ritual intended to destroy the evidence."

"Why didn’t the gaki destroy the interlopers?"

"On the Master’s word, they would have. But as he stood in the center of the ritual circle, he
recognized one of the men gaping at them through the trees; that man was Senju Hisao. And as the
Master was in his human form, Hisao recognized him as well. Lord Kakashi fled, confessing his
transgression to his father and receiving the brunt of his wrath.”

“You mean that scar over his eye … his father did that?”

“No. The night Lord Sakumo met his end, Umino Tadashi swung his dagger, intending to kill the Master as well. Our Lord leapt out of way, yet he will forever bear the scar.”

“So that’s what happened. When he came back to claim me as his servant, I was too afraid to ask about the bandages he wore.” He swept his hand over the surface brushing dried stems into the ash container. “So, this Senju, he was an ancestor of the current Governor I take it?”

“Had they killed Hisao that night, the Hyuga or Shimura clans would have torn the land apart in a struggle for control. Allowing Hisao to live and tell his story would have implicated Lord Kakashi … had anyone believed him. In the end, Lord Sakumo decided it best for all to quit Konoha. A month later, we set sail for Cornwall where Jiraiya had numerous contacts. We lived in peace … the Master sat under Jiraiya’s teachings, honing his skills on the moors and in the bogs and Lord Sakumo branched out, establishing a home in London where he worked as an anatomist. That’s where he met Yamada Kenichi. Because of Yamada’s interest in the occult, they formed a bond; through that association, Lord Sakumo came to know Umino Tadashi.”

“Cornwall … that’s where I met Lord Kakashi. I was working as a night clerk at the hospital where he was training. You’re right … he was different back then; kind of heart, an ever-present smile on his lips and I was—”

“Smitten, like a silly, love-struck girl. You fawned over him, having desires unnatural … I detested your very existence from the first time I laid eyes on you—”

“Goodness, do I detect a hint of jealousy Maito? You act as if he’s never turned to you for physical comfort—”

“You gave him your body,” he sneered, “hoping for a measure of control over him … he took your soul. Be no longer deceived Kinoe. The Master has never suffered want of a bed warmer; you were nothing more than an escapade into depravity … a toy he used till he grew tired and cast you aside. I am joined to our Lord, mind, spirit and soul, and as his property, I am a valuable tool which serves higher pursuits—”

“Is that so? Humph … once a month he lets you off the leash like a dog and you tear through the forests, an irrational quadruped, baying at the moon and devouring the flesh and fat of men. You dare look down on me, Maito?”

“I do. But as we live under the same roof, we want what’s best for the master and we would do whatever he asks to please him, I could learn to respect you … give or take a few thousand years.”

Kinoe bent down, searching for something beneath the cupboard. Standing, he sat the heavy iron case between them. “We don’t have to be friends, but we needn’t continue as enemies either. Master needs the unique skills we both possess; I too could learn to respect you…eventually.” With the invitations stowed away, he returned the container to its place. “Now then … I’ll hear more of this tale, minus the insolence if you please.”

As he reached out for the lantern, it cast an eerie glow over Maito’s face, its flame flickering when his breath ghosted over the aperture as it sat on the cabinet top.

“Our last six months in Cornwall, Jiraiya started receiving reports about the gaki in Konoha. They were multiplying at an alarming rate and would continue to do so without a leader to focus their
energies. At the time, Lord Kakashi was too weak to control an entire territory, so the elder Hatake dispatched Jiraiya to keep an eye on them.” He picked up the lantern and started for the door saying, “Two months before he was killed, Lord Sakumo summoned the Master to London for he knew Umino was plotting against him. During the final month of his life, over a three-night phase of the full moon, Lord Sakumo transferred his memories and three quarters of his power to our Master. My father likewise bequeathed his wisdom and strength to me.”

“I always wondered why it was so easy for a human to kill him,” Kinoe whispered. “Lord Sakumo had already given up the ghost.”

As the door slammed closed behind them, Maito turned and said, “His powers were a parting gift to the son he loved more than he could say. Now is Lord Sakumo joined with the woman he loved too much; I trust their spirits will continue to guide our Lord.”

“I’ll ask one thing more. Master’s eye. I’ve seen it only once; it was blood red with tiny black circles that swirled about. Can he … see--?”

“Farther than you could comprehend, Kinoe. The dagger Umino used was coated with a poison which eroded the tissues surrounding his eye. And what should have been a liability, instead proved another blessing from his ancestors. The son Lord Sakumo never thought would come into the power of the clan, now possess a trait which lay dormant since Hatake Kama’s time.”

“This Kama, who was he?”

The swinging lantern cast wide their shadows as he and Kinoe walked side by side down the long passageway.

“Ah, Kinoe … you’ve so much to learn.”

Notes:

Obeisance: a movement of the body expressing deep respect or deferential courtesy, as before a superior.

Glooming: total or partial darkness.

Askance: with suspicion or distrust.

Poltroon: wretched coward, craven; marked by utter cowardice.

Gravitas: importance in manner causing feelings of respect.

Bedfellows: temporary allies.

Mari means "obstinacy" or "rebelliousness".

Aggrieved: afflicted with pain, anxiety; feeling resentment over having been treated unjustly.

Equanimity: mental or emotional stability, especially under tension or strain; calmness.
Pieces of the Puzzle

So much has happened in the span of two and a half weeks:

During an elaborate ceremony in the town square, Lady Tsunade signs the first of many import/export accords with Europe, England specifically; these days she entertains lawyers and envoys from France and Italy and her nights are spent either hosting or attending elegant dinner gatherings.

Having settled into their new home, Iruka, Izumo and Kotetsu are still ironing out the details of what still seems a dodgy gamble. And poor Ibiki, he's worn a path from his home to the post office and worn out his welcome with the kindly post master as he impatiently awaits delivery of police reports from London.

As another dawn silently breaks at the beginning of the fourth week, haggard factory workers exchange greetings as they begin or end a long shift, while other of the town residents push themselves from cozy beds. The docks have been humming as well; for every two ships steaming toward the west laden with finished products, two more filled with raw materials find mooring in their empty berths.

And lest we forget, Konoha's 'mating season' is just about to reach its peak. The affluent hold their collective mint scented breaths in anticipation of the final event –

a grand soiree at the Hatake estate.

It is there in the belly of the manor house near the cemetery, inside a dimly lit vault, we find two faithful servants standing on either side of the apothecary cabinet. Down the stairs and along the corridor, they hear the measured steps of their master approaching. Kinoe shifts from foot to foot, his breaths quickening with each second as he keeps an eye on the door; Maito's stance is relaxed, his eyes lowered, arms held loosely at his sides.

When the footsteps cease …

an atramentous mist seeps through the stone wall
and suddenly is their Lord upon them.

Standing inches from Maito, the master eerily smiles and says, "The hour draws near … you can feel it too, can't you?"

"Yes, my Lord."

"The atmosphere crackles with tension … the guardedness of my chosen makes heavy the breezes."

"Save one, Master."

Lord Hatake cocks his head to side, chuckling softly. "In due time will he fear me Maito, as befits a loyal subject. Quickly, bring it hither."

Without delay does the bondservant bow low as he backs away to retrieve the iron box beneath the cabinet. In the bat of an eye is he kneeling at the master's feet; his palms steadily supporting the heavy container as it is raised above his head, its contents laid bare for master's inspection. In the same moment, the temperature inside the vault plunges as Master's clothing and his suit of flesh rip in
half and melt away. Translucent, blue tinged skin glistens in the light cast from the solitary lantern; powerful sinews bulge and ripple as Lord Hatake assumes his full height. When he stretches forth an appendage, Kinoe finds himself quaking in awe. Like those of a thaumaturge, clawed phalanges wave over the box. From each talon flows a thick green miasma which draws the six cards upward, suspending them in midair. The eyes of their Master, one a gangrenous yellow, the other blood red, take on a telestic gleam while his laughter stabs through the dank air.

"Now shall the last be first."

One of the cards breaks away from the others, swirling around the head and shoulders of their Lord before coming to rest on its edge against an outstretched manus.

"This one is for my primary target," he said as it gently tumbled to the ground beside Maito's foot. "You will take care to deliver it into his hands."

"Consider it done my Lord."

"As for you, Kinoe, the names of the other recipients are on your desk in the salon. You will visit each one in turn according to my instructions."

"Thank you Master."

In the span of a breath, their Lord stands before him. "Beware, Kinoe … should the ink be disturbed by clumsy handling, it will nullify the desired effect. Salt won't save you from my wrath should that happen."

"Of course," he swallowed hard, "I will exercise the greatest of care my Lord."

Kinoe was trembling to beat the band as his Master towered over him; thick, whetted fangs bared. "See that you do."

He took a few steps back, his eyes still locked onto his thunderstruck servant as layers of human skin and clothing of silk shroud the splendor of his true form.

In a puff of grey smoke, he vanished.

"Well," Maito snarled, "don't just stand there with your mouth agape. Take these and let us be about our Lord's business."

"You know," he said turning toward the cabinet, "this ink … I made it once before with another servant. Master took the mixing pot from my hand shortly thereafter and I never had a chance to see how it works," he said collecting the cards. "Oh damn it!"

"Are you so hungry for punishment that you smudged 'em already?"

"No... I took every detail into consideration as I planned… anticipated every contingency-"

"Hell are you mumbling about?"

"I agreed to provide lodging for many of the guests … here … in this house."

"So what?"

In a panic, he clawed at the other man's forearm. "The soiree, you fool … it takes place during the phase of a full moon! I've put our Master in an untenable situation. How will he feed?"
"What are you … stupid?" Maito bellowed as he shook himself free. "If you do not yet understand the simplest things, how can you think yourself worthy of the house of Hatake?"

"He'll destroy me for certain--!"

"Don't raise my hopes, Kinoe. If Master meant you harm … you'd be a bloody stain by now." Dropping the box to the floor, he kicked it under the cabinet. "Be grateful, you still breathe after you failed to prioritize his needs. If I were Lord Hatake, you'd be a midafternoon snack for the yokai," he said wistfully. "Now show yourself appreciative of his mercy by doing as he ordered."

"You're right, of course," he said wiping the sweat from his brow. "It was an honest mistake … still, I'm not sure what to expect after I deliver the invitations. Should I wait for a written response or should I--?"

"Only after you carry out his instructions will you understand what needs doing. Begone!"

Kinoe grabbed the cards and the lantern, hurrying down the corridor and up the stairs. Racing to the salon, he found the list of recipients lying next to a carefully plotted diagram, a velvet lined pouch and five sheets of vellum.

**Recherché**

Kotetsu rubbed at his eyes, hoping he was seeing things. "So glad one of us had a wild night. You just gettin' up or never been to bed?"

Gesturing toward the kitchen, Izumo told him, "The water's still hot enough for tea."

"Gee thanks. Where's Ruka?"

"In bed … like I should be. Must you stand over my shoulder, scratching yourself like an animal?"

"Not like I got fleas or something. You know, I woulda joined ya guys last night if you'd asked."

"And you would've hated every minute," he yawned, "lots of reading and complex thought involved. Go on then, get your tea." He shook his head and grinned as Kotetsu staggered toward the kitchen. "So, what's on your plate for today?"

"I'd like some toast and eggs … oh, you mean… why? You thinkin' about dragging me to the Temple again? Cause if you are, so help me Zumo, I'll bust ya in the chops!"

"No Temple today, I've enough information here to keep me busy for the rest of the week."

After nosily rummaging through the cabinets, he poked his head into the other room, "Hey! Where's the sugar?"

"Next to your mug," Izumo thought, *same place it is every morning when you ask that question.*

"Found it, it was next to my mug. I was thinkin' about going fishing. Gotta check the traps anyway … wanna come?"

"Nah, you've earned a frolic in the woods. Wouldn't want to deprive you of that."

"Frolic, my eye," he called from the kitchen. "Somebody round here has to gather up firewood and tote water for you lazy bums."

"The effort … always appreciated."
He slugged down a mouthful of tea and wearily propped himself against the door frame. "Mind movin' some of this junk outta the way so I can sit down?"

Izumo dropped his pen with a sigh, grudgingly shifting a stack of papers from table to floor. "I'd almost forgotten how pleasant you are first thing in the morning. And this 'junk,' as you call it, is but one box of Tadashi's notes. There's two more we've yet to open."

"Man … how much longer is this gonna take?"

"I don't know … still trying to familiarize ourselves with all the amulets Tadashi accumulated--"

"I thought everything we needed was in the valise?"

"Iruka gave some of them to Michio to research and repair. No idea where he's hiding the others."

"Damn! I'm itchin' to lop Hatake's head off, but at the rate you two are goin' we'll be old men before that happens."

Iruka stumbled from his room just then and veered toward the kitchen. "My … aren't we bloodthirsty this morning?"

"Yeah, bloodthirsty, it's part of my overall charm," Kotetsu said. "Thought you were having a lie in?"

"Couldn't sleep," he sighed. "Been wracking my brain for a way to conceal the amulets in our clothing--"

"Ruka, you're making this way too complicated," he said stepping out of his way. "I say we stuff the damn things in our pockets and be done with it … what, can't their power radiate through fabric?"

"I'm sure it can," Iruka said as he shook the kettle. "We have to be mindful and stealthy because in a struggle, they could be dislodged."

"Some of the amulets will keep Hatake at a distance," Izumo added as he cleared another space at the table, "but to render him immobile, others need to be in direct contact with his body--"

"Gimme a break, I know that, Zumo. And for the record, Hatake doesn't worry me as much as the army of gaki under his control. They're gonna run interference for him, you realize that right?"

"If the amulets are strong enough to humble a demon … low level gaki won't be a problem," Iruka countered when he took a seat at the table. "We know what to do with Hatake once he's cornered … where we've been hitting a brick wall is finding a way to capture him when he's alone."

"See," Kotetsu smirked as he sat down, "this is exactly why you snobs should've included me in your think tank. I'm not just a pretty face … I know stuff too. And like it or not, Ruka … you gotta get close, gotta let the enemy think he knows you … then you strike."

Izumo rolled his eyes saying, "Thanks for pointing out the obvious--"

"I'm not talkin' about physical distance ya twit. What I mean is … his father worked elbow to elbow with Hatake's old man, right? That gave him knowledge of and access to--"

"Letting him think we mean no harm … not going to work. He already knows we have the weaponry--"
"Yeah, but Zumo, we're puny humans with weak minds in his book. If we can make him think we're soft on this revenge thing--"

"You think we can fool an omnipotent being into--?"

"What? Can he read minds too?"

"Hang on, you might have something there, my cloddy friend. Iruka, didn't you say the Governor was pestering you to meet with her and Hatake? Maybe that's the route we should take--"

"I wanna cut out his heart and smash it under my foot Zumo, not sit around sipping tea and eating finger sandwiches with him--"

"But if you go through with this meeting, it'll look like you want to settle your differences. Come on Ruka, I've seen ya fake sincerity hundreds of times--"

"Like when he smiles and agrees to go along with your crazy ideas?"

"Clam up Zumo … not gonna hurt to try."

"As if he'd believe my sudden change of heart; sorry pal, Hatake is not stupid."

"Okay then, Iruka, what about the other thing… you know … the guy?"

"Guy?" Kotetsu asked, "What guy?"

"Hmm… might not arrive in time; we've less than a week before the full moon--"

"Who, that little monk? Is he the guy?"

"At this point, a small gesture is better than nothing. We can't keep crossing our fingers, hoping Hatake will blunder into our path alone and devoid of power. That might take months and who knows how many victims he intends to--?"

"Hello? Who's the guy?"

"Zumo, the forces of good and right are on our side. If we just keep moving forward, the Fates are going to favor us eventually."

"That's crazy talk! And you know something else … it's fine," Kotetsu huffed as he folded his arms across his chest, "don't tell me who this guy is."

"Listen ya hothead, we can't very well knock on a man's front door and chop his head off; we don't even know where he lives!"

"Then let the Governor set up a meeting between you two. Hell, I'll follow Hatake back to his house, since you're both so scared--"

"I'd rather keep losses minimal on our end. Stalking a demon on your own … it's too risky."

"Yeah, well coming all this way without a firm plan … kinda stupid if you ask me."

"I have a plan," Iruka ground out, "its missing a component, that's all."

"Look, I trust you man … but, this is frustrating, you know? We're so close and now we're runnin' outta time."
"I'm frustrated too, Tetsu, but we can't rush something like this."

"Yeah, yeah, so, this 'guy' is the missing component. What if he never shows up ... then what? I mean, what's he got that we don't already have?"

Iruka closed his eyes, rubbing away a headache. "His father was a student of the dark arts, a mystic, if you will-

"Great, just what we need ... another layabout gettin' in the way and slowin' us down-"

"Tetsu will you let him finish please?"

Unfazed, Iruka continued, "This man trained his son to carry on his work. I found all their information in Father's papers, sent him a letter before we left London."

"Oh, well, if he's got good penmanship skills ... that'll intimidate Hatake."

Iruka cut his eyes at his friend, "I'm sure I told you this the night we went to the diner; you probably weren't listening then either. Anyway, this young man has mastered a technique that lets him keep a target under remote surveillance--"

"We get the layout and routine of the house down pat without drawing attention to ourselves," Izumo explained. "Knowing when and how to strike gives us the advantage."

"Yes, but here's the thing," Iruka bowed his head and said, "I never got a response to my letter."

"Oh, that's wonderful! Can this crap storm get any bigger?"

"By the Buddha's beard ... will you be quiet for a minute?"

"No! The both of ya need to listen to me for a change! Ruka, this guy, that you never met before and don't really know, is supposed to travel all the way to Konoha from wherever the hell he lives, and share a mystical technique with us, just because you wrote him a letter? Does that sound stupid to anybody else at this table, or just me?"

"He's not some random 'guy,' Tetsu, he's family. Third cousin twice removed or something like that ... on my maternal grandmother's side."

"This is ridiculous! I need to get outta here before I say something I can't take back." The empty mug overturned when Kotetsu stood; marching to the door, he almost ripped the nail from the wall when he snatched up his jacket. "Not sure whether I'm angry, disappointed or as crazy as you are, Ruka. I promised to stick by ya til the end ... just can't stand lookin' at ya right now."

"Come on man ... Tetsu, don't be like that--"

SLAM!

After the dust settled, Izumo took another beat and looked to Iruka. "That went better than expected, don't you think?"

Notes:

In days of old, salt was believed to ward off the power of evil spirits.

Atramentous: black as ink.
Thaumaturge: a worker of miracles.

Telestic: mystical.

Manus: the distal segment of the forelimb of a vertebrate; including the carpus and the forefoot.

Whetted: something made sharp or keen.

Vellum: translucent material prepared animal skin; it was used as a material for writing.
Ivory chopsticks slam against their rest on a silver serving tray as the timid servant trembles in the doorway of his master's bedchamber.

“Was it your intention to rob my appetite?”

“No, my Lord, I --”

“Imbecile! That name … Hatake, it is taboo in this house!*

“Please forgive me, I was unaware my Lord.”

The man propped up the massive bed nearly overturned his breakfast tray when he pushed it away. “I’m already sick to my stomach … might as well tell me; what is the nature of this man’s inquiry?”

“I only know he comes bearing a missive … thought it best to inform you before--”

In a rage, he snatched the linen napkin from his collar and twisted it in his hands. “You will do three things. One, march back downstairs this instant; two, inform that man in no uncertain terms that the head of the Uchiha wishes no association with that cursed house. Finally, you will bodily escort him from my property. Move, damn you!”

The servant made to turn himself about, “Pardon. Thought you might want to know, the message he carries was intended for the young master.”

Fugaku chuckled as he leaned against the mountain of pillows behind him, “Then is this new head of the Hatake a greater idiot than you.” The crumpled napkin, he carefully laid across his lap. “My eldest son is an impatient and ruthless man … he will suffer no talk of peace between our houses.” Slowly did he pull back the bed tray. Discarded chopsticks poised in his left hand, he stabs at a chunk of grilled salmon on his plate, saying, “Here now are your new orders. Lead this Hatake scum out to the back garden. Make certain he rudely interrupts my son while he sits alone with his weapons and dark thoughts. Then … prepare for bloodshed.”

The servant bowed, hastening from the room.

After what seemed like hours, Kinoe is led from the salon and into the study. This room, cavernous, the dark wood paneling making it feel as if the walls were closing in upon him. Yet the second they stepped foot on the stoa, Kinoe was at once drowning in a tranquil sea of panoramic beauty. Beams of sunlight crisscross the path before him; silica deposits in the stone reflecting the light like stars. Gentle wisteria scented breezes coax music from brass wind chimes as he walks beneath them. Stately elms ring the vast gardens, chrysanthemums explode in vivid colors before his eyes and fat orange and white koi break the surface of a pond to feed on grey mosquitoes with bellies of red.

“The young Lord is seated to your right, just beyond the path's end,” the servant told him. “You must announce your presence loudly, as he does not hear well.”

As promised, there to his right, about twenty yards from the end of the pathway, a slender young man sat alone on a bench of carved white marble. His hair, bluish black was tied in a low tail against the nape of his neck; errant strands fluttered against the creamy ecru of his kimono.

“Good morning, Lord Itachi,” he called. When the man didn’t respond, Kinoe skirted around the bench that he might bow before him. “Sorry to intrude this early, but my Master, Lord Hatake, has
a request most urgent.”

A gentle smile spread across the young man’s lips when Kinoe stood erect. The young man’s eyes, black as coal seemed so warm and welcoming.

“You dare sully the air around the home of my ancestors … speaking that befouled name without regard for your life?”

There was scarcely time to draw a breath before the young man was standing behind Kinoe, a sharp blade pressed to his throat. “Speak truth while you can,” he hissed. “What is the meaning of your presence here?”

Just then, on the second floor of the manor, the curtains snap closed as Lord Fugaku returns to his bed with a sly grin. That’s my boy,” he thought.

“My Lord,” Kinoe said softly as he raised the card to eye level. “I was told… to deliver this into your hands.”

Painfully pulling the trembling hand closer, Itachi extracts the card between his fingers. He studies it carefully before pushing the messenger to the ground. Gasping for breath, Kinoe turns about, looking up in time to see the characters leap from the stationery and race up the other man’s arms with lightning speed. With eyes widened in fear, he watches the characters converge in the center of the young man’s chest, sinking into the silken robe with a high-pitched whine. Suddenly, Lord Itachi opens wide his mouth in a silent scream as he's thrown forward onto his knees. Tears of blood singe furrows beneath the young man’s eyes as they track down his face. His body violently shakes while an ebony froth bubbles from the corners of his mouth.

Kinoe scooted backward in horror, torn between running for help and staying put to make sure the man would survive.

“It … shall be,” Itachi choked out, “as … you’ve … requested my Lord … Hatake.”

Tense moments pass as Itachi clutches at his chest. Suddenly, he wipes at his mouth with the back of his hand and slowly rises to his feet. Gone were the trails of blood which once ran down his cheeks; only thin dark lines remain etched in his skin. A pleasant smile plasters itself across Itachi’s lips as he bows low before Kinoe and turns himself about. Down the stoa was the unsteady clack of his shoes heard; into the house he walked without speaking another word. By the time Kinoe ran to the end of the pathway, the same servant which led him out onto the walkway is trembling behind the glass doors of the study. Fumbling with the latch, the houseman hastily gestures for Kinoe to flee. The slate floors, slick under his soles as he runs and out the wide open front door he bolts. Sprinting down the outside stairs, he hoists himself onto his mount; turning the reins in his hands, he digs in his heels, his mount galloping toward the main gate.

A mile away at the next house on the list, Kinoe has settled himself; with a shaky hand, he scratches a line through Uchiha Itachi’s name.

I hope to the gods the other ones aren’t like that.

Recherché

Taking the bundle of mail from the postman with a smile, Shizune strolled into the Governor’s office intending to take her time sorting at the conference table. “Lady Tsunade! Did you sleep here last night?”
Slowly lifting her head from the desktop, she growled, “Don’t be ridiculous. Knew there’d be a mountain of papers waiting for me so I came in early … that alright with you?”

“Yes, ma’am, it’s just … I didn’t think you had any appointments until this afternoon--”

“I don’t … its gonna take me until then to get through all this … stuff.” Right then, Tsunade buried her head in her hands whimpering, “My god, if I have to sit through one more butt numbing dinner party this week, I’ll tear my hair out!”

“I envy you ma’am … dressed in stylish clothes, evenings of dancing and elegant dining, it all sounds like great fun. Charming foreign men, all of them vying for your attention--”

“All they want is my signature on the dotted line, Shizune. You have no idea what’s it like; choking back a groan every time a drunken ‘translator’ mangles the Japanese language, trying not to yelp in pain when they stomp on my toes as we dance or forcing myself to look interested in whatever the hell they're talking about, when I’d rather be at home curled up with a good book--”

“If it’s any comfort ma’am, those envoys are leaving tomorrow--”

“Yes, but then the Dutch arrive.”

“Milady, why don’t you stretch out on the couch for a while? I’ll go through the paperwork, write up a synopsis of each and--”

“You’d do that for me?”

“Oh course, anything to make light your load, ma’am.”

She rose cautiously from behind the desk casting a forlorn look at the papers lying there and then, a timid glance at her brightly smiling assistant. “Almost bit your head off earlier … sorry, I’m just … so damned tired.”

“I’ll fetch some strong tea and order a light breakfast. You can rest until the afternoon.”

“You’re a dear … thanks. Hope I never have to find out what I’d do without you.”

Recherché

“So it is true, hell must have frozen over last night; that’s the only reason I can think of for a servant of house Hatake to darken our doorstep. What do you want?”

“My Master extends greetings and an invitation to Lord Orochimaru--”

“I’ll see he gets it,” he said reaching out for the card Kinoe held.

“I think not, Kabuto. I was charged to give this directly into your master’s hand. Surely you understand how grievous the penalty for disobeying orders, do you not? Or might it be, you enjoy being your master’s whipping boy?”

The other man smiled, adjusting his spectacles with a bony index finger. “Right you are, Kinoe … on both counts. Follow me.”

The interior of the house was colder than a winter’s morning. Kinoe shivered the entire time they walked along the corridor, half expecting to see his breath in the frosty air. It was even colder as he stepped inside the library.
“Well, well … what have we here,” chuckled Lord Kokucho, “a message from Lord Hatake? Leave us, Kabuto.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

When the door clicked closed, the master of the manor rose from his seat to stand before Kinoe. “Now then, how can I be of service to house Hatake?”

“My Lord has planned an evening of sophisticated entertainment. He’d be most appreciative if you would join him in the festivities—”

"Ah yes, the last soiree of the season. Alas, I am a man of advanced age. Is it his hope I will find fulfillment or happiness in a bride?"

"That, my Lord I do not know. The whims of my Master stretch far beyond the comprehension of a mere servant—"

“Well, I guess it’s never too late for happiness,” he said, stretching out his hand. The moment his fingers touched the card, Kinoe saw the characters transform into a hissing, white, snakelike creature which made a beeline for the center of Orochimaru’s forehead. He too dropped to his knees, as did Lord Itachi. While he clutched his head in pain, Kinoe laughed to himself as the old man said,

“Your wish … my command; so it shall be …my Lord Hatake.”

He gave the other man a moment to collect himself before reaching down to help him stand. “Shall I tell my Lord you will grace us with your presence?”

“Yes… I count it an honor to be among his guests,” Orochimaru said with a graceful bow.

This time, Kinoe walked away with confidence as Kabuto glared daggers into his back.

The same scenario, minus the cold, unfolded when he delivered the invitation to Lord Danzou.

*Now I understand,* he thought as he turned his mount in the direction of the town. *As the ink soaks into their skin, the will of the Master becomes the recipient’s consuming desire.*

*Three down … two to go.*

**Recherché**

Vexed by the stack of Raidou and Aoba’s reports, Ibiki let out an irritated huff when he sunk into his chair. *The hell are these buffoons up to now? Umino, taking meetings with the Governor … the other two spending hours at the Temple twice a week; what, are they studying to become monks or something? And why on earth is the--?*

“Inspector, someone here to see you.”

*Can I never have a moment to myself?* “Door’s open Sakai,” he barked, hiding the reports under another folder.

“So good to see you again sir,” Kinoe said. “Might I come in?”

Leaning his forearm on the desk, Ibiki eyed the other man warily as he stepped forward without bidding. “What can I do for you, Kinoe?”

“Apologize for the intrusion Inspector; do hope I’m not too late.”
“Late for what?”

Proudly he came closer, laying the card atop a stack of papers near Ibiki’s right hand. “This. Lord Hatake asked me to prepare a special invitation for you weeks ago,” he sheepishly said. “I only remembered today because he asked after your response. To spare myself, I told him you’d already said yes. Making such an assumption put me in the wrong; I’m sorry.” Kinoe smiled broadly as the other man’s expression softened. “I could tell him you had to rescind acceptance; what with protecting the influx of emissaries from abroad, my Master would understand. However, I’d be eternally grateful if you didn’t let on how slothful I was about—”

“Gotcha. But me … at a soiree? I’m hardly the high society type.”

“Quiet as its kept, neither is my Lord; he prefers small informal gatherings. Careful Inspector … with the humidity and the viscosity of this new ink, I don’t think it’s completely dry.”

Ibiki whistled as he scooped up the card, “The calligraphy is exceptional … you did this?”

“My skill with the pen is surely the only reason Master keeps me employed—”

“It’s rare to see young people practicing the art nowadays,” he said when one of the characters smudged beneath his fingers. “But I’ve gone and ruined your hard work—”

“Now, now … don’t trouble yourself sir, it’s still legible. Worry not, since I’ll be greeting every guest, your admittance shan’t be hindered.”

Ibiki shook his head, “A huge party with loads of people in fancy dress … I don’t usually go in for that sort of thing.”

“It’s the final party of the season Inspector … I doubt Master will let me talk him into hosting another like this. Several dignitaries are coming from all Four Nations with their security officers … you can always talk shop, exchange ideas—”

“Not exactly an incentive for me to attend—”

“We’ve also booked entertainment not usually seen round these parts; fan dancers from the Land of Earth—”

“Land of Earth, eh? I’ve heard their … spirited gyrations can make deaf men hear and lame men walk.”

“So I’ve been told, that’s why they will be entertaining only in the Master's private salon.” While he was speaking, Kinoe saw the ink glisten and the Inspector's eyes glaze over. The characters slowly lift from the card and crawl up Ibiki's arms while he muttered words insensible. Marching along his shoulders like soldiers, the characters meet at the apex of the Inspector’s head and dive into his scalp.

Unlike the others, there came no strangled cries of allegiance from this man’s lips.

Still transfixed by the card’s effect, he mumbled, “Wouldn’t miss this for the world.” For a moment, Ibiki squeezed his eyes shut, feeling his thoughts shifting about like someone was rearranging furniture inside his head. All the while, his brain was yelling ‘No!’ and yet he heard a ‘Yes!’ leap from his throat.

“You were saying, Inspector?”
Patting the top of his paper covered desk, he found his pen and said, “Tell Lord Hatake I will attend, but I’ve one … small request.”

With the carefully scrawled note in hand and a quick bow, Kinoe turned to leave. “Thank you for your time and most importantly, I thank you for keeping my confession secret.”

Ibiki waved him off, still mesmerized by the tiny card he held.

Hurrying from the constabulary, Kinoe heads for the Administrative Complex. He stands tall inside the conference room awaiting the Governor.

“Ah, you grow more beautiful each time we meet, milady.”

“I’ve just awakened from a nap; my eyes are puffy and there are lines imprinted on my cheek. Remind me to have Shizune schedule an appointment for you with the eye doctor,” she laughed. “Surely you didn’t come all this way to tell me pretty lies; what news have you from Lord Hatake?”

“No, ma’am. I come bearing an invitation to the--”

“We will be so honored to have you among us, ma’am. Why, only yesterday he was saying how much he enjoyed renewing your acquaintance. Perhaps your schedule will permit a quiet dinner with Lord Hatake some other time?”

Kinoe watched in silence as the Governor stood stock still when the characters took wing from the card; some splattered themselves against her Manju-netsuke, others twined about her wrist, drawing her hand to the necklace. “Then again,” she whispered, “I’d hate to miss out on the highlight of the season. Do tell Lord Hatake I will be in attendance, though I will arrive at a later hour.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

Recherché

As Iruka and Izumo dig through another box of notes, Kotetsu stands at the kitchen sink, gutting the morning’s catch. A heavy rap on the front door almost ends in a sliced finger.

“Keep your britches on, I’m coming!” he shouted. Bloody knife in hand, he stomps over and swings wide the door. “Who the hell are you?”

“My name is of no consequence, sir. I am but a servant from house Hatake,” he said as he bowed. “My Lord directs me extend his greetings and an invitation to a soiree in a few days’ time.”

“Soree? What the hell is that?”

“Tetsu, who are you talking to?”

“One of Hatake’s mouthpieces,” he called over his shoulder. “Says we’re invited to a soiree, but he won’t tell me what the hell that is.”

“A party huh?” Izumo said as he walked to the door. “Well, isn’t that neighborly? Pray tell sir, how did you know where to find us?”

“Even the woods hold no secrets from my Master.”
“Yeah?” Kotetsu snapped, "well the woods aint said nothin’ to me about why he’d want us in his house!”

“Mine is not to question, but to do the will of him who sent me.”

“Zumo, Tetsu? What’s going on over there?”

“We’re on the guest list for a party at Hatake manor,” Izumo said.

“Are you Dr. Umino?” Maito asked as he peered over their heads.

"I am. Who might you be?"

“A messenger, charged by my Lord to deliver this into your hands. Will you accept it sir?”

Iruka slowly stood, his eyes questioning as he padded to the door. “Your Master and I are hardly friends. Not sure I understand why he--”

"At the risk of repeating myself, I am but a messenger. I’m sure my Lord will be pleased to answer your questions directly sir.”

Cautiously he slipped between the bridling Kotetsu and the stern-faced servant. The moment he took the card, time stood still. Only Maito could see the characters as they turn into a swirling black mist headed straight for the good doctor’s nostrils. Iruka sucked in a breath and took a step sideways, stumbling against Izumo.

“You alright there buddy?”

“Yeah,” he said hurriedly, “must have tripped over my own feet.” In an instant, he’d recovered his wits as well as his manners. “Tell your Master we graciously accept and will be delighted to attend.”

“You honor my Lord, Dr. Umino. May the remainder of your day be pleasant sirs.”

Kotetsu stood watching the servant trudge off into the woods while the other men took their seats at the table. He shook his head when he heard Iruka say, “Didn’t I tell you the Fates would favor us, Zumo?”

“Hmm, you seemed overeager--”

"Now don't you start--"

“It’s a trap,” Kotetsu said as he closed the door and propped himself against it. “Thanks for dropping us right in the middle of it Ruka.”

"Come on, you’re far too cynical for such a young man. Lady Tsunade has been telling me about this party for weeks; supposed to close out the season with a bang. I hardly think Hatake would go to all that trouble just to capture us--”

“You’re kidding, right? Why invite people into your home that you know wanna kill ya? Who does that?”

“Worry not, Tetsu, with a clean shave and some nice clothes, you’ll blend in with the hoi-polloi. And if you keep your mouth shut … somebody might mistake you for a regular gentleman.”

"Zumo ... you’re about three seconds away from that bust in the chops."
“Okay, knock it off you two. Hatake has been making overtures of peace through the Governor, says he’s anxious to clear the air between us. He probably just wants to pull me to the side, let me know he’s onto us … make a few thinly veiled threats so we’ll back off—”

“Again, I ask, of all the people in this town, why the hell would he invite us?”

“Sometimes, you should listen to your own words,” Izumo said. “Inviting us will prove to the Governor and Inspector that he’s the bigger man, the one willing to make peace with a known enemy. And should we decline the invite … well it’s just plain bad manners. Weren’t you saying we needed to get close to our target?”

“Shut up Zumo.” Straddling the back of his chair, he plopped down with a sigh. “So, that’s it Ruka … we’re just gonna go?”

“Yes and stop waving that knife around please; can’t afford another scar across my nose. We couldn’t have asked for a better opportunity, unless you know of another way to find out where he lives--?”

“No I don’t … damn it! Still think this whole thing is too convenient.”

“Hatake isn’t going to make a scene with a houseful of people as potential witnesses--”

“Yeah, that’s what you said about the tsuya too.”

“Don’t give me that look, Tetsu. Two hours ago, you were the main one trying to convince me to meet him, well … here's our chance. What’s the matter now, you scared?”
Still the Same, Slightly Different

Through every open window gushes the noise of too many men, with too little on their minds and too much time on their hands; their raucous laughter spews forth like a broken sewer main. This, she thinks, is a good thing. When the last two stanzas of a vulgar limerick tickled at her ears, she couldn’t hold back the half smile if she tried. Up the stone stairs, the click of her heels is silenced by the thundering smack of heavy boots running down the stairs; she slips unnoticed into the entryway. Standing upon the threshold, breathing in their merriment, her shoulder brushes against the doorframe when she neatly tucks her arms beneath her bosom. Could have stayed like this for hours, had it not been for the eagle-eyed captain who spotted her.

“This room will come to order,” he yelled. “ATTEN - SHUN!”

To a man, all activity ceases; papers skip off the edges of desks, a pair of dice clumsily clattered against the far wall and a playing card floats on the breeze as the chair a man once sat in crashes to the floor.

“Mornin’ ma’am,” Ryota said, scarcely lifting his eyes from the reports spread before him. “Inspector’s in his office.”

Now is the soft click of kitten heels almost deafening as she walks past the watch commander’s desk with a nod; wending through a crooked blue line of uniforms and faces knocked for six, she accepts the respectful gaze of the men under her ultimate command. At the mouth of the hallway leading to the Inspector’s office, Ryota’s stern voice momentarily breaks her stride.

“Alright, show’s over … find something to do with yourselves.”

Standing outside his office, she took a breath and smoothed down her hair. Reaching for the doorknob, there was slight resistance before it opened of its own accord to reveal a pleasantly surprised Ibiki.

“I was just on my way to your office,” he said, angling his body to the left. She pushed past him with a smile. “Since you’re here, let me see if I can rustle up some tea for—”

“Heavens no… Shizune brewed up a cup of something she claimed was tea before I left; practically had to cut that stuff with a knife and fork. Thanks to her, I’ll be awake for days.”

Before he could close the door and cross the room, she was already making herself comfortable in the chair that sat in front of his desk. “You’ll never guess who paid me a visit this morning.”

“Let’s see. We weren’t dispatched to break up a fight, so I’m guessing it wasn’t Lords Danzou and Orochimaru—”

“Don’t be silly,” she told him fanning herself with the little card. “I received a personal invite to the Hatake gala. I do hope you’ve something suitable to wear. Wouldn’t do for the Governor to show up dressed to the nines on the arm of a bedraggled looking escort.”

“I was thinking of showing up in my regular attire, now I’ll hafta send a dress uniform to the washerwomen.” He plopped down in his seat with a smile, pointing to an identical card laying in the middle of his desk. “Got my own invite.”

“You … willing to attend a party? Okay,” she looked around the room and whispered, “blink once if someone is hiding in the cupboard to club you over the head … twice if you’re being blackmailed—
I'm not that much of an anti-social mope, am I?"

Along with a tight smile as she leaned back, she gave him a look that said, ‘Yeah, you are.’

"Fine, you got me … formal affairs make me break out in hives; normally hafta drag me by the ear, kickin’ and cussin’ to one of these things--"

"So, what happened this time? Wait a minute … Morino Ibiki, are you blushing? That’s rich. I can see it now, the steely Chief Inspector and his dainty, high bred dame, skipping carefree through the meadow lands."

Ibiki regarded her with a grin. “My face is flushed because you’re turning my stomach. Now, if you’re quite finished, the only reason I’m going is because this party thing is a matter of police business.”

“Naturally. How silly of me; you’re already married to your job.”

Ibiki ignored the jab. “I sent a note with Hatake’s man this morning,” he said settling back into his chair and making a bridge of his fingers. "Kinda need his permission to post uniformed men around the estate--"

“Can you beat that? The rumor mill was right for a change. I’d heard government officials from all Four Nations were expected to attend, but don’t those men usually travel with a security detail of their own?”

Again he ignored the question in favor of picking at a callous on his index finger.

“I know you Ibiki … by this time you would’ve already assigned teams and trained them within an inch of their lives. Why would you wait and ask permission so late in the game?”

The line of his jaw tightened when he reached for the invitation. “Protecting the citizens of Konoha ... always been my top priority--”

“You’re full of it! You think Umino is going to sneak in there and try to harm Hatake, don’t you?”

“Umino is psychotic,” he said, running his fingers over the invitation. “He’s a pathological liar too- -”

“No he isn’t. All he needs is somebody willing to hear him out, someone who can listen to his cockamamie stories objectively.” Folding exasperated hands in her lap, she lowered her voice. “Look, I’ve been meeting with him for some time now … he’s coming around to thinking as any reasonable man should--”

“All that proves is he’s a good actor.”

The possibility Iruka suckered her into a web of lies made her brow crinkle. Shaking her head, she insists, “He’s a hairsbreadth away from sitting down with me and Lord Hatake; he honestly wants to work through the misunderstandings between--”

“That’s a waste of your time and his breath most assuredly. Umino suffers from delusions … don’t you see that ma’am?”

“What I see is a man trying to find answers. Hell,” she snapped throwing up her hands, “he and his
friends have even been getting spiritual counsel from the monks, what more proof do you need that he’s--?”

“Yeah,” Ibiki leaned forward to say, “I know all about your secret meetings and their trips to the temple. It’s a smokescreen. Umino’s anger is too old … it runs too deep, and it chaps my ass that he’s been taking advantage of a soft-hearted woman. “Actions,” his fist slammed to the desk, Lady Tsunade, they tell the true tale of a man. Those three sat in your office and made a long, loud pronouncement about wanting to kill somebody in the presence of the Governor and her top law enforcement official no less. Then they skulked off into the woods under the cover of night, like scoundrels.”

“You’ve got men watching them day and night, it’s not as if you don’t know where they are. Have they done anything suspicious?”

“Not yet, but they’ve been out there plotting god knows what. I’m telling you ma’am ... this party is the perfect opportunity to--”

“Oh for god’s sake Ibiki,” she said scooting toward the edge of her chair, “your eyes are glazing over and you’re practically salivating. If you ask me, you’re the one looking and sounding like a crazy man!”

His eyes fell on the invitation, it’s glowing characters giving him strength to speak as he looked up into her eyes. “I don’t care what you say. I’m going to do everything in my power to ship that lunatic and his crackpot friends back to Looneyville--”

“Even if that means bending the law?”

“I’ll bend it to the point of snapping it in half if need be. Whatever its gonna take to get him out of the territory, I’ll do gladly.”

Confused and angry, Tsunade slowly rises, her fingers flying for comfort to the netsuke. “Yes,” she said after a beat, “maybe you are right. Whatever it takes.”

Recherché

“The air inside this home was contaminated this morning … made putrid by the stench of a servant from the Hatake household,” he told those assembled in the study. “From henceforth, let this be understood. I’ll have the head of any member of the Uchiha who dares fraternize or even lifts their eyes toward anyone who bears the name Hatake.”

“How quickly you’ve forgotten our history with the loathsome scions of that house, my child.” With his hands clasped behind his back, he paced along the runner opposite his large family. “Vermin, that’s what they are. Smooth talking thieves!” The veins bulged from his temples as he faced their horrified stares. “Scum … they attempted dishonor upon our name by stealing the virtue of one of our women already promised in marriage. They humbled her;” his lip curled into a sneer as he bit off the words, “polluted the purity of our bloodline, planting their filthy seed in a virgin womb. Forced us to put to death one of our own. We had none other choice … a mother and innocent babe, their lives taken to cleanse ourselves. We would not stand by in silence as the wheels of supposed justice slowly turned. Two brothers of that despicable family dulled the edges of our blades--”

“Please Father, I beg you … speak no more. It was almost two hundred years ago when this took place,” she said above the audible gasps and whispers of her kin. “See now what their folly has
wrought? Their family has dwindled down to a sole survivor, while ours continues to flourish. What political advantages might have been achieved through marriage are now ours by divine right—"

"Ah, my nebbish elder daughter, just returned from receiving an education abroad," Fugaku smiled sweetly as he walked toward her. "Come to me, Suté," he said with outstretched arms. She was less than five steps away from his embrace when he drew his arm across his body and delivered a backhanded slap. His eyes lit up with glee as she staggered into the waiting arms of a sibling. "Spawn of a wife detested, let that serve as a history lesson for a foolish girl and as a reminder to us all. No matter how we wish it so … the passage of time can never blunt fine honed hatred."

Smoothing a hand through stick straight hair of ebony, he composed himself and continued, "You’d do well to learn from the brother who cradles you. Itachi, my son of a wife beloved, he dealt with this agent of iniquity correctly. I watched him hold a knife to the throat of that man’s servant and I heard the servant flee in fear of his life. Violence … it’s the only language the Hatake speak and comprehend. Now, tell us my son, what did Hatake want?"

"He invited me to the upcoming soiree. I summarily refused."

Fugaku drew himself up proudly, cutting his eyes at the young man. "The hell is wrong with your face? Have that seen to immediately … it’s unsightly."

Itachi cast his eyes to the crown of his sniffling sister’s head; patting her back gently he whispered, "As you wish … Father."

**Recherché**

Having done the master's bidding, he heads northwest, along the twisting paths, through the brambles which hope to ensnare him, toward a dilapidated shack leaning against an ancient sugi tree. A withered old man dressed in ragged brown robes lifts his cane in greeting as Maito approached.

"Knew you’d come," he grinned. "The animals told me. They sense your presence better than I can these days … frightens them it does."

"My Master seeks a report. What news shall I take back to him?"

"Come," the old man beckoned, "I’ve prepared a special treat--"

"My Lord charged me to take nothing away from this place save your words--"

"Very well, but you must come inside … the trees have ears."

Maito closely followed behind him, up the weather-beaten stairs, carefully turning his body sideways to navigate broad, moss covered steps which lead downward into the surprisingly vast belly of the hovel where the shaman dwelt. Sunlight blinds him as it beams through cracks in the lean-to shed walls, though it didn’t prevent him from seeing the moderately sized chemist’s workshop, a fully functional kitchen and the facilities for bathing as he descends the stairs. He perches on a smooth tree stump situated before a massive table hewn from stone.

"Before I speak," the old man husked, "one favor I ask, that mine eyes might behold your beauty."

It was always this way; the price for information, the shaman desiring to bask in the powerful aura of his beastly form. Maito shook himself, enjoying the freedom which came by throwing off the prison of his human flesh. How good it felt when sharp incisors slickly punctured through his gums, when his hands became paws and when the growls from his lips were interpreted as words without having to formulate a language foreign in his own ears.
“Ah … you look exactly like your father. How I miss him.”

The beast gestured for the old man to take a seat across the table from him.

“Been almost a century since it happened last,” the shaman began. “The entrails prophesied its certain return.” From a fold in his garment, came a tattered celestial scroll. Smoothing it over with his hand, milky eyes search for a particular image. “There … three nights from now … the dispersed light from all the earth’s sunrises and sunsets will fall across the face of the moon, bathing it in the color of blood. You understand what this means, don’t you?”

Maito nodded.

“The power of your master will increase tenfold each night as it draws near. Each night this month, the spirits of the Hatake have torn me from my rest … they call to me. Inside ossuary chests of ivory, the bones of the Hatake quake and rattle, crying out to their only living descendant for swift redress. I beg of you Maito … prevent him from veering off the path, for with great power, there is great vulnerability. There is one who lurks in the thickets, a snake, seeking to attenuate the wolf--”

“Though it may bruise the great silver wolf’s paw, the head of the snake will be crushed under foot.”

“The entrails also shew forth something most fearful. Glowing stones, hidden in hollowed trees, snares ripe to spring, bound and shining in the brooks … stumbling blocks--”

“These snares … you will direct me to them--”

“No my son … I cannot. They represent profound harm to beings such as yourself and the Master. But a mortal I will surely guide.”

“Then shall I dispatch one to destroy them.” Maito abruptly stood, his human form and clothing reappearing as he walked toward the hovel’s stairs. Catching hold of a bloody burlap sack, he flung it over his shoulder. “Your fee squirms.”

Out into the sunlight, once more he heads deeper into the woods to collect other of the Master’s invited guests.

Recherché

The smell of his pipe tobacco walked in before he did. “Top of the morning to ya Ryota.”

“You’re obnoxiously chipper Genma … that can only mean you gotta houseful of the dearly departed--”

“Nah, dead around my place … get it?”

“I’m doubled over with laughter on the inside. State your business please.”

“Well, just got in a shipment from England; fresh off the boat … latest medical journals and other science stuff, you wouldn’t understand.”

“Alright, now that you’ve insulted my intelligence, what else can I do for ya?”

Genma rubbed at his neck when he leaned down. “Might need a little help with this stuff.”

“Longshoremen open crates, constables do not. So, unless your shipment contains the report Ibiki’s been looking for, feel free to move along.”
“Sure thing. That slicked up lieutenant, you know … mounted patrolman, brown hair, big smile … he workin’ today?”

Ryota scooted his chair back to flip through the duty roster behind his desk. “He should be coming in from patrol shortly. You need him why?”

“My parcel from London is filled with twenty bottles of brand new embalming compounds; ordered ‘em over a month ago” he grinned. “Damned if they didn’t print the instructions in English.”

“Yes, damn them. I’ll send the lieutenant round after he checks in. Oh, and Genma, I’m warning you. Wait until he arrives before you go mucking about with those things. That’s all I need today, some impatient jackass blowing up something.”

“Heh, you only make that mistake once, am I right? Shame though … aint got nary a body to test the effectiveness of—”

“Don’t look at me when you say that undertaker—”

“Oh … heya Inspector!”

“Coroner Shiranui, I’ve no time for idle chitchat,” he snapped.

Oblivious to Ibiki’s temperament, Genma proceeded to blather on. “Just tellin’ Ryota about a package from England. Make my job a lot easier providing I figure out how to use the stuff. You’re lookin’ a little peaked Inspector; eating well, getting enough rest? You should be, I mean, been awful quiet round here lately, envoys behaving themselves, no drunken brawls, no violent crimes—”

“It’s almost been too quiet … makes me very nervous.” Suddenly Ibiki was standing inches from the stunned Coroner. Looking down at him, Ibiki whispered, “I promise, you won’t like me very much when I get nervous, Genma.”

“Yeah … um, right,” he said taking a step backward, “gotcha. Think I’ll just uh, wait in my shop for your man—”

“Good idea. Ryota … a word,” Ibiki said as he turned away from them. “Now, damn it!”

He rounded the corner of his desk quickly, pushing the stunned mortician toward the door, but by then, the Inspector was halfway across the room. He had to assume a light jog to catch up with his boss. “Whoa … slow down, will ya?” Ibiki stepped to the side as the other man wheezed. “Not as young as I used to be ... what’s your hurry?”

“Two things. I’m heading to the magistrate’s office now and then … to Hatake manor. While I’m gone, you’re going to assemble three teams of ten men each. Ten from mounted patrol and ten from foot patrol. Aoba and Raidou will lead a team of eight.”

“What’s the job, when do they report and to whom?”

“Twenty will monitor the grounds of Hatake’s estate, the others will work undercover inside the house on the night of the soiree. Have them report to me here, at four o’clock this afternoon.”

“Alrighty, anything else they should know?”

“You’ll provide the teams with descriptions of Umino and his friends. I want those three arrested on sight. Should they be stupid enough to resist, I’m authorizing the use of force.”
“What we gonna charge ‘em with?”

“That’s what me and the magistrate are gonna figure out.”

Cold, dead eyes bored into his when he gripped Ibiki by wrist. “You serious? Those young men haven’t done anything to merit arrest--”

“Hands off Watch Commander Takenaka! If you think it too much trouble to execute a direct order, I’ll hafta find somebody else for your position!”

Ryota and those assembled, stood dumbfounded as Ibiki stormed toward his office; not long after, the station house cleared out in the snap of two fingers. Still, Ryota stood in place, betrayed and bewildered when the Inspector brushed past him the second time. Only when the door to the constabulary slammed closed did he come to his senses. And as he walked back to his desk, he thought,

*This is the Governor’s dirty work ... it's the only reasonable explanation. Why would she make him do something like this?*

**Recherché**

As the morning sun climbed higher, there came the rap of a cane against the front door of Kokucho manor. “Greetings, lord Danzou; my master is expecting you. He’s in the conservatory … shall I accompany you, sir?”

"Won't be necessary, Kabuto. I know the way."

Danzou took his time as thoughts of betrayal and grievances long past, flooded his mind with each step as he drew closer to music room. *This corridor ... it's like an oven. Must be coming down with something. Yes, that's it ... a fever. I'll ask after some ginger tea once I get there.*

The strains of a violin, its chords melancholy wrap around his body as he played. Halted mid tune, Orochimaru stills the bow, laying the instrument down upon its resting place, he walked toward the bay windows overlooking the garden. *For the better part of twenty years have I known him, yet this very morning, he is as a stranger to me. Each time his cane strikes the floor anger seethes in my bones. What hell is this? “Impressively late for our weekly game of Shogi, lord Danzou,” he said turning at the sound of the door opening. “Savor these moments while you can, for today is your defeat certain.”*

“Hah! Chance of that would be a fine thing. Nevertheless, you’ll find I am as always, a gracious victor. Why, I’ve already decided to let you tag along with me to the most ostentatious social event of the season.”

“Did you now?” Orochimaru said as he strode over the gaming table. “Your generosity knows no bounds, yet,” he picked up the card Kinoe delivered, “I won’t need your charity in this instance either.”

“You’ve received an invitation as well. Splendid. I was just thinking … this gathering may prove itself worth our time. It behooves us to strike an alliance with Hatake and those from the Four Nations; we stand to make an extortionate amount of money from them and the West.”

“Careful lord Danzou, greed is rearing its ugly head; always admired that about you,” he laughed as his friend sat opposite him. “Our interests in the silk and wool trade alone will certainly allow one of us to buy our way into the seat of power over the territory. And if we can force that Senju woman to levy higher taxes on Konoha’s exported goods, we will have more money than the gods--”
“Did I hear you correctly? I thought you said, ‘allow one of us to buy our way into the seat of power’; whom did you mean?”

“Why should such a thing matter between two old friends? That Senju woman will have to nominate one of us as her successor at some point, the other will serve as his executive consultant. Either way, we win.”

“Yes … how I do enjoy winning.” But before I let you assume a position meant for me, he thought, your blood, and that of your prissy little manservant, will drip from my sword and taint the earth.

“Tea?”

“Please … it smells enchanting.”

“A new blend … Kabuto insisted on ordering from London. Now, then the board is set. I’ll even let you move first this time.” With a crooked smile did Orochimaru watch the other man drag his pawn one space. ‘Executive consultant’, yes, comfort yourself into the grave with that idea, he thought. As if I’d ever bow my knee to you. I’ll have your head stuffed and mounted above my desk as a warning to any who’d dare cross the new head of the territory. “To victory,” he said raising his cup and saluting his soon to be deceased friend.

“Yes,” said Danzou, “here’s to us and a long, profitable future.”

Recherché

“Iruka … what are you doing?”

“Taking notes … what it’s look like I’m doing?”

“Hmm,” he mumbled holding back a laugh, “you seem a little … distracted.”

“Far as I can tell, you’re the only distraction in the room.”

“You know, Tetsu isn’t going to stay angry with you forever … he’ll be back.”

“I know Zumo.”

“Not distracted, huh?” He reached over and rattled the pen against Iruka’s tea cup. “You’ve been trying to write with your spoon for the last few minutes--”

“Damn it,” he muttered fishing his pen from the cup, “that’s the second one this week.” Pushing the books aside, Iruka stretched his arms above his head letting them collapse at his sides. “Been thinking about this the past few days … Father’s notes. What if can’t kill Hatake … would that be such a bad thing?”

“I’m thinking the answer to that is … yes?”

“All this time, my focus was on avenging Father’s death and now … I don’t know how I feel.”

“This is your first attempted murder after all … hesitancy is to be expected--”

“Don’t do that, I’m serious.” He leaned forward, elbows on the table, entwined fingers supporting his chin. “What if everything I thought I knew is wrong? I mean, what if the ramblings of a deranged mind lead me to kill an innocent man?”
“Innocent? Hatake? The hell Iruka? You were standing right there the night Sakumo died, the same night that creature jumped through the study window. You saw it!”

“I know I did, but … it’s just--”

“The idea of killing someone or something, doesn’t sit right with you. Trust me, I understand. I’m not comfortable with it either, so I try not to dwell on it. Still, we both know if we don’t do it, that thing is going to keep on killing--”

“Zumo,” he whispered cradling his head in his hands. “I’m … afraid. Keep having nightmares about facing Hatake and not being able to do him in. What if it’s true … what if I really can’t?”

“And what if a frog had wings, he wouldn’t bump his butt when he jumps, would he? But the frog has learned not to bump his butt.”

“What?”

Izumo patted him on the shoulder, “For a minute, don’t listen to me as a relative or even as a friend; listen to me as a doctor. You haven’t slept well since we got here, that affects your ability to think clearly. You refuse to eat properly and you haven’t been maintaining an adequate fluid level per day; even moderate dehydration, slows judgment, makes you second guess yourself or fret about things that haven’t happened. We’ve been going through all this stuff, meeting with the monks, gathering information and you’ve been trying to keep your stories straight. You’ve got eleventy million things weighing on your shoulders, that makes you anxious and ill tempered.”

“You trying to say I’m a basket case?”

“I’m sayin’ if you if you maintain this pace, you will be. So, here’s what we’re gonna do. First, box up these notes and get them out of our sight … just for today. We’re gonna get out of this cabin, take a little exercise and get some sun. I’ll gather some herbs for a sleeping draught while we’re out in the woods and tonight you’re going to eat well even if I that means I hafta cram the food down your throat. Later, after dinner and a few glasses of wine, you’re gonna take a warm bath and get a good night’s sleep. Sound like a plan?”

Iruka pushed away from the table clapping Izumo on the shoulder when he stood. “Some friend you are. How long were you going to sit there laughing at me while I tried to take notes with a teaspoon?”

“I'm a wonderful friend, thank you and you have to admit ... it was pretty funny."

"Now I'm your laughingstock … wonderful."

"Be grateful, buddy; I haven’t prepared the bill for my services yet. And while you're shopping at the indebted store, thank your lucky stars I’m not as devious as you; if I ever told Tetsu about this … you’d never live it down.”

Notes:

Psychotic: a person who has lost touch with reality.

Nebbish: a pitifully ineffectual, luckless and timid person.

Attenuate: to lessen the force or magnitude of.
Suté: “forsaken foundling.” This name remained common until the end of the 19th century. It was granted via an old custom. If a family had several children die in succession shortly after birth, the next child born (a girl, preferably) had to be exposed. The babe was carried by a servant to a lonely place in the fields and left there. Then a peasant, or other person, hired for the occasion appears and pretends to find the babe; the hired person carries the babe back to the parental home. It was desirable that the one who ‘finds’ the babe be no kin to the family. The child is then received and named “Suté.” It was supposed that this method of recovery would thwart the unseen influences which caused the deaths of the other children.
Recherche: Patience Rewards One

In a warehouse near the wharf, longshoremen winch up the last four crates and haphazardly deposit them into the bed of a wagon. As they walk away, unblinking eyes peer through the slats, surveying what they could of their surroundings. From a ruck in his garments the stowaway retrieves a small scroll, carefully unfurling it across his stomach.

“It will be tomorrow morning before I can move freely,” he whispers.

“Go now my friends.”

Recherché

Hours wasted on a victory so hollow it echoed in his soul.

Precisely three and a half days to execute an arrest warrant obtained by bribery and threats.

In his hand, a piece of paper light as a feather. The trumped-up charges hidden within a labyrinth of legalese … the life and reputation of an innocent man soon to be ruined, made its weight as a cinder block. It’s enough to hold ’em till the Advisory Council can sign deportation orders, he thought passing through the halls of the magistrate’s office. Matter of time before he starts flapping his gums, making public this ridiculous crusade. I don’t understand. My head and gut are telling me this is the right way, yet I’m ill at ease.

Once outside in the fresh air, contrary winds refused to let him light the cigar he’d earlier stashed away. Instead he ground it between his teeth chomping down on its end and sucking out as much nicotine as he could.

If this full moon passes without another murder, it will prove Umino the nutcase I said he was.

But if we wind up with another victim, I'm back to square one. Damn it!

Recherché

Leaving the constabulary, she'd walked home in a daze. On familiar turf, her thoughts clear as she hurries to the cellar, cutting through veils of cobwebs to reach the large dust covered cedar chests.

She tore through their contents like a woman possessed.

Prize found, she collected herself and headed out the door for the short jaunt back to her workaday world. She looked a fright and knew it, politely ignoring the confused stares of the citizenry as she came her way through the crowded streets. The cool, sweet scented air of the Administrative complex calmed her; refusing conversation with the staffers, she rushed to her private office. Flinging open the door, she was greeted with a sight that took her breath away. Straight ahead, in the center of a tidy desk was an elegant vase filled with fresh cut yellow roses. To her left at the conference table, a startled Shizune turned in her seat.

“I didn't expect you back so soon, ma’am. The other excerpts are on your desk, just finished the last one.”

Leaning against the door Tsunade thought, Yes, it was all worth it.
"If you don't need me for anything else here, ma'am," she said clearing off the table, "I'll go lay out your clothes and draw a bath for you."

"Now that you mention it, there is something else," Tsunade slyly said as she walked toward the table. "My intended escort for the party of the season, will be otherwise engaged that evening--"

"Milady, fear not, we've enough time to find someone suitable. I'll tend to it personally--"

"No need, I already have the perfect person in my line of sight and by that, I mean, you Shizune."

A rapid blush spread over her assistant's cheeks as she hid a smile behind her hand, "Surely you jest ma'am. I wouldn't know how to comport myself at one of those things; I've no idea what to discuss with those people--"

"Nonsense, you deal with nobility and dignitaries daily and quite well--"

"But Lady Tsunade, a fancy party is a completely different setting. I'll be out of my depth--"

"Then dig deeper. All you need do is smile pretty, say very little and dance the night away. You'll be the toast of the party, an elegant woman of mystery."

"I'm flattered, but I have no formal kimono and I've no idea what to do with my hair--"

"My hairdresser loves a challenge … you'll be her guinea pig and crowning achievement. As for a kimono … here," she said sliding the package across the table. "My grandmother commissioned this for my coming of age ceremony. That thing hasn't seen the light of day in over forty years … shame to let it disintegrate inside a cedar chest. Go on, open it."

"A furisode made for nobility," she mumbled as nervous fingers skip over delicate paper wrappings, "I couldn't possibly--"

"Too late to pass it on to a daughter I haven't got so you will accept it," she insisted easing into the chair opposite her assistant. "Oh, for heaven sakes, unwrap the damn thing already!"

"Goodness ma'am … it's beautiful."

"Naturally … my grandmother was a woman with excellent taste. I was too scared to tell her those delicate peach and yellow colors never would've looked right on me," she said with a smile. "I envy you, Shizune. See how well it complements your skin tone?"

"You said you never wore it, why?"

"Didn't have a say in the matter," she gestured to her ample bosom, "forces of nature took over. Two weeks before it was finished, I uh, started blossoming. My dressers had a hell of a time to be sure. They tried using binders, but they only constricted my breathing … kept fainting and falling over before I could properly get the damn thing on."

They shared a laugh and then Shizune suddenly bowed her head to the table. "I don't think I have the words to thank you for--"

"Good, that means you won't interrupt me. I've got another situation … not sure you can help me with this one though." Leaning back in her seat, she folded her hands in her lap saying, "I don't know what came over me, let myself get talked into something I don't agree with--"

"Ma'am you can't back out now, members of the Council and the heads of every clan will be--"
"Not that dreadful party tonight ... this has to do with Ibiki. I’m don’t know if he’s bored or just needs to vent his frustrations at the cathouse, but he’s harboring some sort of vendetta against Dr. Umino."

“We both know the Inspector never suffered fools--”

“Dr. Umino is no fool. And as strange as everything he told us was, something deep within me knows he spoke the truth.”

"Ma’am," she said quietly as she shifted in her seat, “you really believe there are such things as monsters and evil spirits?"

“I’ve lived long enough to know there are things in this world logic, science or even religion can’t explain. When foreigners like that damned Commodore Perry and his warships forced this great land to open her borders to the West, our own people stood and cried out in the streets. 'We must take the initiative, they shouted, 'for we can dominate, but if we do not, we will be dominated.' Now the West is twisting our arms to trade pieces of our identity and heritage for the sake of modernity and money. As the first of the Five Great Nations to entertain talks of trade, Konoha has violated the will of our ancestors; for that, I believe we now suffer the consequences of a curse."

"My mother says the same thing, milady."

"No way round it," she said when she stood. "As another full moon will be upon us shortly, I'll have to pay a visit to the temple, atone for our sins--"

“Now? But Lady Tsunade … your appointment--""

"I’m not going right this minute, Shizune … first, I need to find Ibiki before he does something stupid."

Recherché

Seconds away from dismounting, at the sound of thundering hooves, he looked up; Mayonaka's mane fluttered the wind as another constable and his mount galloped beside them. Crap! This can't be good. Drawing to a halt before him Saki panted, “Civilian patrols just turned in a report ... watch commander thought you'd wanna get in on this.”

“What now?"

“The forest ...more bones, a lot of ‘em. Already notified the Coroner, he’s readying a wagon.”

Looking to the hills Ibiki thought, By the time we get done up there, it'll be early evening. Paperwork will take another coupla hours once I get back. Maybe Hatake will send a runner and I won’t hafta pay him a visit after all.

He was all for leaving Genma behind and probably would have, but as he put one foot into the stirrup and threw his other leg over, the Governor was exiting the Administrative complex.

“Inspector!”

“Ma’am?"

“Hold on a minute. We need to talk. This thing with Dr. Umino, it’s--”

“Sorry, milady … we’ve an urgent matter--”
“I’ll wait for the Coroner sir … ma’am,” Sakai said as he bowed his head to the Governor. “We’ll catch you up.”

“Ibiki, what’s going on?”

“Active crime scene in the woods,” he leaned down to whisper, “more bones.”

“Oh my god … and just when things were going so well. Brief me first thing in the morning.” She grabbed at Mayonaka’s reins and looked Ibiki in the eye. “Promise me, you’ll do nothing to Dr. Umino until then.”

“You have my word,” was the lie he told while sliding the warrant inside his breast pocket. “I will do nothing further, ma’am.”

Recherché

As sun sets on the first evening of the fourth week, Iruka and friends relax around the table in their cabin; as grinning translators try her patience, Lady Tsunade holds back on her alcohol consumption and Ibiki, now returned from the scene, is up to his eyeballs in paperwork.

“Last one, Inspector.”

“Ryota … come in, sit down. You been avoiding me since I got back. Can’t say I blame you.”

“You get strange when the town is quiet for too long,” he said when he plopped down in the chair before the desk. “Message received.”

“No,” he said laying down his pen, “there was no excuse for raising my voice to you in front of the men--”

“Yeah, well putting the fear of Morino in ‘em … always a good thing. Figured out what to do with Umino yet?”

“Got a warrant in my pocket,” he said with a sigh.

“You think by holding them, we won’t have a ninth victim?”

“Kinda hope so.”

“I don’t know if this is the right course of action, Ibiki. Umino might be a help to us if we work with him versus throwing him in the slammer. But, if you insist on doing it, we can always drop the charges if they prove their claims.”

“No way in hell they can prove anything, Ryota.

Either way it goes, they’ll be outta my hair and the territory in a week, tops.”

Recherché

Later that evening on winding dusty road, the gentle rolling motion of the ox cart, might have lulled him to sleep if they hadn’t hit a dip in the road. He let out a tiny yelp when his head bumped against the crate.

“You hear something?”

“Probably my stomach growling,” laughed the driver of the cart. “Aint ate nothing since this
“Same here, Daisuke. Been wicked busy, what with the factories taking on extra workers. I try to take it in stride though ... this trade thing is gonna make us all rich.”

“Pull your head outta your ass, Satoshi. Little guys like us aint gonna see much difference in pay. They'll work us to death for next to nothing and we'll be glad to lap up the crumbs they throw us. Tell ya what, this is the last delivery of the night; silk farm’s up ahead. I say we leave this stuff in the barn, slip the invoice under the door and beat feet.”

“Sounds good to me.”

So that’s where we’re headed, thought the stowaway. The wagon picked up the pace, jostling him about for another ten minutes or so. They stopped with a screech and suddenly his accommodation shifted. Unceremoniously dumped to the ground, he waited until they left before cutting a small square in the crate’s side. Squeezing himself through it with a grunt, he slowly stood; sneaking out of the barn, he ran toward the safety of the nearby woods. Once certain he hadn't been seen, the young man whistled for the scouts.

In an instant, four small black forms silently speed through the tall grasses.

Under the light of the moon, these rodent like creatures surround the scroll which lay on the ground before the young man.

“Located them already have you?

What’s that? At least a two-day journey, a wolf like being on the prowl and the police?

Hmm … best I stay put until all the reports come back from your brothers.”

Notes:

1 Quote from Shimazu Nariakira, a Japanese feudal lord of the Edo period. He was renowned as an intelligent and wise ruler who was keenly interested in Western learning and technology.

Furisode: "swinging sleeves." A kimono worn by young unmarried women; usually decorated with a color pattern that fully covers the entire garment. The longer the sleeves, the more formal the garment.

Daisuke: “great helper.”

Satoshi: "clear thinking; quick witted."
Recherche: Patience Rewards Two

WARNING: Descriptions of flesh eating and non con.

At Hatake manor …

his presence pervasive in this wing of the house; the lingering scent in the air bespoke his power, left purposely as a warning. The early arrival meant he’d be in for a time of scrutiny, thus he prepared himself. This last duty, self-imposed and unnecessarily tedious, ate up more time than expected. And though it would never be as crisp as that other servant’s, it would suffice his purposes. Pleased with himself, he walked quickly from his quarters. Only a few minutes remained in which to clean the hearth, build a fire and set out master’s brandy. But as he approached the salon he could tell … someone had beaten him to it.

Standing in the center of the room, his eyes closed, he took a deep breath, filtering out the scents still trapped inside these four walls. Master was already there, seated in his usual chair. Damn it!

He strode over quietly. Bowing before his Lord, he laid the packet on the table between the chairs and made himself comfortable at master’s right hand.

“Running behind, are we?”

"Pardon my liege."

"What have we here?” The parchment crinkled when Master gathered it up. "Last time I saw a task completion list, the Buddha was in knee britches. Were you hoping to impress Jiraiya?"

Maito hung his head mumbling, “Yes my Lord.”

“Ah … that explains why you so readily humbled yourself at my feet.”

“Lord Jiraiya was a harsh taskmaster, he demanded I remember my place and show reverence at all times.”

“Humph, well that was one lesson you haven’t forgotten. Alas, I’ve been a wretchedly lenient Master, treating you as a confidant rather than a servant, I corrupted all your years of strict training--”

“Never let it be said my Lord. The fault is mine … I allowed myself to grow too familiar--”

“Maito, you never cease to amuse me, but as I have no intention of continuing conversation with the back of your head, rise and take your usual seat. Worry not, Jiraiya isn’t here to shake his finger at either of us.”

“Thank you, Master.”

“I’m certain he may call upon you at some point, but I doubt we’ll see much of him until the night of the gala. He came bearing a gift most precious; the second ingredient. After he spoke with me briefly, he dropped his bag in my father’s bedchambers and headed straight for the tertiary ritual grounds.”

“What good news my Lord, all that remains is collection of the sacrifice.”

“Tis true, that time draws nearer. Now then,” he said squinting at the parchment, “I see here the
constables made quite a mess out there.”

“I will secure the area at once- -”

“No doubt Jiraiya has already erected a kekkai around the sacred grounds to throw the constables into confusion and erase the memory of its location from their minds. Here now,” he said uncorking the decanter, "let us drink a toast. The workmen packed up their belongings for the final time less than two hours ago; my home shall enjoy rest for a few days and all else is going according to plan.”

Having flung the parchment into the fire, they watch it burn as the mantle clock ticks away the quiet minutes while Master and servant sit absorbed in their thoughts.

“So, how fares my chosen?”

“Dejected, my Lord …her heart is estranged from her family; she sits alone in her room, pining for your call.”

“And what of the other one?”

“Alas, his mind and spirit remain strong, but this very night will his dreams begin eating away at his confidence.”

“Excellent. Konoha is already mine and with Umino’s assistance, I shall rule supreme over the Five Great Nations.”

Running sweaty palms over cloth covered thighs, Maito turned to the master saying, “My Lord … may I speak freely?”

“Drink first … then speak.”

He reached for the snifter, nodded his thanks and drained it in one greedy gulp. And as he slowly lowered the glass to the table he said, “The shaman spoke of a snake in the thicket who will silently rise up to attenuate the wolf.”

“What need have I of a wife to pace the floors and wring her hands in worry, when I have you? Even as we speak, the Yasha are making replicas of the amulets described by our agents; the morrow’s dawn will see them returned to their places of secret. We have people working for us on the inside of the Temple … they will take care of the remaining talismans.”

“Yes my Lord, however, Umino still holds several in his possession.”

“May he enjoy his presumed triumph,” he said pouring another glass for his servant. “I will leave the retrieval of those worthless trinkets to my special guests. I trust Kinoe is acclimating them?”

"Last I saw, they'd been bathed and placed in the holding cells while Kinoe attempted to teach them something called etiquette."

"There you see, fret not Maito. The wolf has sinews of iron, able to withstand the jaws of an enfeebled snake, strong enough to snap the fangs off any serpent foolish enough to strike.”

“It is as you say, my Lord.”

“You’ve done well, and now shall you be at liberty. Six hours I grant you … go, eat your fill.”

The collar slipped from his neck as he scrambled from the chair and knelt before his Master. “You are most gracious, my Lord.”
“No Maito, I am wise. These next days are crucial … I cannot allow hunger’s pangs to drive you to
distraction.”

Recherché

Through the woods, he struggled to maintain his human form as the scent of his prey wafted about
him. There he stood, alone, relieving himself outside a tavern near the docks. Maito crushed a fallen
branch beneath his boot as he approached him.

“Hey!” the other man slurred, “don’t I know you? Yeah … finished work at your house today.
Lemme tell ya pal, it was a real bitch. You come to buy us drinks have ya?”

“No, Hiroaki … but this is a celebration nonetheless, a reward, just for you. I’d like to have you for
dinner,” he said with a smile.

“Okay by me,” he said staggering closer to where Maito stood. “Need something to soak up the
rotgut in my stomach anyway.”

“It’s settled. I know of an out of the way eatery, just beyond the mills. They serve the most unusual
delicacies … raw liver seasoned with cheap alcohol, for example … quite tasty.”

“Begging your pardon Mister, that sounds disgusting; none for me thanks.”

“Well, there are countless tidbits for every appetite at this diner. I’m sure we’ll find something that
will go right up your alley.”

“Lead on then.”

After they’d walked for a while, Hiroaki grabbed him by the elbow. “Hey, uh Mister … I know I'm
a little tipsy, but I think we’re going in the wrong direction. The mills,” he pointed drunkenly,
"they're over that way.”

“No, I assure you we’re on the correct path, just a little further.”

“Look pal, I know these woods like the back of my hand and I'm telling ya, if we keep going, we’re
gonna wind up in the middle of the woods.”

“Precisely. No one will hear your screams out there.”

"Eh? What’s there to scream about?” He turned to see Maito’s eyes, yellow with black slits. “What
the … what the hell are you?”

“A wolf, Hiroaki … a very hungry wolf.”

The other man sobers quickly and takes off on a stumbling run into the forest; Maito allows him the
head start, grinning as he watches him trip and fall several times. But out there in the woods, lupine
howls ring about him, boxing him in and forcing him toward a clearing as he frantically searches for
a way out.

“Welcome to my private diner,” Maito said as he stood behind him. “And would you look at this, my
meal is presented hot and sweaty, just the way I like it.”

Hiroaki turned at the voice. “The foreman put you up to this didn’t he? I cussed him out in the
tavern and now he’s sent you to frighten me. Alright, take off that stupid mask, you’ve had your fun.
I pissed my pants too … ya happy now?”
“Not just yet,” he said flinging the hapless man against the spiny bark of a tree near the weald; with a swipe of his powerful claws, Hiroaki’s shirt is ripped from his body.

“Hey now, you’re taking the joke too far. Stay back!”

“Afraid I couldn’t stay away if I tried. The smell of your corpulence and the sound of the blood rushing in your veins beckons me closer.” Another swipe of his paws tears Hiroaki’s pants to shreds.

“Should have known, you were standing there, watching me piss … you’re some kinda freak aren’t ya?”

Maito clucked his tongue and shook his head. “Insulting the one who holds you captive,” he said as he transformed before the frightened eyes of his prey. “Extremely poor judgment old man.”

Roughly turned about and slammed face first into the tree, searing pain burns through his bowels as something hot, barbed and harder than steel forces itself inside his body, ripping him apart. “It is unwise to struggle. You cannot escape me and the pain will not lessen,” Maito husked against his ear. “You will bear it … mayhaps it will be over soon.”

Tears ran down his cheeks as the beast rutted into him. He prayed that he might lose consciousness, that this memory would not follow him to hell, to no avail. Desperate, he screamed louder, hoping someone might come to his rescue. In return, it seemed the howls which drove him to this place were coming closer.

At last, a grunt of completion sounded behind him and the beast flung him to the center of the clearing.

“Now that I’ve worked up an appetite,” Maito grinned as he stood over him, “I think I’ll start with something small and chewy.” He bent down and ripped Hiroaki’s erect penis from its root. “Yes, this should do nicely. And these” he said, yanking at his testes, “these will provide an interesting texture.”

Popping the morsels into his mouth, the bleeding man watched tiny trails of blood gush out and drip along the maws of the beast. After swallowing down the tasty treats, he said, “Why, Hiroaki, providing a fountain of red sauce for my entrée of ribs,” laughing now, Maito’s paw tore through his chest, “how thoughtful.”

The last sounds Hiroaki hears as he begins his descent into eternal flames, was the cracking of bones, the tearing of muscle and cartilage to suck out the marrow; the last sight Hiroaki sees is of several monsters gathered about him, pieces of his flesh dangling from their sharpened teeth.
Dawn ... three days before the event of the season.

No sooner than the master of the manor retired to his chambers, the summons, not unexpected, went forth. Disconcertment frustrates every movement as he adjusts his clothing, it punctuates every footfall when he hurriedly leaves his quarters. The east wing from whence he came slowly brightens as the sun begins her ascent; crossing the span above the foyer, hesitantly does he stand on the border of darkness that is the west wing.

*No*, he thought, *couldn't be that. I had my Lord's permission, returned before the set time and left nothing behind.*

Down the hall and to the right he sees the door to Lord Sakumo’s bedchamber slightly ajar.

“You wished to see me Master Jiraiya?” he called peering around the room.

“In the library,” responded a pleasant baritone voice. “Come through.”

Three steps inside, he paused to slick down his hair; the heels of his hands smoothing down his clothing once more. To his left, the door leading to the library was cracked open a mite; a deep breath did nothing to calm him as he passed through to the other room. Lambent illumination of fifty candles bathes this massive space in yellow orange light, and there, standing before a floor to ceiling bookcase the broad back of the fabled albino wolf presents itself. Spiky waist length hair gathered in a low tail sweeps around the man as he turns. Dark grey eyes smile as he speaks; the red fang-like marks etched into the skin under them, had grown in length since Maito saw him last.

“You’re looking well. Please,” he gestured broadly to the lone chair in the center of the room, “have a seat.”

Maito kept his eyes on the tall, huskily built, fair skinned man as he carefully replaced the book he’d been thumbing through.

“My, my ... how old are you now son?”

Knowing this might be a trick question, he considered for long moments before answering. “I am nigh unto three hundred and twenty years sir.”

The other man chuckled softly, “Still a pup then. And when was the last time you paid respects to the Hatake ancestors?”

Hands on his knees, Maito leaned forward saying, “I am shamed. Often time, other duties prevent me from joining the master as he kowtows to them. For the last fifty years, Master has attended upon this duty alone.” He sensed the scowl on Jiraiya's lips as he bowed lower. “I see," he heard him say. "That explains everything. Maito, look at me."

Expecting a well-deserved slap across the face, the seated man lifted himself slowly to see Jiraiya still standing by the bookcase.

"When Lord Kakashi became head of clan Hatake, his duties and responsibilities increased fivefold. Why haven’t yours?”

The weight of Jiraiya’s critical eye left him fumbling for an answer suitable. “I … I do not
"After speaking with our Lord yesterday afternoon, I came here, to the fore father's place of rest. Tell me young one," he said slowly walking to the place Maito sat, "what are your first considerations as a bond servant?"

He promised himself not to flinch or cry out if buffeted. "My first considerations are the health and well-being of my Master, sir."

"When you were servant to the heir," he said stepping to Maito’s left side, "that would have been the correct response." Walking behind the wary man, Jiraiya continued, "but now are you the right hand to the current Lord Hatake. More than catering to his whims or carrying out his orders, you are to protect your Master from all who wish him harm. You’ve done well in that respect ... till now." A meaty hand alighted on a quivering shoulder. "However, if I’m correct in my thinking, you’ve failed to keep safe your Master from an enemy most dangerous ... one closer than the skin which covers him."

"A foe who can defy my senses of sight and smell ... sir, how can I be expected to defend against something like that?"

"Do you fear our Lord, Maito?"

"I would be a fool not to sir."

"This fear ... it binds you too close to see and makes you too weak to speak. Come with me."

He rose and followed Jiraiya a few steps away to the bookcase, knowing full well what lay behind it; a latch hidden under one of the shelves loudly engaged, a secret passageway opened revealing an alcove where rows of carved ivory ossuaries sat.

"From the moment your master was born," Jiraiya said, "his father feared for his life. I assume you know of the ritual?"

"Yes sir, I do."

"When the blood of the sacrifice drips from the lips of his parents, the skin of the babe is supposed to take on a different hue. The deeper that coloring is, denotes the level of power granted by the spirits of the family. That didn’t happen with lord Kakashi ... instead, his frail body went still, becoming the same color as the marble altar upon which he lay. Sakumo knew he’d defied the rules for the sake of the woman he loved by bringing forth offspring that had human blood nourishing it from the moment of conception. Love for this human bent him prostrate; with great weeping and gnashing of teeth, that proud man begged the spirits to spare his son for the sake of its mother. His plea, they heard, his request, they did grant ... with a condition. If the child did not show an increase in power by the end of his first year, the life they graciously permitted would be extinguished without question. Seeking counsel from the shaman in the woods, Sakumo broke the seal on Hatake Kama's remains. With every month that came, he faithfully sprinkled tiny portions of those bones on his child's tongue to mix with his feedings of blood. He and I both hoped Kama's strength would be imparted to the child."

"And it was so. My Lord’s power knows no equal."

"True ... but in addition to his strength, Kama’s wrath and insatiable thirst for revenge were gifts unexpected.” Jiraiya smiled weakly as he ran a hand over each box. “These were the ones who helped established the foundations of this land, they paved the road to progress with their riches and
unearthly powers. Mighty beings of vision they were; scorned, betrayed, weakened by talismans and
now, reduced to bone dust. This one, Hatake Masaki,” he whispered, “done in by the machinations
of clan Shimura; accused of witchcraft, he was drawn and quartered in the town square. Hatake
Enoki and Botan, the twins, killed by the Uchiha. This one here, Hatake Kuwa; met his end after a
coup by rebel yokai. Lastly, Hatake Kama, the most powerful and bloodthirsty of them all. He
crushed the rebellion which took the life of his brother, sired countless seed born of witches,
breeding fealty to clan Hatake into those who were cursed as yokai. Took the combined effort of the
Hyuga, Shimura and Kokucho clans to bring him down.”

Maito dropped to one knee when Jiraiya paused before the last container. “And here are the
treasured remains of Kama’s only son; my Lord and friend ... Hatake Sakumo. I will not let you
repeat the same mistakes I made.”

“Mistakes sir?

“The love Sakumo had for a human drove him from the path ...as his friend, I reveled in his
happiness and took part in his schemes to safeguard his child. As his servant, I stood by his side,
speaking reason when it was too late to be heard. I valued his friendship above all else, and I let it
overshadow the duty to my Lord as his counselor. Listen well, young one, you will incur the
Master’s wrath as you seek to protect him from his own desires ...yet you must buck up against that
fear, for the enemy within poses the greatest threat.”

"I swear on my life to do as you’ve said, my Lord."

"Good." Bending down beside Maito, he pointed to a chest at the base of the shrine inlaid with gold
and precious gems. “These are the remains of Hatake Mari; wife of Sakumo, mother of Kakashi.
Both of their remains have been disturbed.”

Carefully studying each shelf, he tilts his head to the side asking, “How can you tell sir?”

“Well for one thing, their positioning has changed. Apart from Kama, each of these chests also had
four seals, one at each corner. I was present when Sakumo sealed lady Mari’s, watched him apply
them with my own eyes. As for Sakumo, I applied the four seals; they’re all missing now.”

“I can’t imagine who would do such a thing, sir. This wing of the manor has been closed off since
our return; none of the servants would dare enter these halls, much less this room. Only the Master,
you and I know of this place.” Maito raised his eyes to Jiraiya, shocked by the implication his words
carried, he sadly shook his head saying, “You don’t think Master--?”

“I learned too late of his intention to conquer and rule over the humans and gaki of the Five Great
Nations ... it was the same foolish desire Hatake Kama held. As the last Hatake of his time and with
his family name on the brink of extinction, Kama dreamed of revenge; unfortunately, revenge
required a form of sorcery unheard of during his time. I’ve reason to believe Kama’s folly has found
its home inside Lord Kakashi.”

“In this I hope you are wrong sir.”

“I hope so too,” he sighed. "The death of his mother deeply affected your Master. He drew close to
his father after she passed into eternity; I suspect he’s looking for their comfort and guidance by
taking in their remains.”

“You think he’s ingesting them sir?”

“The evidence before us confirms your words and my fears,” Jiraiya said as he stood. Running his
index finger over the crease in his chin he mumbled. “Unwittingly, I've fed into the young Lord’s plan to pursue Kama's goal. Had I but known it yesterday, I never would have gifted him the second ingredient.”

"Long ago, Master spoke to me about the research begun by his father and Professor Yamada. I do not remember much of that conversation, but I think Master did say three elements were lacking to complete their work."

"When the time comes, our Lord will bring all things to your remembrance."

"Master's recall is meticulous and impressive."

"Lord Kakashi is indeed his father's son; that's why I shut myself up in here, scouring this library for hours on end. Lord Sakumo was a keen observer, given to recording copious notes; in light of the tragedies this family endured, he was also inclined to cautiousness. I used to tease him about that penchant of his," he laughed, "anticipating and preparing for events which might never occur was how he passed his time. How I wish he'd addressed this present situation."

“We needn’t fear, for not only is my Lord wise, he is well acquainted and brutally honest about his temperament. He will take no action without careful consideration and if the spirits guide him, I’ve no doubt he will …”

The slap he’d earlier prepared for came without warning.

“Do you not yet understand? If Lord Kakashi is doing what I think he is, this unslakable thirst to rule will have cataclysmic results for all of us! The spirits may well lend him their strength, but his mother’s remains will affect him in ways disastrous. Up, stand to your feet, let us quit this place. I know of a shaman in the Land of Earth who might have the answers I seek. I should return in time for the soiree.”

“Lord Jiraiya,” he said wiping blood from the corner of his mouth, “What do you wish me to do in your absence?”

“Pay close attention to Master's behavior and speech. Should he begin acting strangely, do not hesitate or fail to confront him.”

“Yes sir,” he said lifting his eyes to the man who now towered over him.

"As Kama was long ago, your Master is the only Hatake left," he said helping Maito stand. "We must do all we can to ensure he is not the last Hatake this world will ever know."

As they left the alcove, as the secret passageway was once more hidden, Jiraiya turned himself about saying, “There is an odor most foul in the mansion. The longer I’m exposed to it, the more desperate I become to eradicate it at the source.”

“That would be Kinoe, sir. Master prizes his skills and intelligence … he won’t allow me to destroy him.”

“I have no such restrictions, yet I will respect our Lord’s will. What’s this? You’re not concerned this Kinoe will usurp your position, are you?”

Maito dropped his eyes to the carpet. “In matters of human business, he is more proficient than I. And if Master walks with the mortals … what need will he have of me?”

Laughing heartily, Jiraiya grabbed him by the shoulder. “I slapped the foolishness out of you … will
I now have to slap sense into you?"

"No, sir," he said rubbing at the sting in his cheek.

“Ah youth ... tis wasted on the young. For a moment, it looked as if you were pouting, Maito. You and your Master are bound for all eternity; nothing or no one can change that. Come along now, we have no time for petty jealousies. I’m certain he will find other uses for your talents and your belly will never suffer want. One favor I ask; while I reside in the manor, do your best to keep that Kinoe thing far from me."

“Understood, sir.”

Recherché

Izumo sat on the side of his bed, reasoning within himself. *Maybe I overdid it; made him eat and drink too much. I should go to him,* he thinks sliding his feet into the nearby slippers. *Wait, the moans are softer now, doesn’t sound as if he’s in pain. Good heavens! What was I thinking? If he’s enjoying a private moment and I burst in there … might be awkward.* He kicked off the slippers and blew out the candle on the bedside table. *No, best leave him release tension his own way.*

Recherché

“There are two others?” the young man asked the creatures gathered round him. “And the constables have them under surveillance, I see. Fresh human blood and shards of bone lay in the woods as well … this might complicate things. I think you’re right; travel under the cover of darkness is the best option, though it will push my arrival back a day or so.”

Notes:

Disconcertment: the emotional state of being made self-consciously uncomfortable.

Lambent: softly bright or radiant.

Kowtow: the act of deep respect shown by prostration; kneeling and bowing so low one’s head touches the ground. The highest sign of worship used to show reverence to one’s elders or superiors.

Alcove: a recess or small room adjacent to or opening out of a room.

Ossuary: a chest or box for the final resting place of human skeletal remains.

Enoki (“a nettle tree”), Botan (“peony”), Kuwa (“hoe”) and Kama (“scythe”), were the names Masashi Kishimoto considered for the character who eventually became known as Kakashi (“scarecrow”). The addition of the name Masaki was mine.

In modern times when a body is cremated, what remains are bone fragments. These fragments are then pulverized to powder with a grinding machine and placed in an urn. In the days of Japan’s past, the bones were left whole after cremation, (or as whole as was possible), and deposited into an urn which was either buried or set up in a household shrine.
Gilded Butterflies in Cages of Cartilage

Recherché

Early morning, two days before the event of the season:

“There you go,” Ibiki proudly said when he deposited a stack of folders on the watch commander’s desk, “the monthly and quarterly reports.”

“Impressive,” Ryota cast a nonchalant glance toward the ungainly heap, “districts filed alphabetically and chronologically;’ he said giving them a cursory thumb through. “Someone’s bored stiff.”

“You should be on your feet cheering and yes, I’m bored to tears. Nevertheless, I’ve a meeting with the Governor. Have the stable master bring Mayonaka to the Complex. Once this meeting wraps, I’m heading to Hatake manor. Anything else that needs my attention or signature, best hand it over now.”

“I’ll hold down the fort while you're gone, but if you're in need of a chuckle, take a look at this,” Ryota said as he shoved one of the deputy’s reports toward Ibiki. “The last crew that went out to secure the crime scene said they couldn’t find it.”

“Keep it,” he sighed, “no sense gettin’ my dander up about nothing. We’ve recovered enough evidence to keep Genma busy and that’s good enough for me. Reckon I’ll be back by late afternoon.”

The trek across the busy plaza he found unsettling; the warm smiles, the cheery greetings, and then it happened.

Someone ran up behind him, nearly slapping the air from his lungs when a beefy hand landed between his shoulder blades.

*Only one man in the territory is that stupid,* he thought turning to face the Coroner with a growl.

“Idate? The hell are you doing here?”

“Missed those warm smiles and gigantic hugs of yours, Biki.”

“And you narrowly missed gettin’ a rap in the mouth too.”

“Always so pleasant. And to answer your question, I’m in town because of Tsune; needs supplies from the apothecary,” he cautiously looked around, “and I need a break from her. You look surprisingly well fed and rested, how go things with you?”

“Let’s see … townsfolk aren’t flinging rotten produce at my head and they’ve yet to hang me in effigy, well … this week anyway. All in all, things are going well.”

“So, in other words, you’re bored outta your skull.”

Ibiki smiled and shrugged his shoulders. “What can I say?”

“Say you’ll come back to the farm with me. Could really use your help; two rigs need surgery--”

“Stop right there, I pass,” he shuddered, “but as it happens, an errand takes me out your way this
afternoon. I’d be willing to help with anything else, in exchange for one of Hana’s bentos.”

Idate reached out as they walked and shook his hand, “You got a deal. But don’t try to be slick and sweet talk my wife old man. No work, no bento.”

“Oh no, you’re onto me ... whatever shall I do?”

“Jackass.”

“I can tell you don’t come to town much, bumpkin... the apothecary is that way.”

“Yes,” he gestured toward the Complex, “but the assessor’s office is over there. Property taxes due next month. Not a capital crime to pay early, is it?”

“No, but I might make an exception in your case.”

“Gee, you’re all heart Inspector.”

“Right this way hayseed,” he said holding the one of the double doors open. “Hate to find my brother’s name on the scofflaw list.”

“You’re here to speak with the Governor?”

“What about it?”

“Do me a favor, ask if she wouldn’t mind--”

“Idate, she was a people doctor, not a vet; hardly think she has time to--”

“If I wanted my intelligence belittled, I coulda stayed home ... Tsume is much better at it than you.”

“I don’t doubt that.”

They were halfway to the reception desk when Idate said, “Every now and again, the Governor would send medical students our way when we were in a pinch, like now. Ask if she’d consider doing it again, please. It’ll be the same deal ... free room and board, a little pocket change included.”

"Yeah, yeah ... I’ll ask. See ya,” said Ibiki as they parted ways.

Recherché

“It’s almost nine o’clock in the morning. Reckon he rushed her outta here before dawn?”

Izumo laid down his pen and sighed. “For the last time Tetsu, he had too much to eat and drink last night... his stomach was griping--”

“Didn’t sound like no bellyache to me. All that moanin’ and groanin’ … he was greasin’ the fire pole I tell ya.”

“Must you be so vulgar?”

“Oh, calm down Frumpystilskin, we’re all men here.”

“Just stop talking … please.” Izumo returned to his writing as Kotetsu’s spoon rattled against the sides of his mug. “I never knew Ruka was such a show-off. Personally, I woulda conducted my business at the cathouse. The walls are thicker.”
“And how would you know that?”

Leaning back in his chair, he folded his arms across his chest saying, “Unlike you and your prude cousin, I didn’t just read about sex in dusty schoolbook. Nope ... I got out there and experienced it.”

“I’m sure that’s not my business and don’t you go wandering off to get more ... ‘experience,’ hear me? We can’t afford to waste our money frivolously. The way I figure, it’ll be another month before things get tight, so, don’t even--”

“Hey, I’ve been doing my part since we got here. We’ve been eating on the regular and for nothing, why? Because of me. If ya hothouse petunias weren’t afraid of getting your hands dirty, I could teach you to live off the land.”

Returning to the work before him, Izumo snickered, “Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.”

“How long were you planning to stay here anyway? We collected most of the amulets, I’ve sharpened all the weapons ... we can knock off Hatake at this shindig, go back to London and find work there--”

“Why bother going back to London? We can take out Hatake and stay right here in Konoha at the expense of the people. I’m sure they won’t mind housing us rent free while we await execution for murder--”

“You got no stones Zumo ... speaking of which,” he gestured with his chin toward the disheveled looking Iruka, "somebody got a lot of bang for their buck last night.”

Izumo turned to see his cousin staggering from his room; his hair every which way, his forehead dotted with perspiration, the dark circles under his eyes could have been used for archery practice, “Damn ... you look like hell,” he said without thinking.

“Hush up the both of you ... had a rough night okay? Didn’t get much sleep--”

“So we heard,” Kotetsu answered with a wink. “Well, where is she?”

“There was no she you pervert,” he grumbled falling into the chair beside Izumo. “Just kept having the same nightmare over and over.”

“Seriously, she was that ugly?”

“Come on, get it together," he said cutting his eyes at Kotetsu. "I’ll make you some tea, Iruka.”

The moment Izumo disappeared into the kitchen, Kotetsu scooted into the abandoned seat whispering, “Okay, he’s gone now, you can tell me ... what was she like?”

Elbows on the table, the palms of his hands supporting his brow, Iruka snapped, “Nothing to tell as I’ve no time for carnal pursuits--”

“There’s the problem right there. You gotta find time for life’s little pleasures Ruka ... might help you relax.”

“Honestly, you’ve got a one-track mind this morning," Izumo called from the kitchen. "Go on then, leave him alone." He tried shooing Kotetsu from his seat, leaning between them saying, " Iruka, drink this; black tea, with a little ginger root. It’ll wake you up and settle your stomach.”

“So, nightmares, huh,” Kotetsu asked, “wanna talk about ‘em?”
“Not particularly. Just a series of very interesting images, that’s all.”

“If you’d rather not,” he said, finally dislodging Kotetsu from the seat, “you don’t owe either of us -”

“Tetsu will pester me all day if I leave it unsaid .. it’s okay. Like any other nightmare, it was ... strange,” he said after savoring his first sip. “I’d rendered Hatake powerless, he was lying flat on the ground before me; I approached with dagger in hand and fell on him. But the moment I thought to plunge my blade into his chest, he gave me this smug little grin and lifted his hand to my face. Somehow or another, he’d ripped the heart out of my chest … I watched him squeeze it until it exploded. Instead of blood running down his hand, get this, there were hundreds of tiny puppets ... every one of them looked exactly like me. They surrounded my body and pulled me down until I was on my back while Hatake stood over me. I watched him chew up what was left of my heart and then he ran off into the forests.”

“That’s it? I thought you said it was interesting?”

Izumo kicked him in the shin under the table. “What our idiot friend is trying to say is, your dream sounds like a bad case of nerves. It’s just a party, Iruka. Chances are you’ll see Hatake briefly before he’s rushed off to greet other guests. We can make a graceful exit after an hour --”

“Yeah,” Kotetsu chimed in, “one hour, oughta be enough time for us to split up and snoop around.”

Iruka gave forth a dry laugh. “That part is easier said than done. The party is less than a day away and my ‘ace in the hole’ is god knows where--”

“Forget about that character, he didn’t even have the decency to respond to your letter,” Izumo said as he patted him on the shoulder. "If it’s any consolation, you still have us--”

“Damn right,” Kotetsu added, “a pinch penny and a pervert ...we’re an unstoppable team.”

Iruka took another sip and smiled. “Believe it or not, that is oddly encouraging.”

“To be clear, I’m encouraging,” Izumo said, “and him … he’s just odd.”

“Go ahead, yuck it up, ya yahoos. Last laugh is on you. Ruka’s all wound up about some stupid dream and you’re talkin’ out the side of your neck Zumo; either one of you geniuses realize we still don’t know where Hatake lives?”

“Well that’s easily fixed,” Iruka cheerily replied. "I’ll drop by the Governor’s office, update her on this development and get directions while I’m at it.”

“Good idea. I’m thinking the other amulets should be ready now. Me and Tetsu will pay a visit to the Temple--”

“Oh yeah? I think you gotta another think coming Zumo. I hate going up there … always look at me funny.” His eyes darted between his two silent friends. "First one to say, ‘it's because I’m funny looking,’ gets a punch in the head.”

**Recherché**

Because Lady Tsunade was nursing one helluva hangover, his report was delivered in hushed tones with no questions asked. When Ibiki emerged from the building, the stable manager and his mount were standing near the fountain in the plaza. Even the pushcart vendors were coldly cordial as he brushed past them. *Must be my lucky day,* he thought,
and it was ... until he reached the forest.

“What in blue blazes? How is it possible for an entire area to vanish into thin air? Come on Mayonaka ... let's get the hell outta here.”

He fared no better at the house of Hatake.

“I’m afraid Master is unavailable,” the servant told him through a partially opened front door.

“How fortunate then that I came to see you Kinoe.”

“In that case, do come in Inspector.”

Behind the nervous servant with the fake smile, other of the household help were running about cleaning, polishing, dusting and sweeping.

“I just wanna know if a decision’s been made about my request.”

“Oh, my heavens,” Kinoe said flipping through the folder he held, “I’ve been rushed off my feet since last I saw you … forgot to send a messenger with this. Sorry.”

Once Ibiki scanned down to the part of the letter giving him permission, he said, “I’d like to have a few men in plain clothes inside the manor too, if that’s alright.”

“Certainly. I’ll be announcing the guests as they arrive, just tell me how to recognize your men.”

“They’ll flash their badges.”

“Right, excuse me, somewhat disjointed today, mind going in a thousand directions at once. On behalf of our guests I thank you for the extra care you’re providing--”

“We’re doing this for Lord Hatake’s protection, not theirs. Threats have been made, I wanna keep this person from sneaking in among the other guests--”

“My word … an assault on the Master would certainly put a damper on the festivities. Can you give me a description of this ne’er-do-well,” he said readying his pen, “I mean, on the off chance he slips past your men?”

Ibiki clamped down on his anger, forcing a response through clenched jaws. “Average height and weight ... late twenties, early thirties, very distinct scar across his nose. Goes by the name of Umino Iruka; he’ll be accompanied by two other gentlemen.”

Kinoe stopped writing for a moment. “Umino? Hmm, that might present a problem for my Master,” he said turning a few pages in the folder. “Dr. Umino Iruka is an invited guest.”

"How’s that?"

“From what I understand, the Governor encouraged his invitation. She didn’t tell you?”

“Must’ve slipped her mind,” Ibiki ground out. “Nevertheless, my men will be in place should Umino create a ruckus. Good day, Kinoe.”

He rode back into town angry and confused, the promise to Idate forgotten. He and Mayonaka were just coming to a halt when Lady Tsunade walked out of the Complex. He spoke without care about his tone of voice. “Ma’am,” he why didn’t you tell me? Umino attending Hatake’s party--”
“See here, Inspector, I just found out he accepted the invite myself. Why is that your concern anyway? Oh my god ... what have you done, Ibiki?”

Recherché

“Itachi ... come in son.”

The young man entered the study, bowing before his father and taking a seat beside him.

“Lords Orochimaru and Danzou just left; boorish idiots, they could speak nothing apart from this grand soiree. There will be many people of influence at this affair and I think it wise you join them. Never hurts to have to political contacts within the other nations.”

“But Father, I’ve already refused. It would be gauche if turned up out of the blue.”

“Now you sound like your mother,” Fugaku laughed. “Gauche or not, you will attend.”

“As you wish, my Lord.”

Notes:

Rig: male horse with one or two undescended testicles.

Scofflaw: one who flouts the law, especially one who fails to pay fines or fees owed.
Twinkle Twinkle Little Lies ... Time to Blind Your Great Big "I"s

Early evening, **two days** before the event of the season:

In an office silent, his name it sweetly calls.

“There is another way,” it whispers.

A pert near useless arrest warrant smolders in his pocket as his arm slowly extends, fingers desperate to fiddle with the glimmering images on the small card.

“Hope I ain’t interrupting nothing,” Genma says as he barges in. “Knew you needed this information soon as possible. You know what I think? I think we got another serial killer on our hands.”

With his mind in limbo and eyes glazed, Ibiki pulls the card closer; the ink, still tacky to the touch, he watches it melt into his skin. Genma is nothing more than a series of clicks and pops, background noise to the words he distinctly hears within himself.

“If you read through the warrant again,” the voice said, “you will find a loophole.”

He dug through the breast pocket of his uniform, fishing out the paper bearing the magistrates seal. Laying the crumpled, sweat stained document beside the small card, his eyes zigzag up and down the page; the justification necessary glares back at him.

And so it is. What else would you have me do?

“Your men will abandon their searches in the forest,” the voice instructed. “You will also bring to halt any work being done on those deportation papers.”

A strident voice breaks through the fog in his mind, the weight of Genma's presence before his desk draws him back to the then and now. “… so then I says to myself, yes siree; every last one of ’em had the same marks on the femur. Almost like a signature on a painting … exceptin' of course we don't know who this artist is, eh?”

Ibiki’s eyes continue to drift between the invitation and the grinning man who stands six inches from the edge of his desk. **Shall I kill him?**

“No, as you will, so must he live to play his appointed role.

“Yep, full moon’s a comin’ and no ordinary one is this. Folks say it will turn red like blood. That’ll be a sight. Inspector ... you listening?”

“No. If you’ve got a written report, leave it with Ryota ... it’s a police matter now.”

“Hey ... you alright there? Kinda blanked out on me in mid-sentence. Reckon I oughta be used to that by now, but you know--”

“Kindly close the door on your way out.”

“Oh … uh, yeah. Sure I can't get ya something? Hot tea ... a stiff drink?”

"The door, Genma ... close it as you exit."
As his footsteps recede, once more Ibiki hears the now familiar whisper.

“Well done.”

Late evening, two days before the event of the season.

“Of all my children … never completely understood that one. Been sitting out there for hours you know; servants tell me he’s staring off into space and muttering to himself. Probably called me every name in the book by now,” Fugaku joked as he looked out the bedroom window and into the back garden.

“You’re the one I don’t understand,” said the woman at his side. “One minute you’re beaming with pride because he did what you expected … the next minute you’re scowling and forcing him into a situation that challenges everything he’s heard and known all his life. If that weren’t confusing enough, now you’re taking leave of the territory in the dark of night. How is he supposed to react to such crotchet?”

“Yes, he got his good looks from me obviously, but that aura of mystery … that’s all you Mikoto.” He made to reach out for her dainty hand saying, “I can never tell what either of you are thinking until it’s too late.”

She lightly slapped at his wrist whilst angling her body outside his reach. “What you’re doing isn’t fair … you’re not even listening to me, are you?”

“Oh the contrary, when my beloved speaks, mine heart doth attend.”

“Hah … as if honeyed words will save you this time—”

“Then shall I speak plainly,” he started as a servant entered the room.

“Pardon, my Lord and Lady … shall I take the portmanteau now?”

Fugaku turned and with a wave of his hand said, “Leave it.” By the time the bedroom door softly closed, Mikoto was pacing the floor. “Success in business demands flexibility, elsewise opportunities die on the vine,” he said reaching for her hand again as she walked past him. “And in matters of business as well as matters of the heart, luck favors the prepared. By word and deed, I’m teaching him a valuable lesson.”

“You’re teaching him to be wishy washy.”

“Lest you forget dearest, we’ve two rigs in Tsume’s care. I’ve no doubt those soon to be geldings will become prodigious racehorses in time, but we can’t wait for that … the need for sires is desperate.” He managed to capture her wrist this time and pulled her close. “Lord Danzou mentioned in passing that a certain cash strapped breeder was sending three champion stallions to auction in Water Country. I must act quickly—”

“Pfft … horses and money,” she replied twisting out of his grip, “the only things you seem to care about these days—”

“How deep the wound my love. You know this family is always foremost in my thoughts.”

“I find that hard to believe since you’re running away from your son when he needs you most. Why not stay till the morning and talk to him?”

“That I cannot do, my sweet.” He successfully caught her around the waist this time steering her
toward the bench at the foot of the bed. “What Itachi needs most is freedom from my shadow.”

Mikoto allowed herself to ease down on the bench with a slight huff as his tone was conciliatory when he sat beside her. “I left instructions for him …all he need do is mingle with the dignitaries at that man’s soiree and extend an invitation to our home--”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but Itachi refused to attend … won’t it be awkward if he just shows up at that man’s home?”

“Already taken care of. I dispatched a messenger explaining away the misunderstanding and confirming Itachi’s attendance. Hatake,” he snarled, “is simply a means to an end.”

“And what might that be?”

“Think about it. Why would anyone outside the territory accept an invitation to the home of one of our minor nobles? New streams of revenue, of course. Konoha is the first in Japan to establish trade with the West and that makes us their rivals for a new marketplace. They know full well greedy foreigners will demand more than Fire Country can provide alone, so it makes sense to seek connections with our people--”

“Don’t you think other businessmen inside the territory are plotting the same thing?”

“If they have any sense at all, yes, but if the Uchiha can convince them to invest in our silver and copper mines for example, we turn rivals into allies and our family reaps the benefits. You know, I’ve heard cloisonné is becoming quite the thing in Europe …”

“I’m aware of that,” she sighed, “we read the same newspapers, remember?”

“My bag is packed and the carriage awaits,” he said placing his hand on hers. He drew her close and softly kissed her on the cheek. “I’ll be back by the night of the soiree and I promise to speak with Itachi the following morning. I’ve taught him well … he’ll do what is right and best for our family, you’ll see.”

“I still don’t think you should leave without speaking to him.”

“Ah, but if I refuse my darling’s request, her pique will smolder in my absence,” he said with a wink. “And how I do enjoy finding new ways to beg her forgiveness.”

She melted against him whispering, “Uchiha Fugaku, you’re incorrigible.”

Recherché

“You’re outta your mind Zumo … I aint got a superstitious bone in my body--”

“Then there must be some other logical explanation for your actions. Pouring salt around every entrance and exit of the cabin isn’t something I’d expect from you--”

“I’m doing this because once you tell him everything Michio said, he’s gonna be upset; just looking out for Ruka... you got a problem with that?”

“Long as you’re going to clean up this mess … no.”

He tossed the empty salt bag at Izumo’s head saying, “All that mumbo jumbo about the amulets drawing gaki to the bearer … you think Ruka knew about that?”

“Perhaps. It would explain why he kept the bulk of them separate from our lodgings. Michio warned
us about what could happen, but we made it back from the temple safely, didn’t we?”

“Yeah well, it was still daylight when we got here; those gaki things don’t come out until nighttime. So, where the hell is he?”

“Am I his keeper, Tetsu? He probably stayed for dinner with the Governor. Maybe he stopped to help an old lady carry her bags home from the market. I’m certain Iruka will be back soon. Besides, between this cabin and the Complex … where else would he go?”

Recherché

“I never knew this,” Itachi said to the shadowy figure standing before him. “If this is the only way and I the chosen one to carry out your will … strengthen my heart for the task.”

The ethereal being drew closer. “Look deeply into my eyes and I will bequeath to you a portion of mine hatred and my power,” it said. Receive it with gladness, that your will may not falter at the time appointed.”

“Yes, Lord Hatake,” he whispered.

Recherché

A pine cone crunched under his boot shattering the quiet of the woods. The cabin’s just ahead … better hurry before they start looking for me, he thought.

“Your vow have I heard my son,” echoed the familiar voice through the trees.

“Fa … father?”

“Do not doubt or be afraid, Iruka.”

His hands flew to cover his ears, No, this can’t be, he thought scanning the forest, I will not succumb to madness!

He took off running as the voice continued,

“I’ve come to guide you … listen well my son.”

His heart nearly burst out of his chest when a vision of Umino Tadashi stood before him, its arms spread wide to capture him. “If anyone understands the conflict you’re having … it’s me. I waited too long to act; went to my grave with the blood of many an innocent on my hands. I’ll not let you suffer the same fate.”

Iruka fell to his knees, tears streaming down his cheeks. "I don’t know if I can do this, Father.”

Suddenly the vision spoke the same words penned in Tadashi’s final journal entry. "Seishinryoku, it is yours. I am ever with you my son, closer than your next heartbeat."

Long after the vision dissipated, Iruka remained on his knees, sobs wracking his body.

Recherché

Only twelve remain, he thought while scrabbling up the outcropping of rock. That's a good sign. It will take but a moment’s preparation to receive them.

In the shadows of fallen timber, they hid, watching and waiting. Soon, gnarled tree roots would
become a makeshift cradle, a spongy carpet of sheet moss, the cushion for a roll of heavyweight parchment, longer than the arms and wider than the body of him who called them forth.

At last, alone he sits, his pose meditative, his eyes unceasingly active, scanning the forest floor. He hears them now; their tiny feet, heavy bodies and long tails scattering leaf litter as they dart through the underbrush. When at last they assemble before him, the moon has risen higher, its yellowish white beams reflecting in their eyes of bitumen. Some are bruxing, others softly chirping, all look to him with whiskers atwitch. And as the low sad sounding whoops of the Scops owl die down, the young man asks,

“Who will be my first offering?”

One of the creatures waddles forward, situating itself dead center of the parchment. It looks to his fellows and dissolves with a piercing shriek into a large ebony splotch.

The young man waves his hand over the slowly spreading splatter and suddenly, chaos becomes order; neatly written characters crawl from the blackness, aligning themselves into neat rows. One behind the other, each of the remaining eleven creatures join their brethren and now is their story completely told.

_Concentrated spiritual energy just north of here_, he thought while rolling out a smaller scroll.

Quick as lightning, he draws six more creatures, the words from the larger scroll absorbed into their bodies and to the north they scamper. The young man packs his belongings and heads south east through the forests.

**Recherché**

Six miles from the cabin, Kinoe and Maito kneel before their Master inside the salon.

“Representatives from the lands of Earth and Wind arrive tomorrow afternoon, my Lord. Their accommodations stand ready to receive them.”

“Very well Kinoe. Apologize for my absence and see to it my guests are afforded every hospitality.”

“With pleasure, Master.”

“I trust you’ve sufficiently trained the other attendees?”

“That I have my liege.”

“You will release them from the holding pens, supervise as they entertain the guests.”

“One thing more, my Lord. Inspector Morino paid a visit earlier this afternoon. He seemed most distressed after learning Dr. Umino was on the guest list. It was all I could do to keep a straight face while he was talking. He also wanted some of his officers to attend the party in plain clothes … naturally I agreed on your behalf—”

“Naturally,” Maito mumbled.

The Master nodded as he replaced his snifter on the table beside him. “Maito, find out who these men are. I want you and the Yasha to see to it they do nothing to prevent Umino’s arrival.”

“Consider it done, Master.”
"As for you, Kinoe, a great feast awaits inside your quarters; venomous snakes, shrews and lizards,” he said with a shudder. “Go gorge yourself.” After his gleeful servant hied from the room, he gestured for Maito to take a seat. “Where did Lord Jiraiya run off to?”

“I believe he had business in the land of Earth Master.”

“You were inside my father’s bedchamber tonight; bowed your knee at the shrine of my ancestors. I must discover Lord Jiraiya’s special techniques to secure your prompt obedience--”

“My Lord, I did as he asked because--”

“Let us be clear about two things, Maito. Though you have great respect for him, Jiraiya is not your master. Secondly, you are never to step foot inside my father’s private chambers unless I accompany you.”

“Master, it will never happen again … forgive me.”

"A blood moon,” he said more to himself than his servant, “how appropriate will its appearance be on the night of the soiree. A spectacle of wonder in the heavens and the embodiment of horror on the earth. This night have I visited my prey … stoking a fire in his belly. While he slumbers I shall return to begin his torment anew.”

“I shall I go with you my Lord--”

“Did I not issue orders Maito or can it be you think me feeble? Since when have I required protection against a sleeping human?”

“Master … his friends brought the amulets from the Temple; powerful prayers were spoken over them and--”

“Can the empty words of men and a handful of worthless trinkets stand against the power of a god?

Flee from my sight while my temper still holds!”

Notes:

Crotchet: a sudden odd fancy or whimsical notion.

Portmanteau (British): a case or bag to carry clothing in while traveling, especially a leather suitcase that opens into two halves.

Cloisonné: the art of enameling an object (typically made of copper) whereby fine wires are used to delineate the decorative areas into which enamel paste is applied before the object is fired and polished. 1890-1910 were the years considered the “Golden Age” of Japanese cloisonné enamels which were made for display at great World Exhibitions of that time.

Seishinryoku: “spiritual strength, courage.”

Scops owl: small and agile hunters, colored in various brownish hues, they are resident breeders in Japan. They prefer areas containing old trees with hollows, which are home to prey such like insects, bats and mice. Their superb sense of hearing helps them locate food in any habitat.

Bruxing (rat behavior): the soft, repetitive grinding of the incisors against each other. It serves to sharpen them and may be done in times of relaxation.
Twinkle, Twinkle Little Lies (Part Two)

Twinkle, Twinkle Little Lies ... Time to Blind Your Great Big "I"s

(Part Two)

Recherché

Early morning, one day before the event of the season

“I read somewhere that worry ages a person--”

“Your point?”

“When you went to bed last night Iruka, you were twenty-seven years old; this morning you look like a doddering eighty-year-old. Come on, talk to me … what the hell is going on?”

“I think I might be losing the last of my marbles … okay?”

“The time to worry about madness is when you wanna sleep on a tin roof during a thunderstorm or when you attempt to set your hair on fire--”

“I saw my father last night.”

Izumo leaned back in his chair, hands folded in his lap. “Well, that had to be a pleasant dream--”

“If only,” was breathed out with a heavy sigh. “He was standing right in front of me Zumo; arms outstretched, one eyebrow raised and that crooked smile on his lips … you know the one,” he said with a soft chuckle. “Such a relief to see him; I was at once encouraged … and full of regret for having failed him.”

From the corner of his eye, he watched Izumo push aside his mug of tea; chin to chest, his hands dropped back into his lap once more, the search for a logical explanation, abandoned. “You were never a failure in his eyes Iruka.”

Their tea grew tepid as in worrisome silence they sat; Izumo waiting for the unburdening, Iruka reluctant to shirk off the guilt.

“I was coming back from the Governor’s office when I got disoriented in the forest. Suddenly, Father showed up and pointed me in the right direction. Zumo, I know it was him … I could even smell the pomade he always used to groom his hair.” After taking another sip of tea, he mumbled, “Go on … say it. You think I’ve gone ‘round the bend, don’t you?”

Izumo leaned forward striking a thoughtful pose; elbows on the table this time, fingers entwined before his lips, “No … I don’t. You had a close relationship with your father; no shame in needing his kind of support right now. As to the vision, I think that overheated brain of yours finally figured out a way to provide comfort--”

“Perhaps. But, whether real or imagined, his presence gave me peace for a time.”

“So, why is it you look like you’re coming off a three-day drunk this morning?”
“Which is it Zumo, am I old or am I hungover?” Scraping his nails over a stubbly chin, he said, "You have to promise not to laugh, okay?"

Drawing an imaginary cross over his heart, Izumo smiled and nodded.

"All night long I felt a malevolent 'presence' inside my room; for hours, it stood at the foot of the bed watching me toss and turn. Reeked of rotting flesh it did … kept thinking it would smother me at any moment--"

"Then it’s worse than I thought,” Kotetsu said when the door closed behind him. “First it was the nightmares … now you’re seeing things? Ruka, you’re unraveling fast buddy and if you don’t start relaxing soon … you will crack up. That settles it,” he said dropping the basket beside the door, “if I hafta drag you there myself, you’re going to the cathouse--”

"Would you stop with that please, Tetsu? Sex isn’t the answer for every problem--"

“Says the virgin Kamizuki.”

“I am not a virg--”

“Maybe I oughta drag you over there with us, Zumo.”

“See here, you Neanderthal … the only person being dragged anywhere today is you. For god sakes, you’re looking more like a caveman every day. And you, Iruka, stop making mountains out of molehills. The nightmares, visions and any other strange things you’re experiencing will disappear once this party is behind us, I promise. Now, no more of this twaddle … from either of you.”

“Alright, simmer down,” Iruka said as he stood to stretch. “I’ll try to go back to bed, see if I can squeeze out a nap, alright? Oh, and before I forget, the Governor’s arranged transportation for us; we need to be at her office by six thirty tomorrow evening."

“Perfect, gives us time to go over the plan and fetch our clothes from the washerwomen. Matter of fact, I’ll run down to the market this morning … be one less thing we have to do tomorrow--”

“Hold it, nobody’s going to bed or into town til we get all this food sorted out,” Kotetsu told them. “I got enough catfish over there for breakfast and lunch … Ruka, you’re gonna clean ‘em. Zumo, the traps outside are full of juicy squirrels that need tending to. Well? Don’t just stand there with your mouths hanging open,” he said walking to the table, “get to work.”

Recherché

“More tea, Lord Orochimaru?”

“No and do stand still a moment Kabuto. Now, where was I?"

“Beautiful young woman … appeared in the conservatory last night … rapturous voice--”

“Yes of course. She kept chanting the same five words over and over; I thought if I jotted them down, more would come … it never did. Soon as I stopped writing, she vanished into thin air. Look at this,” he said thrusting a slip of paper into his servant’s hand.

“Strange vision indeed, my Lord, and so too is this. Looks like a list of herbs,” he said adjusting his glasses, “which I’m hoping was transcribed incorrectly; two of these are quite poisonous you know- -"
“Yes, those you’ll gather from the forests on your own; the others you’ll purchase from the apothecary.”

“I will do as you say Master, but would you mind explaining why?”

“Dissolution of a partnership.”

“Sir?”

“After that vision, it was clear what I need do. If I’m to become the next Governor, certain obstacles must be cleared from my path. Now run along and fetch my breakfast … I’ve a busy day ahead.”

**Recherché**

Having left a spitting mad Kotetsu in the care of an equally truculent barber, Izumo ducks around the corner, heading straight for the Complex. He hesitated a moment before striding toward the reception desk. *No,* he thought, *the help he needs is beyond my ability. Much easier to ask forgiveness than permission.* “I’d like to speak with the Governor please.”

The mousy clerk never raised her eyes from the papers spread out on the desk. “Town hall meeting is next week,” she said. “Signup sheets are to your right. Next!”

“I had hoped to see her today—”

“Either you wait over there with everyone else or try to catch her as she’s leaving the building. Those are your only options.”

“What about her assistant … is she here?”

Slamming her pencil down, she hissed, “Sit! I’ll see if I can find her.”

He knew she couldn’t hear it and probably didn’t care, still he thanked her as she stomped toward the outer conference room. Easing away from the counter, Izumo turned and took the only seat available; giving a slight bow to the two women seated across the way, he settled into a chair beside an elderly gentleman.

“Don’t take it to heart son,” the man whispered, “full moon’s a ‘coming … folks gettin’ testy.”

“Thank you sir … can’t believe I forgot about that.” As he sat quietly, he kept one eye on the door leading from the conference room and one ear open to the conversations around him.

“… utter debauchery,” said one of the ladies. “And those ‘dancers’ from Earth country are supposed to entertain as well.”

“Humpf … a nobleman who’d allow half naked women to flit about his home … scandalous is what it is,” her friend replied.

“It’s how the rich behave dear; those fancy parties … just a cover for immoral activities.”

“Still,” added another, “with a strange moon rising, those in attendance will be safer than us common folk. I hear tell it will be blood red this time. Chills me it does … most certain to whip the creatures of the woods into a feeding frenzy.”

“Hush up you silly women,” the man beside him barked, “oughta embrace the coming of this new moon, not fear it. Don’t you know its appearance will break the curse over this land?”
“Oh, quiet down you crazy old coot--”

“Crazy? Old? Why you--!”

“Mr. Kamizuki?”

Izumo almost tripped over his feet as he stood. Scuttling away from the bickering seniors, he guided Shizune toward the reception area saying, “I need only a few moments of the Governor’s time. Would it be possible to--?”

“I'm afraid not. She has a meeting with the Advisory Council in ten minutes. Is there something I can do to help?”

“Well … it concerns Dr. Umino--”

“I see … come with me then.” She led him into the outer conference room with a caution, “I'll let her know you’re here. And while I can’t promise she’ll speak with you at length, you'll be hard to miss if you sit here.”

Once more was he grateful for her kind intervention yet he was barely comfortable in the chair when the Governor sallied into the room.

“Right. What’s the matter with Dr. Umino? He seemed fine yesterday--”

“Morning ma'am,” he said as he rose and bowed, "I'm here because I understand you have the best medical mind in the Five Nations--”

“Make your point …haven’t time for flattery.”

“Something is seriously wrong with Iruka.”

“In that case, Shizune will provide you with a list of doctors,” she called nearing the exit. “Now, you will excuse me--”

“Lady Tsunade … he needs someone skilled in the art of Kampo.”

Her hand froze on the doorknob. Slowly she turned, her eyes narrowing on him. “Tell the Council to start without me Shizune. I’ll be there soon.”

“Yes ma’am.”

“A young man who studied Western medicine in London,” she said walking back to the table, “how is it you know of Kampo?”

“Umino Tadashi grew and compounded his own herbs; it was a godsend for the older Japanese folks who didn’t trust modern medicine.”

“Guess I should have known that,” she said pulling out the chair across from him. “However, here in Japan ...1883, I believe it was, they passed a law revoking the licenses of all Kampo practitioners. Only a handful secretly take patients these days.”

“Then it’s one of the worst kept secrets in Konoha, because I heard tell you’re the best.” He leaned closer to say, “Iruka would strangle me if he knew I’d come to see you. But there’s no way he’d let anyone other than you, treat him. Won’t you help him ma’am?”

“Fine,” she sighed with a roll of the eyes. “I'll write up something for the apothecary. What are his
“General malaise, sleeplessness, loss of appetite … nightmares–”

“Mr. Kamizuki, surely you can put together a simple sleeping draught–”

“I tried that … didn’t work. This affliction besets his mind Lady Tsunade … he’s not been himself of late.”

“That’s a rather vague diagnosis … I’m sorry, without examining him, there’s nothing else I can do.” She made to stand saying, “My guess is, he’s anxious about meeting with Hatake; sure his symptoms will pass once that’s done.”

“I would have continued thinking the same thing … until he told me about a ‘presence’ which hovered over him last night–”

“A presence,” she asked easing back down into her seat, “you mean, a spirit?” Her fingers traced over the design in the netsuke as her eyes glazed over. “Odd … right before dawn I heard the voice of my grandfather Hashirama; he warned of an ill wind coming to shake our foundations. When I sat up, I saw him standing near the foot of my bed and then … he vanished.”

“Iruka saw a vision of his father in the forest last night.”

“Well then, guess this full moon is making us all a little crazy.” Still fiddling with her necklace, she added, “Not three days ago, I thought to go to the Temple … you know, atone for the sins of the land? I didn’t … now it might be too late. If his symptoms persist or worsen, bring him to me immediately. And for heaven sake, speak not a word of this, to anyone.”

“Of course. Thank you for your time and concern ma’am.”

Notes:

Twaddle: silly, idle talk.

Sallied: sudden rushing forth or activity.

Truculent: aggressively self-assertive; scathingly harsh.

Kampo: the study of traditional Chinese medicine, which the Japanese adopted, developing their own methods of diagnosis and therapy which included acupuncture and moxibustion (the burning of dried mugwort on certain parts of the body, either indirectly through acupuncture needles or directly on the skin). The underlying idea of Kampo is the human body and mind are inseparable and it was thought a balance of the physical and mental were essential to human health. In recent times, it has been demonstrated that a single Kampo formula can act on both the central nervous system and peripheral target organs, i.e., the heart and liver, to improve stress-induced conditions. Today, many Japanese physicians combine conventional psychosomatic therapies and Kampo to treat stress-related diseases. This integrated approach is called Kampo psychosomatic medicine.
Chapter Summary

The time of meeting draws nigh ...

Time Keeps on Tickin': Smiles to Go, Before We Die

Calendars mark it not as a holiday, nevertheless, the entire territory of Konoha is in a festive mood. A happy coincidence said some, like a chuckle under the chin by gods beforetime fickle; as if the universe itself was making amends for last month's disappointing Tsukimi Festival.

However the cause, Konoha never looked a gift horse in the mouth.

You see, it started as a trickle yesterday, with small boatloads of tourists, slowly pushing the inns by the wharf to capacity. By afternoon, that trickle became a rolling stream, and by midnight, the stream turned into a pulsing river.

This morning dawned on anxious innkeepers, banging on the doors of family and friends for assistance. Owners of pack mules found themselves in high demand, for in the next nine hours, they would make the difference between farmers burdened with bumper crops, dining establishments contemplating early closure and inns facing dwindling pantries. The shops along the avenue opened early too, swelling every vendor's till with foreign currency; by noon, many would be dusting off their empty shelves. A night's lodging, family style dining, the promise of a spot on the back lawn; these padded the pockets of enterprising residents as impromptu moon viewing parties were being thrown together all over town.

Yet, even as excitement flavored the air and the rush of revenue lifted the spirits, a palpable sense of dread was peeking round every corner.

Just north of the town center and beyond humble abodes, everyone else was working on one man's dime:

Lord Hatake Kakashi.

7:00 am: Down at the docks, casks of sparkling wines and premium cognacs from the south of France are gently rolled down cargo ship ramps and into waiting wagons. From the lumber mills and the fire brigade in the northeast, came a convoy of eight mule drawn wagons, each laden with cured pine pallets, aromatic kindling, and buckets of sand and stone. These sixteen men, chosen by lottery for an enviable assignment, counted themselves most fortunate. Promised a reward beyond their imagining, they will set to work, constructing the framework for six massive bonfires. Throughout the day will they sample the hospitality of the manor; the richest of foods, the choicest beverages, all which will be served up by enchantingly winsome scullery maids. And just coming over the ridge from the south, barrels of Kenbishi sake, silk lined cases of kiriko sake cups, wine glasses and tokkuri, softly rattle along in hand drawn wagons. Marching ahead of them are seven ox carts, overflowing with hampers of fresh cut flowers and hand-woven tatami mats. With keen eyes and honest scales, farmers in the northeast weigh and inspect bushel after bushel of fruits and vegetables, while wranglers and shepherds herd choice cattle and fatted lambs to the slaughterhouses.
The house of Hatake demands the highest quality - everything must be without spot or blemish and at the absolute peak of freshness.

7:35 am: Inside the vast manor kitchens, gruff voices are rising above the noise of knives against whetstones. At last, criteria and wagers are set, handshakes exchanged; false cheer flows like a river. It was to be a friendly competition, a culinary affair of honor. Chefs from the countries of Earth, Wind, Lightning and Water drew lines of demarcation in this once for all battle to determine which country's cuisine reigned supreme.

7:47 am - Coroner's office/Mortuary: While Genma busies himself sweeping out an empty morgue, an old friend from the post office raps on the open front door.

"Well looky here … who let you outta your cage?"

"Shut your trap, cold cook," was the rumbled pseudo grouchy response as Hiroyuki entered the shop. "My delivery man's out sick-"

"Sick? Don't ya mean he's hung over?"

"Fine, he's a stinkin' drunk … if he weren't married to my sister, I woulda fired him years ago. That the gossip you lookin' to hear undertaker?"

"You are so easy to wind up, Hiroyuki," he laughed. "Anything for me?"

"Nope … somethin' for the Inspector though. Like to get a signature for it, but I aint got time to wait around … so here, drop it by the station house."

Genma ambled toward his friend, "Gotta do your job for ya too?"

"Inspector weren't in this morning … be nightfall for I'm done with the entire route. Well? You gonna do this or aint ya?"

Genma reached out for the wrinkled tan envelope, abandoning the broom against a cabinet. "Feels heavy … reckon it's a love letter from that Queen Victoria lady? Nah, must be a training manual or some such--"

"Don't know, don't care," Hiroyuki mumbled as he turned about. "Came from London addressed to the 'Chief Constable' … see he gets it."

As he fiddled with the envelope's fastener, Genma let out a low whistle. "Second night of a full moon … guardin' all them high muckety mucks up at that shindig … maybe I oughta hold onto this till tomorrow--"

"No dice," croaked the postman as he turned back. "Whether he looks at the damn thing today or never, aint my business. The job is to deliver it--"

"Geez, calm down ya old fart, I'll do it. You know me, always willin' to help the Inspector any way I can, 'sides … not like I got nothin' goin' on."

Hiroyuki started for the door again saying, "So, what ya think … we gonna get another victim before dawn?"

Genma lifted his eyes to the hills with a sigh. "If I wish for business," he said helping the older man climb into the mail wagon, "might wind up cursing myself. And while I can't say I aint itchin' to try out them new chemicals … then again," he scratched at his cheek, "can't say I'm lookin' to prep
another young woman for burial."

"Reckon you'll have more customers than you can handle here soon; you see the way all them carriages and ox carts were racing through the plaza this morning? Pfft … damn near took out three vendors in one go-"

"From your lips to the ears of the gods," Genma said with a wink. "Startin' to think folks round here were stayin' alive just to spite me."

8:15 am: Not far from the mortuary, a detachment of mounted patrolmen stands near the wharf, ready to receive final inspection and instruction. They were to position themselves on either side of a fleet of shiny black and gold carriages pulled by teams of blue roan horses. The visiting dignitaries were to be guarded as they attend a welcome breakfast at the Governor's private residence. From there, they would conduct them safely along paved back roads to the grand estate in the north.

8:43 am - Hatake manor: In the reception area, left of the grand foyer, huge silver chafing dishes are situated at precise intervals atop long buffet tables; lavender scented steam fills the entire first floor as household servants run hot heavy irons over tablecloths and napkins of the finest woven linens. Upstairs in the grand ballroom, the morning sun casts prismatic kaleidoscopes against ivory colored walls as it reflects through sixteen leaden crystal chandeliers. Gilt chairs occupy their appointed places alongside refreshment tables which square off the room's four corners. Near sparkling glass doors leading out to a wraparound balcony, sleepy eyed musicians gather for the first of many rehearsals. With one pencil tucked behind his ear and another attached to the clipboard in his hand, majordomo Kinoe is a blur. One minute he's outside, verifying newly delivered supplies in the staging areas or writing out chits for delivery men; the next, he's maintaining peace inside the kitchens or attending the comfort of guests already in residence.

But in the manor's subterranean vaults, all is quiet.

The potion for those set to patrol the grounds this evening stands ready; the Yasha have dispersed, leaving behind a grumbling Maito to tidy up the work area. At the sound of heavy footsteps, he turns suddenly, sweeping the mixing bowl off the table as he does. "My Lord!"

Jiraiya was beside him in an instant, the tumbling mortar caught in his hand ere it smashed to the ground. "Little off your game this morning eh, Maito?"

"Yes sir ... sorry. Master's power thums through the walls, shaking the floors with a violence unaccustomed. It's wrath unquenched I say … never experienced anything like this before."

"Well, son," Jiraiya chuckled as he strode to the other side of the apothecary cabinet, "that's because, this isn't your Master's power. This 'wrath' as you call it … belongs to Kama." Carefully he sat the mortar down, running his finger around the bowl's rim as he spoke. "The deeper our Lord slips into slumber, the higher Kama's power ascends. And as it extends beyond the manor walls, it will paint the forests with a thick blue mist, drawing gaki within a hundred-mile radius and laying them under its thrall."

"Is this not desirable, sir?"

"Not sure. Last time there was a blood moon, Kama went on a rampage. If Lord Kakashi cannot harness his urges, he'll be unable to control renegade gaki. Yep, we might a have full-scale slaughter fest on our hands. Speaking of which, our Master's mark glows beneath the flesh of several mortals in the territory. What plans has he for them?"

"I do not know, sir."
"Well, has he claimed the next bridesmaid?"

"Not yet, nor have I received instructions in that regard for this evening."

"Troublesome news on many fronts," Jiraiya said, reaching into a ruck of his obi. "He'll listen to reason once he feeds ... I hope. So, it's settled, until the sacrifice is claimed, I will remain his elbow tonight. Now then, as for these … keep them on your person at all times," he warned, laying four vials onto the cabinet's surface.

Maito nodded, depositing the small glass containers in his pocket.

"This potion must be administered quickly and under the right conditions. If we can manage that, it will amplify Kama's strength in the Master, while negating Lady Mari's influence over him."

"Conditions, sir?"

"These vials must not be mixed until ready for consumption, nor are they to be administered during any phase of a full moon. Last and most importantly, Master must refrain from tasting the blood of any human with whom he shares a soul tie."

"I don't foresee a problem with that sir. The bridesmaids are merely sustenance and I know for certain, Master would never allow himself to-"

"Correction, Maito … we must never allow him. This ... Umino Iruka," he sneered, "is destined to become a servant to house Hatake, as his father was to lord Sakumo. Unfortunately, an ill-advised friendship with Umino Tadashi, tainted Sakumo's judgment and took the edge off his killing instincts, therefore I charge you, Maito ... see to it the son does not repeat the mistakes of the father. You must do everything in your power to ensure their interactions never progress beyond ruler and subject. We clear on that?"

"Of course, sir."

"Master must remain pure until his coronation. However, should Kama within him grow impatient, you may be called upon to physically restrain Lord Kakashi from time to time." Jiraiya rested his palms on either side of the cabinet's top, "What am I saying? Your resolve is weak, you fear your master's displeasure more than you care for his well-being. How could I possibly trust you to protect him from himself? No," he sadly shook his head, "there's no other way round it. Effective immediately, I will take your place as his right hand--"

"Over my cold dead body" came the growled reply, as a partially transformed Maito's claws scraped against Jiraiya's throat. "In all my years of existence, never have I raised my voice, much less, my hand to the Master. But if it means furtherance of his plans ... I will do whatever it takes, up to and including ... killing you."

It was but for a moment, long enough to gauge the other creature's reaction as Jiraiya transformed in kind. After a frightful display of his own power, he resumed human form as he stepped back with a hearty laugh. "Willing to go up against me to save our Master? Impressive. But, if you betray my trust, I will strike you down without mercy."

9:35 am - Morning call inside the constabulary: A hush falls over the room as Ryota clambered atop his desk. "We've a cluster of foreign dignitaries just arrived, all of them bearing precious gifts and in the crowds of tourists lurk nefarious criminals. Lest we forget, there's still a mad dog killer on the loose. Slacken not vigilance men … Konoha's reputation rests on your shoulders."

With fifteen hours left on the magistrate's orders, Ibiki stands on the training grounds east of the
constabulary. Before him are seventy uniformed officers and one hundred fifty deputized civilians. "By now," he roared, "all of you should know what Dr. Iruka Umino and his friends look like. You are to detain and search them before they enter house Hatake. If they are found in possession of anything which can be used as a weapon … arrest them immediately. And should they be foolish enough to resist arrest … the use of deadly force is authorized. Now, get outta my sight, get some rest and remember … no alcoholic beverages whatsoever until your shift is over.

Dismissed."

Notes:

I was a huge fan of the original Iron Chef; I wonder how many readers will catch the references. Hint, hint ... Iron Chef French was one of my faves.

"Cold cook": archaic slang for an undertaker.

Roan: having the base color of red, black or brown muted and lightened by an admixture of white hairs; a horse with intermixed white and colored hairs of any color. Blue roan is a true roan on a black coat. The mane, tail, head and legs remain black, while the body takes on a grayish or bluish appearance.

Kiriko: traditional technique of cutting glass, developed in 1834, fostered in the urban culture among townspeople. During the Meiji era, the craft introduced Western equipment and instruments. Beautifully designed glass art, the patterns are carved on the surface of a multi-layered glass so users can enjoy both the transparency and the design. Most designs were based on historical Japanese illustrations and patterns. Very expensive.

A sake set consists of the flask and the cups used to serve the beverage. Sake sets are commonly ceramic, but they can also be made of wood, lacquered wood, or glass. The server of a sake set is a flask called a tokkuri which is generally bulbous with a narrow neck, but it may have a variety of other shapes, including that of a spouted serving bowl. Sake used to be sold by volume in a wooden box measuring cup, which was in turn, used to drink it. The wooden box was said to complement traditionally brewed sake, as it is brewed in a wooden cask.

Kenbishi sake: renown as the first branded sake brewery in Japan; established in 1505. In days of old, Kenbishi was a very popular sake enjoyed by samurai. On the eve of major military battles, a large Kenbishi barrel would be ceremoniously opened. It was believed that sake strengthened the bonds of friendship and established strong loyalty in upcoming battles.
Early afternoon, day of the soiree; somewhere in Water Country.

Uchiha Fugaku, a man renown as a consummate negotiator and excellent judge of horse flesh; he needed not the empty words of soothsayers. Yet simply because this ridiculous ritual lent comfort to his wife, he deigns allow it. And so, with a nod of his head, their prognostications he accepted with grace. What a colossal waste of time, he thought, as three sour looking old men in funny hats pranced about the carriage after anointing him with aromatic oils.

“What a colossal waste of time,” he remembered them saying. “The constellations herald an event momentous which will alter the course of family history.”

For once, those crazy old men spoke truth, he thinks, as the carriage lurches forward on the return trip. History shall record this journey as the genesis of a powerful dynasty. Through my sons and their sons after them, our name shall endure to a thousand generations.

And now with thirty-seven miles betwixt his entourage and Konoha’s northwestern border, Fugaku ponders a future bright. Into the embrace of sumptuous upholstery he sinks, his thoughts drifting to journey’s end; surrounded by a loving family, their eyes alight with pride as the master plan for a legacy everlasting is unveiled. Slack hands lay atop the solander in his lap, as ruminations fanciful skip further ahead. His eyes slip closed as Fugaku settles in, envisioning that special time tonight, when the household lay quiet, as the lamps are extinguished in the secret of his bedchamber. The light of the full moon, illuminating soft curves and needy hands; pillows of silk, wantonly adorned with the unbound ebony hair of his love most true. There in the shelter of devotion unbridled will coherent thought cease and senses overwhelm manners. There would he drink his fill of velvety supple lips and perfumed bosoms, until the night air becomes thick with huffed noises of pleasure and pain and the musky fragrance of arousal transcends eloquence.

Ah yes … tonight. All hail the conquering hero indeed.

From imaginings pleasant is he jostled, an unanticipated yaw sending the solander crashing to the floor. Yet ere his ire rises, the carriage resumes its comforting rock and sway. Gilt edged pedigrees strewn about his feet, are carefully gathered and tucked away. For now, a clatter of iron stirrups, the rumble of wooden wheels and the clatter of hoofbeats upon worn earthen paths will suffice as his concerto of victory. Once more he leans back, a fey grin cemented upon his lips. Eyelids heavy with fatigue he permits succumb to gravity’s persistent tugs; as slumber’s silken cords bind him, a proud chin dips toward chest.

Oi! You gonna sleep your life away, Ruka?”

Scarcely a proper shield against afternoon light, the lump beneath the covers shifts as it pulls the thin sheet over his face. “Five more minutes.”

“Nothing doing. Look alive,” he said clapping his hands above Iruka’s ear.

“Tetsu, you do realize that’s irritating, right?”

“Is it? Well, how bout this,” he asked, poking his finger into the drowsy man’s arm, “is this more, or
less irritating than the clapping?”

Iruka inched away pleading as he went, “Can’t you leave me be for just ten more minutes? I promise--”

“Nope,” he laughed as the poking resumed, “time’s a wastin,’ I’ll have no more of your promises. Comealong, rise and shine, up and at ‘em … and all that.”

“We’ve four hours before we need to be anywhere,” Iruka mumbles, “fifteen more minutes can’t possibly be a damage.”

“Enough of your sass! Here’s the deal, I’m going to the kitchen and if you aint up when I get back...you’ll regret it.”

“Yes, yes, whatever you say my tocsin most beneficent.”

“Hey! Name calling makes it worse, Ruka.”

Recherché

Early afternoon, day of the soiree; the woods of Konoha

In the forests, warm, still and quiet, he feels them; their presence strong and cold as they measure his steps from encampments hidden. Behind stands of wild grasses, from the hollows of trees long decayed, they watch. A contrary wind whistles through the branches and once more, Izumo sharply turns, ducking behind a tree and scanning the landscape; again, there is nothing to see. Stomping through a cluster of toadstools, he steps back onto the path. Still his eyes dart hither and yon even as he bends down to retrieve the bundle by his feet.

A grown man hiding from shadows like a scared child. Come now, he scolds himself, this is ridiculous!

Still, every skitter of leaves and each crunch of twigs beneath his feet forces him cast furtive glances o’er his shoulder. He quickens the pace along the foot worn path thinking,

Am I surprised conscience buffets me? To his face, I give meaningless affirmations of confidence; behind his back, I am in league with a stranger, plotting ways to test his mental competence. May the gods protect me until I can properly confess.

As he scurries along the path, massive black bodies are zigzagging through marshes damp; their glistening eyes recording the distance remaining to his destination, their hairless tails, telegraphing data to their brethren just ahead.

Recherché

As Fugaku falls deeper into sleep, memory doth rehearse itself. Striding down a torch lit corridor, he sees himself ushered into the arena of battle. Standing tall and proud, his expression never changing, even as he hears them whispering behind their hands.

“Surely this old man isn’t the pigeon,” they said. “If he is, then what a letdown; almost like stealing a baby’s candy.”

Others spoke out boldly, pity dripping as honey from their lips, “Now, now,” said they, “mayhaps this old timer has wandered into the wrong room. Go on then, show him a kindness and direct him elsewhere.” One dared draw close, taunting as he squatted down to say, “Oi, jiji, you’re in the
wrong place. This is a serious meeting, one that will likely drag on past your bedtime. What say you shuffle off to a waiting rocking chair, eh?”

With a sly chuckle does he lean forward, elbows pressed to the table, fingers steepled before his lips as the door behind him opens. There’s a scuff of soft slippers as the elders enter the hall; conversation ceases as everyone, except Fugaku, leaps from their seats.

The elders fall to their knees, in anguish they cry out, “Lord Uchiha of Konoha. May the gods have mercy upon us! Our sons are brainless seed of vapid women; they had no idea to whom they were speaking. Please my Lord, lay not to our charge this great dishonor!”

A wave of his hand silences the flood of apologies and bitter regret of the angry young men as they are escorted from the room. And in the end, without much effort on his part, Fugaku walks away with more than expected … six for the price of three.

As another slow smile tracks over his lips, beyond the quiet environs of the carriage, rapid hoof beats and loud voices joggle him awake.

“My Lord,” shouts his captain, “twenty riders under banner approach! The rearguard has advanced and the archers have taken up their positions.”

At once, the solander is thrown into a concealed compartment beneath the bench from which Fugaku extracts a pearl hilt tanto.

So, they’ve come to take what is rightfully mine, have they?

Time to show them what this old man is made of.

Recherché

Early afternoon, day of the soiree; the cabin in the woods

Twice came rebuffs couched with lopsided snickers and slurred refusals; there would not be a third time. Snatching away the thin sheet, Kotetsu leans down, a pitcher of cold water hovering inches above Iruka’s forehead.

“Either get up or get doused … it’s your choice sleeping beauty.”

Beneath him, heavy eyelids flutter open; he finds it difficult distinguishing between the pitcher’s bottom and the arm that held it. Closing his eyes once more, Iruka mumbles, “Well then, I choose five more minutes.”

“Wrong response and you know why,” he said inching the container closer. “When your cousin gets here and finds us screwing around, he’s gonna whinge about it all night.”

“I think not, Tetsu,” he said with a languid stretch and slow-moving smile. “Once he sees how relaxed I am, he’ll be pleased.”

“Are you kiddin’ me? Zumo is a man obsessed with punctuality and responsibility. For goodness sake, he posts daily chore lists and timetables all over the cabin—”

“Surely, he’ll make an exception for me, ‘sides,” he said reaching for the sheet, “I never woulda done this if you hadn’t talked me into it.”

“And if I’d known you were gonna act like this, I never woulda suggested it. Now, are you gonna
get up or what?”

Iruka scooched further away from the droplets of cold water dripping on his forehead. “Fine … I’m up! Happy now?”

“Not yet. Up means eyes open and feet on the floor—”

“Tetsu! My sheets are already soaked with your sweat and now you literally intend to drown me? That’s hardly sporting—”

“What about me, huh?” With a bang, the pitcher slams down on the bedside table. “I was sweatin’ like a farm animal cause I practically carried you all the way from town. Sure I pulled a muscle too … tryna get your clothes off, wrestlin’ ya into bed, not to mention, crawling out from under your solid weight—”

“Wait! You sayin’ I’m fat?” Iruka levered himself upward with a huff, “Need I remind you again that this was your idea? And here I thought you were my good friend—”

“I’ll be your dearly departed, good friend if Zumo finds you lolling about, jelly boned and grinning like an idiot.”

“But, isn’t this,” he gestured to his torpid body, “what you hoped for when you took me--?”

“Actually, it was a thousand times better. It’s not every day the staid Dr. Umino gets kicked outta an establishment for lewd behavior—”

“Yes,” he chuckled while drawing his knees up and wrapping his arms around them, ” irony abounds. A place like that, you’d think they’d be accustomed to loud grunts and moans—”

“Sounds of pleasure weren’t the problem… it was all that caterwaulin’ that did you in Ruka.”

“For the last time, Tetsu, I wasn’t that loud—”

“Wanna bet? Hell, everybody in the joint knew you were gettin’ your kinks worked out—”

“You make it sound … scandalous.” Throwing aside the light sheet, he maneuvered himself to sit at the edge of the mattress. “There was this large, angry man pounding away at my body, how was I supposed to respond? And damned if didn’t keep zeroing in on a small bundle of nerves in my … well, can’t say I remember much after he hit a certain spot—”

“Ruka, after a blood curdling yell, you passed out. You know how embarrassing that was for me?”

“Indeed, what boorish behavior,” came the snide remark. “I do hope forgiveness is within your reach.”

Kotetsu thoughtfully stroked at his goatee, “Hmm … it was funny as hell, Ruka so, I’ll give ya that.”

They looked to each other and burst out laughing.

“Sadder than anything,” Iruka said, “it’s been ages since anyone manipulated my body that way—”

“Explains why you’re such a tight ass all the time.”

Stifling a yawn and stretching his arms above his head, Iruka landed a purposely accidental punch to Kotetsu’s shoulder. “That last comment aside, reckon I am glad you talked me into it.”
“Come again? That kinda sounded like you were tryna say that when I’m right, I’m right … am I right?”

“Fine. I'd forgotten how relaxing a soak in the hot springs and a massage could be, so thanks for suggesting it, okay?”

"Ah, there’s a good man; gratitude, looks good on ya Ruka. Now let’s get moving. You'll splash more cold water on your face, we'll get some hot tea in your belly and you'll be fine. Oh, and not a word of this to Zumo--"

“We’ll have to say something eventually, after all, he holds the purse strings. Man oh man, he's gonna pitch a fit when he finds how much money we--”

“Relax, I already got that bit sorted. First, I tell him we went to the cathouse and then--”

“What? Why would you--?”

“I know you chuckle heads better than you know yourselves, just trust there’s a method to the madness. Zumo is as wound up about this 'maybe' meeting with Hatake as you are. Sure, he’ll blow up, but letting him get it out of his system now benefits all of us in the long run. We’ll be cool, calm and collected tonight, better able to focus on the matter at hand, you know … killing Hatake?”

Notes:

Deign (obsolete): to condescend (to yield, assent).

Augur: to serve as an omen or promise of; foreshadow, betoken.

Tocsin: (archaic) for alarm bell.

Clitter: make a thin, vibratory rattling sound.

Yaw: temporary deviation from a straight course.

Jiji (Japanese): “old geezer.”
Merriment, Mayhem and Murder

Four hours remain until the soiree officially kicks off.

With the guests attended to and the house set in order, Kinoe flops down on the bench at the foot of the Master's upper bedchamber. Down below, inside the quiet vaults, Maito assembles the potions for the constables and readies the altar. And while lord Hatake seemingly lies in repose, a heated skirmish rages inside his body. Kama's power surging through his veins, hatred burns holes into the pit of his being, even as emotions foreign find new life inside a darkened corner of his heart.

Recherché

"… emissaries from the house of Tanaguchi. Prithee ask your master turn aside for a time of rest and replenishment."

As soon as Fugaku heard these words, the tanto slips back into its secret compartment. *If we tarry long, he thinks, I risk needless worry for Mikoto. And if I refuse hospitality from the Tanaguchi, it would mark me a social pariah; Mikoto might not ever get over it and I can't have that.* Upon his say so are they escorted to the manor and treated as royalty. Water and provender for the horses was supplied upon arrival and after a sumptuous meal and good wine, Fugaku and his men are sent on their way with baskets overflowing with gifts for their loved ones.

Recherché

His body relaxed, the mental fog lifting after a second cup of tea, Iruka is still hitting a brick wall with his stubborn friend. "All I'm saying is, why waste time ambushing the man, when we can--?"

"I know what I'm doing m'kay Ruka? All you hafta do is act embarrassed and keep your trap shut."

"I am embarrassed … for you. Tell him the truth and be done with--"

At the sound of three sharp thumps, they look up from their tea.

"For the second time today," Kotetsu said as he stood, "I'm asking ya to trust me, can you do that?"

"Fine, but he's obviously got his hands full; can you at least be nice until he gets inside and drops his bags?"

"That's crazy talk. If I'm too nice, he'll know something is up."

With a sigh and a roll of the eyes, Iruka watched his friend stalk toward the door. "If I live a thousand years, I'll never understand how your mind works."

Kotetsu turns back for a moment, a devious grin in place and his eyes agleam. "Watch and learn, buddy, this is how me and Zumo have fun. Oi, Soup for brains, told ya we didn't need nothing else from the market… and you call *me* hard headed?" Swinging the door open with a playful scowl, he barked,

"Who the hell are you?"

On the other side of the threshold stands a tall, clean scrubbed young man, dressed in a utilitarian long sleeved black shirt and hakama pants. Eighteen years old, if he was a day, his eyes innocent, the color of molten pitch; his features keen, and skin, paper white. *Not necessarily a threat, just weird*
lookin,' Kotetsu thinks as he assumes a defensive posture. "What you need, kid?"

The young man graciously bowed before him. "Good afternoon. I was hoping to speak with," he paused, glancing down at the paper in his hand, "Dr. Umino Iruka?"

"Say what now?"

"Who is it, Tetsu?"

"Hell if I know … some kid," he called over his shoulder, "probably got lost in the woods, looking for a handout or directions. Yeah, but, how did this character know his name? Is he another one of Hatake's minions? When he heard Iruka rise from the table, he moved to shield this person from view. "Alright, state your business and make it snappy."

Iruka comes closer, trying to peer around him; his voice hopeful when he asked, "Sai … is that you?"

At the mention of his name, the young man brightened. "Yes sir?"

"It's okay, let him in Tetsu."

"What!? Have you lost your damn mind?" Puffing himself up, Kotetsu continues blocking the entrance with his body. "What if somebody followed him here?"

"I seriously doubt that, stop being ridicu-"

"Your friend is correct, Dr. Umino … I am being followed. By my reckoning, this man is about fifteen seconds behind me; I believe he's also a friend of yours-?"

"And how would you know who's what?" Kotetsu reached out, poking this Sai person in the chest, "you been spying on us or somethin'?"

"Yes and no," he politely responded, "you see-"

"I've heard enough, beat it punk!

"Tetsu, catch hold of yourself! Sai, come on in, it's alright, this one's bark is worse than his bite."

"True, but mine isn't," Izumo said as he stepped closer to their visitor. "I'm with Tetsu on this one. I'd like to know how he found us before we just let him waltz in here. You workin' with or for Hatake young man?"

"I have no idea what a Hatake is sir," he said turning slightly, "but I did have my friends keep watch over you these last days--'"

"That's it!" This time Kotetsu used the heel of his hand, forcibly pushing the young man backwards, while reaching around him to yank Izumo inside. Another push sent the would-be intruder sprawling. After poking his head outside and scanning the immediate area, he considered the young man's expressionless face. "Friends, eh? I don't see nobody but you-"

"Tetsu, stop it! Help him up."

"Not a chance … are you really that gullible? I mean, he could be anybody!"

Iruka finally succeeded at pulling him from the door frame and with a huff, he extends his hand, pulling Sai to his feet. "See here, I appreciate caution, but would you give us a chance to explain,
Backing away from an angry Iruka, Izumo and Kotetsu exchange chary glances as their visitor steps over the threshold.

"This is my ace in the hole, the one I've been waiting for? My third cousin twice removed? Ring any bells, no? Then allow me present, Shimizu Sai."

Kotetsu sucked at his teeth as he gave the young man the once over. "Seriously? This character is your guy Ruka? Pfft … lot of help he's gonna be in a fight."

Once again, Sai bowed before answering. "I'm no fighter, Mr. Tetsu-"

"Yeah, I see that. Hell, it's a wonder you can even stand on your own, what with a gigantic scroll strapped to your back; damn thing probably weighs more than you do."

"And how is it," wondered Izumo, "nobody noticed him walking around town with that thing? That would have been a juicy bit of gossip … and I didn't hear anything about it while I was in the washerwomen's shop."

"That's because I never went into the town, sirs … well, not directly." He took a few steps forward as the others backed away. "When I arrived here almost a week ago, it was on the inside of a shipping crate, which was eventually offloaded in a barn near the silk mills. I slept there at night and spent my days scoping out vantage points in the forests near the-"

"So that's why you're so pale and scrawny. I bet he aint had a good meal since he got here. Fine, never let it be said that I aint got a heart. I don't mind feedin' ya, but you and your imaginary friends aint stayin' here, got it?"

"Tetsu!"

"What? Like we need a malnourished noncombatant to worry about--"

"Please sirs, I will not inconvenience you. And for the record, Mr. Tetsu, this is my normal appearance; my diet consisted of berries and fish from the streams-"

"Okay kid … you're resourceful, I'll give ya that. Still think you're a strange little fella."

"Let me handle this," Izumo chided, as he laid the package in his arms on the chair by the door. "Now then Sai, do tell how you found us."

"With pleasure, but I think comprehension will come quicker if you allow me to introduce my friends," he said, releasing the large scroll from his waist. "Gentlemen, would you mind standing over there, by the table?"

Izumo and Iruka struggle to pull a glaring Kotetsu away as Sai begins unfurling the scroll. Even before he stood erect, his fingers were flying through intricate signs, mouthing the words of what they assumed was a powerful incantation.

His hands stilled, the movement of his lips ceased, his eyes fluttered and then … nothing.

A few moments pass and still … nothing.

Just as Kotetsu folded his arms across his chest and opened his mouth, they hear the noise of skittering against the cabin walls; quiet at first, it grows louder as the seconds tick past. Suddenly, a
swarm of black mice begins squeezing themselves under the door, through the windows and in the middle of slats in the walls. Between one breath and the next, a writhing, squeaking blanket of rodents are blocking the only exit. Obediently do they line up before the scroll, their eyes fixed on their summoner. Sai bows his head and with a snap of his fingers, the vermin cannibalize one another until only a dozen large sewer rat looking things are left. These in turn waddle onto the blank paper; lying flat in five rows, they transform from animated creatures into matte, two dimensional drawings. And as the stunned trio lets out a collective breath, Sai claps his hands over the scroll and the drawings become neatly printed Kanji.

"Hmm," he said, "I see you've traveled a great deal since arriving in Konoha; the wharf, an inn, the constabulary, Administrative complex, the Fire Temple--"

"Good god! He's a witch!"

"Oh no, Mr. Tetsu, female workers of magic are witches, men are warlocks; I am simply an artist with special abilities. And to answer your question Mr. Zumo, I took the letter Dr. Umino sent and fed pieces of it to the mice while I was in the barn. The style of his writing and the pressure exerted by his palm on the paper … that's what led my friends to your location."

"Neat trick for finding living, breathing humans kid," snapped Kotetsu, "but what we're looking for is a demon. How do you and your little 'friends' propose to do that smart ass?"

"Tetsu!"

"I don't know what the hell he's talking about--"

"Perhaps if you let me finish this time, sir, you won't be as confused."

"Why you little-"

"Hush now," Iruka said, "go on Sai."

He inclined his head and continued, "Every being leaves behind traces of their aura wherever they go, and every aura is unique. With me so far, Mr. Tetsu?"

"Quit callin' me that, kid … name's Kotetsu."

"Alright, and you may call me Sai."

"You're itchin' for a rap in the mouth, aren't ya punk?"

"Calm down slugger."

"Thank you, Mr. Zumo … as I was saying, everything has an aura, even gaki. They leave behind slime deposits, indiscernible to humans, but my mice are trained to see and track them. Spirits are trickier since they aren't much more than vapor, however, all vapor dissipates into the atmosphere and eventually settles on the flora and fauna. When the mice eat the leaves, blades of grass or flower stems, they digest that information and can distinguish for me what type of spirit has frequented the area."

"So what? Hatake aint gonna be afraid of no mice."

"Right, but chances are, he won't be suspicious of them either," Izumo said. "All we need do is match the floor plans we already have with the information the mice provide to Sai and then bingo bango … the location of Hatake's lair is at our fingertips."
"I don't know. This kid is a shaman or somethin', what if Hatake figures out his mice are magic things too? What's stopping him from tracing the mice back to this weird guy and turning him against us?"

"Absolutely nothing. But like the three of you, I also possess powerful talismans. I assure you, no demon or Hatakes will come near me."

"Bully for you, kid."

"Yes … bully. In my treks through the forests, I discovered a massive buildup of spiritual energy centered in the north, near the cemetery. The past few days it's been flowing like a river through the town, but just last night it started raging like a flood, which leads me to believe the demon you're hunting is enthroned nearby."

"The full moon is supposed to be closer to earth tonight," Iruka confirmed, "makes sense."

"I'd already planned to set up camp in the forests beyond the cemetery, so I can keep an eye on activity in that area. If you'd like, Dr. Umino, I can send updates to you via messenger-"

"Can't you draw anything aside from creepy little mice?"

"I'll be happy to draw birds or butterflies, or are you fearful of them as well, Mr. Tetsu?"

"Look ya little jackass-"

"Idle your engine," Izumo said as he physically held his friend in check. "Sai is gonna make things easier for us, least you could do 'Mr. Tetsu,' is be gracious."

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**Recherché**

*Day of the event, 5:00pm: Governor Senju's private residence.*

Turning her toward the vanity, the hairdresser held her breath as Lady Tsunade evaluates the image in the mirror. "Looks good," she said at last. "I should be back by half past seven. Until then ladies, she's all yours to pluck, powder and primp as you please. There now, Shizune, don't look so frightened-"

"I appreciate all you've done ma'am, but this is so-"

"Hush. You deserve a little pampering; relax and enjoy yourself … that's an order."

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**Recherché**

*Day of the event, 5:15pm: Inside the constabulary*

A crisply pressed dress uniform hangs on the coat rack near the door, silently does it mock and judge him. A too many times folded arrest warrant lies in the center of his desk, beside an impossibly pristine invitation; one shaming, the other emboldening. He'd raced here hoping to find sanctuary in controlled chaos, alas all was quiet and calm; no pressing paperwork requiring his attention or signature and no interruptions to derail his train of thought.

*Time running out; I gotta little bit of everything … and a whole lot of nothing.*

He leaned to the side, his arm swinging limply as he fumbled about for the release lever on the bottom desk drawer. Relieved when at last his fingertips bump against cool glass, a shaky hand grabs
hold the prize. *Been years since our lips met. Didn't think I'd need you again this soon.* A half empty bottle of whiskey settles with a thump and welcome slosh between the warrant and the invite. His mouth twitches into a grin as the cork slides loose, its aroma biting at his nose. *Shit … hafta remain clear headed, but I sure as hell don’t want to.* With an exhalation of regret is the bottle returned to its hiding place and in one fell swoop, the two pieces of paper find their way into a breast pocket. He rises with resolve renewed, forcing one foot in front of the other until he can snatch the uniform from its hook and head down the quiet hallway.

"Ah, I was just thinking to send someone after you; it's gettin' late," Ryota said when Ibiki paused before his desk. "Been a helluva day, we had fifty civilian volunteers sign up. Already deputized 'em ... figured they could help patrol the docks and monitor the taverns tonight. What say you, Inspector?"

"Huh? Umm, yeah that's fine. Frees up more officers."

"Same thing I thought. I've tasked the mounted patrol to increase surveillance around the manor homes, Aoba and his men are already in place and that detachment should be near house Hatake by now."

"You buckin' for a promotion or somethin'?"

"Nope, just doing my job, making sure you have less to worry about this evening. But if you insist on authorizing a bonus for me, who am I to argue? Pretty sure the forms are somewhere in all this clutter-"

"I don't really want to do this, Ryota."

"So that's the way of it huh, don't think I deserve--?"

"Relax old man, I’m talking about this … party thing."

"Then think of tonight as an investigation," he said, while rummaging through one of his desk drawers. "You’re going there to gather information, that’s all. Some of your best men are gonna be there to assist and I'll catch you up later." As the authorization found its way toward Ibiki’s hand, he added, "Sign this first. I gotta get these new figures to the Comptroller before six thirty, elsewise these chits won't be worth the paper they're written on."

Ibiki chuckled as the pen was pressed into his hand. "Because you've left me no other reason to hang around here and wrangled a bonus outta me, I best leave now, before I'm tricked into something else. Reckon I oughta head to the barber, make myself presentable--"

"Heya Ryota … Inspector," says Genma as he sidles up to the Watch Commander's desk. "Couldn't help overhearing; you know, I could shave ya myself Inspector … no charge."

Ibiki didn't bother looking up to wisecrack, "I'm not that cheap. Nothing personal Genma, but shaving is one activity I like being vertical for."

"Got it," he chuckled, "meanwhile, you gents still taking volunteers?"

"We're all full up," Ryota said, "sorry."

“I see, well, if you need somebody to, you know … fetch dinner, file paperwork, empty the bins or somethin' ... I'm available."

"Ryota, leave a note to that effect for the night commander."
"I don't care what anybody says about you Inspector, you're okay in my book. Right then, I'm off. Reckon I'll see ya round."

They watch in silence as the dejected man shuffles out the door.

"Talk about off? Can't remember the last time I saw him so depressed, you Ibiki?"

"Nah, but between you, me and the lamppost, I hope he has reason to stay like that for a few days."

Recherché

*Day of the event, 5:37 pm: Inuzuka compound*

Soon would the sun set, as if it mattered to the ranch hands and farmers standing in the line which extended from the barn door to the front gate.

"Damn it man," Tsume fussed as she strode toward him, "thought you asked the Governor to send-?"

"Quit your griping woman!" The crowded barn fell silent as Idate rose from his seat. "These people need our help and by god … we're gonna do what we can, with what we have, understand? Now, get back to work!"

Eyes wide and mouth agape, a stunned Tsume takes two steps forward and one step back while Idate reclaims the overturned chair. Terrified workers peel their backs from the barn's walls, scurrying hither and yon to complete their assigned duties. Only Hana dares approach him from behind, her arms falling around his neck as she plants a kiss on his cheek.

"I like it when you're so forceful, dearest," she whispers.

"I know," he said with a smile, "and we both know there's gonna be hell to pay around the dinner table this evening."

With a blush rising in her cheeks, Hana further lowered her voice, "No doubt, but I promise to make it all better … tonight."

Recherché

*Day of the event, 6:00pm: Outside the Administrative complex*

Amulets stuffed into every available pocket and shoved inside their socks, three nattily dressed young men await transportation.

"A soak and a massage," Izumo said, "why didn't I think of that?"

"Cause I'm an unsung genius," Kotetsu boasted. "How many times do I hafta tell ya?"

Izumo left off an answer as a stately vehicle pulled round the corner. "Moment of truth gents," he whispered, "ready?"

"Me, I was born ready-"

"Okay, just remember Tetsu, we're supposed to gather information and show ourselves friendly; don't start nothin', we clear?"

"You suck the "f" outta fun, you know that Zumo?"
"Your guests have safely arrived, my Lord and are enjoying refreshments in the salon."

His master absently runs his fingers over the strings of a cherished violin, never turning about to face his servant. “What a tragic headline … three members of the Advisory Council taking a twenty-minute ride to the Hatake gala … all dead on arrival,” he sighed. "Still, I’ll put on a brave face, my heart heavy as I muddle through tonight’s festivities. What think you, Kabuto? In such a small amount of time, can I possibly muster sufficient shock and dismay at their passing?"

"I have no doubt … no one could do it better than you, Lord Orochimaru. Now, you will excuse me, I've left a completely stocked sweets table at the mercy of an Akimichi." As Kabuto turned about, the smug grin melted from his lips when he saw the door handle's slow downward turn.

"Aha," said Danzou as he entered the conservatory, "knew you'd be hiding in here."

"Naturally, we are but creatures of habit, old friend. You know well a bit of music calms me before large gatherings and I know, listening to me play calms you as well. Go now Kabuto, attend the comfort of my other dear friends…. we'll be along directly.""

"As you wish, my Lord."

Orochimaru waits until the door clicks closed before turning himself about. "This night will be filled with merriment and dancing, yet at this very moment, my soul cries out for something melancholy. You think that strange Lord Danzou?"

"Not in the least, for that would have been my request had you not spoken it first."

"Come then … take a seat at my right hand."

Solemnly does Orochimaru position the instrument atop his shoulder, his eyes slipping closed as bow skids over strings. Music mournful, reverberates inside the room, and as the final notes hang in the air, Danzou draws in a breath.

"Splendid! You know," he said reaching inside the sleeve of his kimono, "I've been meaning to give these to you for ages. Another gift for your collection."

Orochimaru reverently lays aside the violin, taking hold the proffered package with both hands. Unwrapping the silken pouch with care, his fingers gingerly run the length of the prize contained therein. "My word," he breathed, "a shakuhachi … fingering chart and notations? I didn't think these still existed."

"Well they were hard to come by, yet I searched high and low for a special gift to celebrate our friendship. Do they not please you?"

"It is your generosity that leaves me humbled … and speechless. These shall have places of honor among my growing Danzouana," he replied, heading toward a glass encased cabinet on the other side of the room.

Danzou rose, following close behind him. "There's something else I must share. I've given our last conversation a great deal of thought and as usual … you're right. Once we force that Senju woman from office, only one of us is fit to become the next Governor of the territory."
"Is that so? What a relief to know you've finally come to your senses," Orochimaru said while covertly palming one of the ornamental daggers from the cabinet.

"Yes, and that one man ... is me, old friend."

He turned slowly, wanting to look his friend in the eyes for the last time. A soundless scream freezes on his face as lancinating pain spreads through his midsection; there's a look of shock and betrayal in his eyes as the knife twists and turns, tearing through the greater omentum, puncturing intestines and lacerating his stomach. Danzou's grin stretches wider as he maneuvers the knife forward and backward, slicing up the liver of his closet friend.

"And so, it ends," Orochimaru manages as the knife retracts, only to plunge itself deep into the side of his neck. "I'll see you in hell!"

No sooner does he crumple to the floor the clock chimes the half hour and Danzou falls to his knees beside him. And now for the rest, he thinks as the bloody tanto slips back inside his sleeve.

Unbeknownst to him, Kabuto was standing in the center of the room; the tea set and heavy silver platter crashing to the floor as he ran to his Master's aid.

"My god! What happened?"

"Stupid argument," Danzou splutters as he attempts to stand, "he pulled a knife ... tried to take it from him; quickly now, fetch a doctor!"

Having seen the blood soaking into the rug, the stunned servant took off running for the exit. Danzou stayed where he was, looking down into the unseeing eyes of the man he shared half his life with. Suddenly he hears the footfalls of an enraged Kabuto running full tilt toward him. He can't move fast enough to evade the long blade before it runs through the space between his shoulder blades. A final breath catches in his throat as he hears Kabuto say, "That's for my Master, and this," he shouts as the blade forces itself through the pericardium of a still beating heart, "this one's for me."

In the stillness of the room, it takes a moment before reality becomes clear.

Kabuto kneels, checking the Master's pulse, finding none, he gentles closes Orochimaru's lifeless eyes. Using the hem of Danzou's kimono, he wipes clean the bloodied blade. His breathing settles to normal as he stands; a single tear streaking down his cheek. The katana, which he didn't remember from whence it came nor how it found its way into his hand, falls free of his grasp, landing atop the rug without a sound. Carefully does he check his clothing for traces of blood before slowly walking away. Arriving in the salon, he's the epitome of a polished liar as he tells the other guests, "I'm afraid Lords Orochimaru and Danzou have been unavoidably detained. Nonetheless, my Master prays you avail yourselves of the carriage." He forced a smile as he stood in the open front door, a cheery wave he gives as the Akimichi and the Nara are sent off into the darkness of their last night on earth. Ascending the quiet staircase to the Master's bedchamber, his thoughts turn to his own security and safety. Leaving the manor for the final time, his heart as heavy as the valise stuffed with cash and gold coins, Kabuto makes his way from the kitchen entrance to the stables. Saddling up one of the Master's prized mares, he vanishes into the woods.

Recherché

6:47 pm: The master of the manor, Lord Hatake, rises from slumber as the moon begins its ascent.

The death toll stands at two ... for now.
Notes:

Primp: to dress or groom with meticulous or excessive attention to detail.

Lancinating: characterized by a piercing or stabbing sensation.

Shakuhachi: An end blown flute originally introduced from China into Japan during the 6th century; traditionally made of bamboo. It was primarily used by the monks of the Fuke sect of Zen Buddhism. Their songs, paced according to the players’ breathing, were considered meditation as much as music. Beginning in 1868, the playing of the shakuhachi was officially forbidden for a few years, however, when the Meiji government did permit the playing of shakuhachi again, it was only as an accompanying instrument to certain stringed instruments.

-ana: a suffix that forms collective nouns denoting an assembly of items, as household objects, art, books, or maps, or a description of such items, as a bibliography, all of which are representative of or associated with the place, person, or period named by the stem.

Greater omentum: a large, apron like fold of the peritoneum (a serous membrane that forms the lining of the abdominal cavity; it covers the organs and serves as a passageway for blood and lymphatic vessels and nerves), it extends from the greater curve of the stomach, passes in front of the small intestines and doubles back to ascend to the transverse colon before it reaches back to the posterior abdominal wall.

Jiji (Japanese): “old geezer.”
More Merriment, Mayhem and Murder

Recherché

"Please, help me."

Into a life of service was he born, no other existence he knew; the overflowing valise, his ticket to a better life. He had the wits to play the role of an eccentric mountebank, but he'd lost the heart. What he needed was time … time to empty his head of the grotesque images left behind on the conservatory floor … time to organize his thoughts, to determine a new identity for himself.

"Please, help me."

Every estate had two parcels of land designated as escape routes, accessible either through underground tunnels or through a maze of timber adjacent the property; one led to the northern border, the other southeast to the sea shores. His course was plotted ere they turned onto the ancient path; they'd weave through the forests, hiding in shadows cast by moon beams filtering through the trees.

"Please, help me."

Broadcast from parts unknown, the discontinuous supplications echoed the cry of his heart; ignore them he must, his survival imperative. Kabuto was a man at ill liberty, one without a home, a purpose and now … without a country. Convinced it was only his mind playing tricks, he spurs the horse onward, faster and faster they fly along well trampled paths; still, the voice outside him grows in its urgency and volume.

"Please, help me."

Ahead in the clearing stands a woman, a reddish mist swirling about her feet. Her clothing suggests she hails from a noble house though she sways undignified, as a common woman bereft, her head and arms lifted to the heavens, shamelessly imploring the gods:

"Please, help me."

Curious, he turns the horse aside when suddenly, the woman fell to her knees, tears streaming down her cheeks, her body trembling as if she might break in half.

So beautiful her pain, so exquisite her torture, he cannot look away.

Cautious, he brings the horse to halt not more than twenty paces from where she knelt. Better judgment thrown to the winds, he calls,

"What ails you woman?"

His presence and question the woman does not acknowledge, instead her mournful entreaty continues unabated.

"Please, help me."

He thinks to continue onward, to quit this place at once … again, he cannot. Closer and closer he comes, stopping only when he sees four more women emerge from the woods, each one as beautiful as the first, the same reddish mist swirling about their feet and clad in robes identical; each of them
chanting the same refrain.

"Please, help me."

They come together in the clearing, falling to their knees, their voices in unison. The ground beneath his mount rumbles, sinking inward upon itself; twisted roots and whistling vines, spring up through soft loam, rapidly do they wind themselves about his paralytic body. His mount hobbled, they crash to the ground. Anon do the women trap him in their sights as the chorus reaches a crescendo, the lyric altered a whit, the women rise together; sinuously do they inch toward him, their voices blending as one.

"Help us please."

Alas, vigor has forsaken him as he makes a vain attempt at freedom. Helpless, he watches the vines and roots squeeze life and breath from his mount. Panic overtakes him, yet the scream he hears inside his head, never finds its way past his lips. It seems but an instant before the women are upon him as lionesses encircling their prey.

"Help us carry out the will of our Master."

Their cries of pain turn to derisive laughter as they fall upon him; their beautiful faces taking on the appearance of shrunken skulls, their voluptuous bodies melting before his eyes, as the women become corpulent masses of shimmering green, oozing putrid yellow slime. Their eyes, blood red and with fangs bared, they rip and tear into his flesh and that of his mount.

Recherché

And the death toll stands at three.

Between greeting and announcing incoming guests, Kinoe makes time to serve tea to those constables charged with guarding the interior and front lawns of the estate. Maito also busies himself, delivering the same potion laden refreshment to Ibiki's men hidden in the forests. Knowing the potion will do no permanent or traceable harm to the men, Kinoe and Maito smile through their respective amusement and ire. Apart from rendering them incapable of recognizing or preventing Dr. Umino and friends, tomorrow will these men awaken, slightly groggy, their memories partially infarcted.

"How did you know where to find us?"

was the oft asked question of the evening and Maito's response never varied. "I was blessed with a keen sense of smell which my Master harnesses for the amusement of his guests," he said time and again. "Lord Hatake would be honored if you fine officers partook of this, a small token of his gratitude and hospitality."

Recherché

The carriage bearing the banner of house Kokucho finally pulls to the front of the line; it's driver hurriedly alighting his perch.

"Quickly," he calls to a nearby uniformed officer, "my passengers … something is terribly wrong!"

Running to the carriage, the patrolman finds two men clutched in death's icy throes, their faces purple, lips cyanotic. Commandeering the vehicle, he crazily steers it down the steep driveway, racing toward the now shuttered Coroner's office.

Recherché
And the death toll stands at five.

This early in the evening and the plaza was jammed with people, as were the shorelines. Even the grassy knolls were running out of available space. Vendors didn’t seem to mind the press and the shops along the avenues were still doing brisk business at this late hour. Good for them, he thought, but what he didn’t see was the usual group of opportunists normally drawn to large gatherings. No need for concern, just trust that my men and their deputies are on their toes tonight.

As he worked his way through the throng of revelers, many of them turned to offer up limp fingered salutes as they stepped out of his way, others oohed and aahed as he passed by. There was no denying he cut an impressive figure … towering over pleasantly tipsy party goers in a dress uniform that pinched a tad round the middle still, they may have been angling away because he reeked of bay rum. Their motives mattered little to Ibiki.

Damn wiseacre tourists, he thought as the crowd bobbed and weaved about him.

He turned a deaf ear to the catcalls and whistles coming from the front door and open windows of the constabulary as he finally made it to the stables. But he could scarcely hold back a chuckle when Mayonaka was lead out; a highly polished saddle, an ornately plaited mane and his silver studded bridle shining like new money. "Now I don't feel so bad," he said, "you look as silly as I do."

Mayonaka shook his head and began walking back toward an open field behind the stable.

"Okay, get back here. Look," he confided as he grabbed the reins, "I didn't wanna get all gussied up either, but like it or not, we've gotta do what we gotta to get the job done. But what say we kill some time first? We could drop by the morgue... see Genma; he always has treats for ya?"

Another shake of Mayonaka's head nixed that idea.

"Alright, how bout we run by the docks, see how the men are faring?" Once again, Mayonaka turned to walk away. "I get it, you don't wanna be seen by your stable mates and I don't wanna hang around here any longer either. I've got another idea, trust me on this one. There's a good man."

Sitting tall in the saddle, they eschew the main roads, opting for the circuitous route to Hatake manor. By the time they cross the boundary where the cottages end, and the grasslands begin, the arrest warrant and invitation are burning holes in his pocket. Veering off the path, he pats himself down for something of great import.

Do or die time, and wouldn't you just know it?

Tonight, of all nights, I left home without my flask.

Recherché

With each man considering what lay ahead, the interior of the coach was enveloped in awkward silence for most of the journey. Slumped against the window's ledge, Kotetsu stares out into the darkness, his thumb worrying at a neatly trimmed goatee; at the opposite end of the bench, Izumo sits hunched forward, forearms braced against his thighs, his thumbs twiddling. Iruka occupies the long bench across from them; pressed tightly against the plush backrest, his eyes are closed and his breathing even.

Not wanting to disturb, yet needing to inform, Izumo loudly clears his throat and says, "Iruka? I know you have a few things on your mind right now … but I'm afraid I need to add another."

A weary sigh accompanies the opening of his eyes. "Took you long enough ... go on, you think Sai is off his rocker too, don't you?"
"Course not. The kid's a gifted artist, they're supposed to be a little … different." Straightening all the better to look Iruka in the eyes, he quietly adds, "If only he were the problem." One more deep breath and the words rush out,

"It's me, Iruka … crossed a line I shouldn't have."

"Sounds serious, but trouble not," he said as his eyes slipped closed. "Whatever you've done, I'm sure it's fixable."

"Really, can you unring a bell?"

"Dagnabit," Kotetsu whines, "you're as bad as that Coroner! Say what ya hafta say or shut up, damn!"

The withering "don't rush me" look shot to his left was met with irritated silence. Sustained silence, nonetheless. Slowly he turns to face his bewildered cousin. "The thing is … I felt compelled to seek advice from Lady Tsunade; we ended up in a place I never intended-"

"Well, that explains why you were so long returning this afternoon," Iruka answered with a smirk, "but I know how it goes. Once you get her wound up, she'll go on and on."

"Yes, but when I saw her isn't relevant to the story … it's what I did while I was with her that-"

"Sheesh!" Kotetsu pipes up again, "Never woulda pegged her as your type. I mean … she's old-"

"I did nothing untoward so kindly drag your mind from the gutter. Look, Iruka, I went to see her because I was concerned. Told her about the nightmares and visions you were having-"

"Okay, not sure why that would be any of her business Zumö, but you needn't be on edge. I'm not angry-"

"Not yet. Here's the thing, Lady Tsunade isn't just a government official, she's a practitioner of Kampo. I had hope she'd be able to help you."

At the mention of the ancient therapy, Iruka opens his eyes. "And there we have it," he sneered, "you think I'm the crazy one."

"No, Iruka, I thought you were under stress, not crazy. Bothered me to see you in pain so, I went behind your back and spoke out of turn. Betrayed your trust … I'm sorry."

Iruka leans forward with a gentle smile to slap Izumo on the wrist. "There … you've been punished. Zumö, because your heart was in the right place and I'm big enough to forgive your well intentioned blabbermouthery, think no more of it. Hell," he chuckled, "I might have done the same thing if the situation were reversed."

"Whew! That's a load off. Then you won't mind letting her do an evaluation?"

"How's that now?"

"You think me inconsiderate, huh? What the hell are we supposed to do after they lock him up in the nuthouse Zumö?"

"Mind your beeswax," Iruka cautioned, "nobody's getting locked up-"

"I'm not so sure about that," Izumo said, his gaze shifting to the friend on his left. "I think one of us might … especially if Hatake has someone checking the guests for weapons, eh, Tetsu?"
"How did this suddenly turn on me? What makes you think I got weapons?"

"Might have something to do with the clanking noises I heard when you stepped into the carriage. Right then, hand 'em over. Don't make me pat you down."

"Like to see ya try and anyways, how am I supposed to protect myself, huh?"

"Protection is the job of the amulets," Izumo said as he turned in his seat and held out his hand.

"This is one of those times where I really don't like you Zumo."

"I'm heartbroken … now give."

Mumbling curses under his breath, Kotetsu dug deep inside his pockets and sulkily brought out one dagger, two kakute and two sets of knuckledusters. "You're both jackasses. Here, take 'em, and don't come crying to me if you get yourselves killed."

"Honestly, we've been invited to an upper crust, fancy dress gala, not a barroom brawl."

"Where'd you get those things," Iruka wondered aloud, "and how long have you been hiding them from us?"

"Oh yeah, like we know all your secrets, Ruka. Leave me alone!"

"Enough! Tetsu, stop pouting and listen. I'm gonna put these right here in the compartment under the seat. If you behave yourself tonight, you might get them back when we get home."

"Who are you, my father? Alrighty then, if we're gonna play that game, I demand that you empty your pockets, Zumo."

Naturally, the bickering escalated and show and tell progressed to extremes after that.

While inching unnoticed toward the opposite window, Iruka thought,

_If I agree with Tetsu's logic, Zumo will be offended but, if I look exasperated with their antics, neither of them will suspect anything. I'll take that chance. Last thing I wanna do now is explain why I've got an amulet stitched to the inside of my breast pocket and Father's dagger tucked inside my waistband._

Notes:

Mountebank: a person who deceives others, especially to trick them out of money.

Sinuous: of a serpentine or wavy form; marked by strong lithe movements.

Infarct: a small localized area of dead tissue which results from a lack of blood supply.

Partake: receive or have a share or portion.

Kakute: basically, rings with spikes. Usually worn with the spikes hidden in the palm as the kakute's main advantage lay in its grip. One ring would be worn on the middle finger while a second ring might be placed in the thumb. Gaining a firm grip on an opponent was the primary purpose of these weapons.

Knuckledusters: brass knuckles.
Ring O' Ring of Roses, Pocketful of Posies

Recherché

Makibishi Bosky … was Konoha’s first line of defense from days of old.

This densely populated, five miles long area of evergreens had alternately served as a base for the monks guarding the Daimyo and locus of control for samurai and an immigration checkpoint. The mounted patrol took over the Daimyo’s residence years ago, maintaining it as a station house and temporary holding center. Nowadays, it is but a mile marker and point of interest for travelers.

Historical records provide this was an area birthed of necessity. Three large families, the Senju, Hyuga and Nara, reportedly ringed their properties with saplings to keep them safe from the land grabbing Uchiha clan. Legend claims the trees in this area sprang up to their current height in one night because of the monk’s continuous prayers and a spell cast by the Hyuga. The then Governor of the territory, Senju Hisao, ordered a horticultural excavation to lay to rest these fables which were stifling trade with nations to the north. It concluded the bones of a thousand samurai warriors fertilized and nourished this, the richest soil in Konoha.

But that discovery only gave strength to the folklore, leading many to believe the trees were possessed of sentiency.

Even to this day, citizens credit these woods with the ability to judge the thoughts and intents of all who enter. If a heart is filled with good, a traveler can make it to the other side unscathed, but if evil, the woods would rain down pine needles of iron upon them.

Nary a man in the entourage would ever admit they accepted as true these superstitions, nonetheless, every one of them offered up silent thanks to the gods for safe passage. And as they gathered around the carriage, Fugaku stood on the running board for another ritual instituted by his wife; the selection of a volunteer to precede the caravan and announce the lord of the manor’s imminent return. It started as a private joke between the lord and lady Uchiha with Fugaku questioning whether the advance warning was sufficient for potential suitors to scale down the manor walls.

“Just barely,” Mikoto always said.

Smiling at the memory as a volunteer stepped forward, Fugaku points to the lucky young man saying, “Make haste! Inform Lady Uchiha beware, for the Master approaches. And as the one designated to carry the power of my name, you will order the cooks to bring forth choice foods and wine, for tonight … we celebrate!”

This was always met with cheers and loud whoops as the rider took off at high speed toward the compound.

Under the light of a moon inordinately huge and bright, his men brimmed with jubilation as the caravan begins rolling toward home and hearth.

It took less than fifty minutes before the messenger returned breathless.

On heavy night air floated the noise of angry voices; above the squeal of carriage brakes, Fugaku pokes his head out the window:

“What goes on out there?”
“Trouble not, my Lord … the runner stands before us moonstruck."

His message could wait no longer, and the wiry young man slipped free of those intending to keep him captive. “My Lord,” he shouted, “the manor lies in darkness! Nary a soul stirs--"

“What hell possesses you to lie to--?”

“It is no falsehood,” he said, turning to face the man who bopped him in the head. “I know what I saw!”

As the crowd of men press in on him, one voice rang out above the clamor. “This lad is a fantast with a timid constitution. I pray you my Lord, grant him none humour for he speaks as one mad.”

Fugaku lifted his hand and quelled the crowd, “I'll be the judge of that.”

“Nay,” roared the captain of the guard as he worked his way through the crowd, “permit me send another, one who can tell his left from right.”

Ignoring their words, Fugaku crooked his fingers to the runner. “Stand aside men, do nothing to prevent his approach.”

With a grimace and stifled curse, the young man rubbed at the back of his head as he’s shoved toward the carriage. “My Lord, I speak the truth. As I stood on the road, I could feel the darkness--”

“Hmm … feel darkness, can you? Tell me plain, have we been away so long you've forgotten where you live? Or is it possible you looked upon the wrong house?’’

"Mayhaps” was the reluctant whisper, “afeared I was, my Lord.”

His answer was met with another gale of sighs, hisses and booing. Again, Fugaku raised his hand to quiet them. “And as you stood on the roadside, did it occur to you my family might be awaiting arrival of these champions, inside the stables?’’

“No, sir, it did not.”

“I see. And are you now finding strength within to prove wrong your accusers?’’

“I … I believe so my Lord.”

“Herein stands opportunity for correction. I adjure you, return with a squad of four and after a thorough search of the grounds, I believe you will see it is as I've said.”

The young man bowed low, stammering out a higgledy-piggledy fusion of apology and gratitude. And after the five men head out, the captain of the guard draws near. “For the abundance of mercy shown, I thank you my Lord.”

"Tis nothing. We do well to hold tight anger, for he is but a child. If we leave him redeem himself, something like this shan't happen again,” Fugaku said as he settled back inside the carriage.

“IT was his first journey outside the territory after all, and most manor homes do appear similar from the roadside. I bow before wise counsel. With your permission, we shall journey onward.”

As the carriage lurched forward, Fugaku thought, Wise counsel?

Or have I reached new heights of hypocrisy?
Ryota stands a few yards away, watching Genna stagger from the constabulary. *That poor bastard ... drunker than a skunk; reckon I’d do the same if I were him.* Sadly shaking his head, he walks up the stairs and deposits the certified chits on the night commander’s desk. “Coroner eh? What’d he want?”

The other man shrugged his shoulders. “Mumbled something about the Inspector ordering him to empty all the bins; he weren’t hurting nothin’, so I left him to it.”

Recherché

At long last, the caravan arrives at the bottom of the hill upon which the manor stands; it is here the horses refuse to go further. Frustrated riders whip and spur them onward until they reach the driveway’s halfway point. It started with the horses pulling the carriage; as soon as they reared up, it was as if a switch simultaneously flipped inside the other horse’s brains. Spooked, every horse bucks off its rider and in a frenzy, they begin backing away from the manor.

“Fetch torches from the stoop,” shouts the captain, “and for those unharmed, bring your mounts under control at once!”

From the carriage window Fugaku bellows, “The gates will hold the rest … calm my champions and get them to the stable immediately!”

No sooner than the three men run toward the house, the light of the moon is obscured by clouds. They’re almost at the terminus of the driveway when confronted by strange indentations in the thick grasses. As they turn aside, the veil of clouds parts from the moon, it’s yellow light revealing the crumpled body of the runner; the other four men lay nearby, each one with his throat severed to a point just shy of decapitation.

And the death toll now stands at ten.

Recherché

*Here's to me ... a flippin' geniush!* The shot glass slams to the table as Genna reckons he’s had enough. *Oughta lock the door, nah ... skip it,* he thinks before turning about to happily stumble toward the rear of the building.

*Aint nobody gonna break in and sure as hell ... aint nobody gonna break out.*

Recherché

The sound of retching fills the air as bouncing torchlight wends toward the stalled coach.

“My Lord … advance party … a fate dreadful! Slaughtered before the entrance way; the door to the manor stands ajar …!”

Fugaku can’t wait for a servant’s assistance, instead he flings open the carriage door from the inside and hits the ground at a dead run, his men struggling to keep up with him. Speeding up the gravel drive, his mind’s eye takes him back to the young men he shamed in Water Country.

*Impossible, even with the stopover, they could not have prevented us. And I will not believe the Tanaguchi were part of a ruse to waylay us.*

With each body he sees by the entrance, fear tears at his innards.
Bounding up the steps and through the open door, he’s confronted with floors wet and glistening; the torchlight from the men coming behind reveal walls splattered with blood and bodies strewn about like broken dolls.

*Oh my god, Mikoto … where are you?*

Six other men now join the party crowded into the foyer. Slowly they walk deeper inside to stand near the bottom of the grand staircase.

“Search the upstairs for signs of life” Fugaku whispers, “neglect not the lower levels.”

“My Lord, light shines under the door of your study. Right, four of you will take mounts from the stables and compel local doctors to come posthaste,” the captain orders. “You two, notify the constables … and the Coroner.”

“The rest of you,” Fugaku mumbles, “fetch Inuzuka Tsume to tend the horses.” He turns, meaning to run down the hall toward the only source of light when the captain of the guard grabs him by the arm.

“We will not leave you on your own, my Lord.”

Clasping the hand which holds him, Lord Uchiha shouts, “Station archers near every exit if you must, but return to your injured men outside, captain.” Heedless of danger, Fugaku takes off running; midway to his destination, he stops to look back at the stunned men. “Go I said!”

**Recherché**

Music rolls down grassy slopes and bounds over tall trees as the carriage bearing Iruka, Kotetsu and Izumo bumps along the hillside. They crowd the windows to see a mile-long pathway alight with torches and Hatake manor itself ringed with even brighter lights.

“Well, would you look at that? Impressive,” Izumo says with a low whistle.

“Eh,” Kotetsu shrugs, “I’ve seen bigger.”

**Recherché**

Jiraiya turns the corner by the stables as a horde of hungry gaki descend on Uchiha manor. “Remember, only those marked with my seal are yours. Touch none other, especially the horses. There are two more at Kokucho manor and another in the forest, leave no trace behind.”

**Recherché**

As he rockets down the corridor, screams from the interior and exterior of the manor fill his ears, the pungent scent of kerosene burns at his nostrils and eyes; he cares nothing for it. When at last his shoulder connects with the door of the study, Fugaku beholds his beloved, kneeling in the center of the room. Her head jerks upward as he barges in. “Come quickly my love, let us quit this place—”

“Please… don’t come any closer!”

“You’re frightened,” he whispers sweetly as he draws near. “It’s alright … I’m here now … I’ll protect you.”
“No, please Fugaku … run, I beg you--”

“She asked you to stay put Father, yet you could not--”

He’s rooted to the spot, as Itachi appears from opposite the bookcase. “Mikoto, Itachi thank the gods… you’re alive! Come my son, the ones who committed this atrocity may still lurk in the shadows, let us search them out!”

“No need,” he answers, walking up behind his mother, moonlight shimmering against the blades of his broadswords. “The murderer stands before you.”

“What?” Fugaku takes another step forward, “what are you saying?”

“All of my siblings, save one, all of the servants and five of your trusted men lay dead, cut down by the same swords you gave me.”

With head bowed and palms covering his ears, Fugaku screamed, “You’re lying! Why are you lying to me?”

“Isn’t that the way of our family, Father? We lie, steal … kill; whatever it takes to maintain power, it is the legacy of the Uchiha is it not?”

“What the hell are you saying?”

“Mine eyes have been enlightened … at last I see truth--”

“Truth?" He takes a few hesitant steps toward his wife. “What sort truth would lead you to slaughter your family? How could you do something this vile?”

Itachi smiled and said, “Because I now understand who the real monsters in this world are.”

“You aren’t making any sense! What is the meaning of all this?”

“Let me make it plain,” he said as one of the blades settles beneath his mother's throat. “Whether by birth or willing servitude, I’ve killed every last person who bears the name Uchiha, understand?”

“Itachi, how could … why would … they trusted you, they loved you, how could you--?”

“Simple. A debt owed, and with your death, Father

… a debt paid in full.”

Notes:

Igadama or Makibishi: these sharp spiked implements date back to feudal Japan; used to defend samurai battlements and/or thrown into the path of an enemy’s path to slow pursuit.

Bosky: having abundant trees or shrubs, wooded.

Locus: a center or source of activities or power.

Sentience: sense perception not involving intelligence or mental perception.

Fantast: an impractical, impulsive person; a dreamer.

Higgledy-piggledy: in a disorderly manner.
Adjure: urge or request (someone) solemnly or earnestly to do something.

Horticulture: the science and art of producing, improving, marketing, and using fruits, vegetables, flowers, and ornamental plants. It differs from botany and other plant sciences in that horticulture incorporates both science and aesthetics.
Ashes, Ashes ... They All Fall Down

Recherché

Nine members of the caravan,

Eight members of the same family,

And the death toll stands at twenty-seven.

From opposite the forest, the dilatory Inspector and Mayonaka make their way over the ridge and down slope toward the manor with Ibiki complaining all the way. “At least those dancers will make this thing bearable. Can you believe I’m doing this sober? Pfft ... last time I do somebody a favor. With any luck, Ryota is there already as is ... Umino. We just need to plant a few weapons on one of those idiots, make a clean arrest and I’m back at the station house before ten o’clock.”

Meanwhile, Ryota is trying his level best to leave the constabulary. “I’ve explained this to you five times already. What’s so difficult about rotating the dock patrols every two hours and filling out the civilian pay sheets before midnight?”

“But what if the drunk tank fills up before then?”

“Oh, for god sake! The patrolmen know to escort ‘em to one of the inns to let ‘em sleep it off in the lobby. Damn, look at the time! Ibiki’s gonna kill me if I don’t leave soon.”

“Sorry, I usually get one of the other night clerks do paperwork like this, but since they’re all out on patrol—”

“Explains at lot. Alright,” he sighed, “one more time…”

Recherché

Izumo reached out, tapping at Iruka’s knee. “No second thoughts, no cold feet?”

“Quite the opposite … being quite unsuccessful at reining in all the hatred I feel toward that man.”

“That’s it Ruka! Not that I’d mind watching ya go all out psycho killer on Hatake—”

“Tetsu, shut up! Iruka, get a grip on yourself. We stick to the plan, you hear me? Sai handles the hard stuff, we observe and strategize ... nothing more!”

“We’ve been in this line forever. How much longer?”

“Wouldn’t expect a roughneck like you to understand,” Izumo mumbled under his breath. “As I said fifteen minutes ago, Tetsu, every guest must needs be escorted from their carriages and then someone must announce them before they can enter, it’s what’s done at these things.”

“It’s stupid, might as well just get out and walk--”

“If you so much as move a muscle, so help me, I’ll beat the tar outta ya.”

Recherché
“Suté, a child forsaken,” Itachi calmly explains, “she will become a bridesmaid, an eternal slave of Hatake; fitting, don’t you think Father?”

“You’d sacrifice a child of mine to those … creatures?”

“She was treated as less than nothing because your first wife could only produce stillborn sons; now that she’s valued by someone you despise suddenly you care?”

“I fed and clothed her, sent her to school so she could learn something useful—”

“You did no more than the law requires! The only reason you sent her far away was so that she wouldn’t remind you of the betrayal—”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“Don’t I? Suté was a product of infidelity; every day her presence a reminder of your shame—!”

“Shut up damn you!”

“Not this time Father.” In the blink of an eye was Itachi upon him, the tip of his blade poking at the center of his father's chest. “You will kneel before me and listen well.”

“Bow before a thankless child and a murderer? I think not!”

“Fugaku, if you truly love me, then please … do as he says.”

Both men turned at the sound of her voice; a distraught wife, a bereaved mother, one who loved them with every fiber of her being. Itachi slowly backed away, the broadsword held limply at his side; Fugaku, his eyes welling with tears, yet he would not bow down.

“I am the fruit of your loins Father, and the product of my ancestors.” he said stepping back so that he was in line with where Mikoto knelt. “Thieves, liars, swindlers and bigots, these comprise our family tree; ah, but money covers a multitude of sins. From the time we were old enough to understand words, you force fed us your hatred, souring our minds against the Hatake, when in fact, they were the true source of our wealth and prestige.”

“Why you ungrateful—”

Fugaku breaks into a jog toward Itachi, stopping cold when the backhanded blade his son holds is once more pressed against Mikoto’s throat. Her frightened eyes and sharp intake of breath gives him pause and with heavy heart, he slumps to his knees. “Do as you will with me,” he hisses, “only spare the life of your mother.”

“You love her … and would agree to almost anything to protect her, correct?”

“What would you know of love? Your younger brother Sasuke, your sisters … all of them looked up to and loved you and how did you repay them?”

“I did what was necessary to keep them from falling prey to the curse of this family. And that Father, is love.”

“Itachi … you’re clearly insane, but I can protect you from prosecution … I can ship you off to another country, get you the treatment you need from the world’s best doctors—”

“Enough! You will sit there quietly while I tell the story of our family's treachery and of a love true.”
Genma wakes with a start to find a patrolman standing over his bed with a lantern. “Is it morning already?”

“Get up ya drunken fool … I got two stiffs in a coach outside. Come and get ‘em.”

Fugaku kept his eyes on Itachi as he inched closer to Mikoto. “Twin brothers,” he said, “Enoki and Botan Hatake owned over three hundred silver mines and seventy smelting plants which the Uchiha, coveted. The head of our clan, Uchiha Noboru, set in motion a plot to divide and conquer the brothers, by enticing one into marriage. Knowing Enoki was already smitten, he promised his daughter, Miyako’s hand in exchange for his portion of the mines and plants. It was couched as a move which unite two of the strongest families in the land, making both clans richer. Alas, it did not end well for either family.” Walking behind his mother’s back he said, “When their engagement was announced, Botan was in the Land of Wind, inspecting one of their plants. Learning of the wedding upon his return, he was vehemently opposed, because he knew the Uchiha couldn’t be trusted.”

“That was almost two hundred years ago, Itachi … it was business--”

“Was it, Father … or was it murder?”

“The Hatake got exactly what they deserved. They aren’t human, Itachi … but monsters from the darkest corners of hell!”

“All the more reason we never should have crossed demons in human skins, for long are their memories and deep run their grudges.”

“Given the means and opportunity, I’d send the last of that cursed line back to the hell from whence he came!”

“Ah yes, the means.” Leaning down, he laid the blades flat against Mikoto’s chest. "Not that this will matter much to you in the long run Father, but I helped Suté destroy the remaining amulets we had stored in the vaults." Flipping the swords upward that their blunt lines lay on his shoulders, he said, " You seemed shocked Mother. Were you unaware that every noble family in Konoha possessed talismans to ward off evil?"

“No dear,” she said, “I knew that, but in this day and age, they are no more than pretty baubles. These forces of evil you speak of, no longer exist.”

“Oh but they do, and as long as a Hatake walks upon this earth, he will spawn more of his kind. The threat of evil not only exists, Mother but it will spread through this land like a plague. Thank the gods, you won’t be here to witness it. Now then," he said bringing the blades to his sides, " did you know, the Uchiha used the power of those talismans to weaken the Hatake brothers so that they would sign over the entirety of their enterprises to us? That is correct, isn’t it Father?”

“Touch not my wife,” he snarled. "I make no apologies for the actions of our ancestors. We’ve always known what the Hatake were ... and I’m damn proud they used those things for our advantage!”

“And what an advantage it was. Once the brothers were free of the talisman’s power,” Itachi picked up the story, “the engagement was summarily nullified. Enoki railed against us, breathing out threats to wipe us from the face of the earth. But as they do so well, the Uchiha lawyers rushed this matter
before the courts to enforce the signed contract, by alleging renegation on the Hatake’s part. You see Mother, not everyone knew the truth of the Hatake's origins, and because the presiding magistrate’s pockets were being lined with Uchiha gold, he sided with the family. Funny isn't it? Over two hundred years have passed and Enoki's will finds fulfillment in the hands of a Uchiha."

“I never heard any of these stories before,” Mikoto said, “are you sure what you say is fact and not folklore?”

“You need only look upon the face of your husband, do not his tight jaw and narrowed eyes verify that I speak the truth?”

“For the last time boy, it was business--”

“Yes, but after the case was won and their fortunes became ours, Miyako was found with child … Enoki’s child. Noboru could not abide the thought of our pure blood being mingled with that of a demon, so he sent for the strongest shamans in the land. With spells and potions did they attempt to abort the seed inside her; when that didn’t work, Noburo quickly espoused her to another. They went so far as to sew amulets inside her clothing, hoping to keep an enraged Enoki at bay until she was wed.”

“It worked too,” Fugaku spat, “kept him from turning her into an undead creature like unto himself, a fate you’ve gleefully assigned your sister.”

“But,” Itachi continued, “because Miyako couldn’t be with the man she loved, she killed herself and that’s when the fount of hell broke open. Having mesmerized Noboru’s personal servants, Enoki had him delivered into the forests where two wolves, also under Hatake’s control tore him limb from limb. That night, our family cried out to the constables, demanding the Hatake brothers be arrested for murder. The entire clan testified that they saw the brothers drag him from this house; accusing them of witchcraft as well, our family armed the constables with their own amulets that the brothers could be taken into custody.”

“That’s right,” said Fugaku, “in those days murder was swiftly punished … an eye for an eye. When the constables discovered Noboru's torn remains not far from Uchiha manor, the Hatake were sentenced to death; drawn and quartered in the town square that very night as horrified townsfolk looked on.”

“And now, Father the time has come, the debt being called forward. In just a few moments, I will be the last male Uchiha in Konoha.”

Fugaku lifted his head to his wife, “If that be so, then let the last thing I behold be the face of your mother. One last kiss, my dearest, for I loved you with all my heart.”

“And I you,” she answered.

Itachi permits it, watching his father crawl to his mother's side. Looking into Mikoto's eyes, Fugaku gives her courage unspoken. They fall into a clutch, one body desperately melting into the other. Their lips meet for the final time, and with one swing of the broadsword as they embrace, two bodies slump to the floor. Itachi looked on impassively as shooting fountains of blood slow to a trickle.

And as he walks toward the door of the study, his body convulses; wracked with tears, he whispers,

“It is done, Lord Hatake.”

Recherché

Seconds draw down as they wait inside the upper bedchamber. Maito and Kinoe standing near the
hearth, several of the Yasha taking up their positions on either side of the massive bed. A rush of gray brume precedes him, the warm scents of sandalwood, ylang ylang and Clary sage swirl about before pushing into the room when the door to the bathing chamber opens; dressed in a robe and slippers of royal blue, lord Hatake stands, his silver hair a tousled mess as the towel is pushed back, falling to its rest on sinewy shoulders.

“My Lord, gushed Kinoe, "how handsome you are."

Master doesn’t break his stride, flinging the towel in the servant’s face as walks past to pull Maito close. “It is done, the last Uchiha walks to his fate. Once Umino arrives, you will keep him in your sights at all times.” You will also make certain Hagane and Kamizuki are lavished with attention, understood?.”

“As you wish Master.”

He walks to the center of the room allowing the robe to slip and pool around his feet. “Come my beauties,” he beckons to the Yasha; they flock to him as moths to a flame, running their hands over his naked body, writhing and pressing their bodies to his. In a puff of black smoke … they vanish.

“Kinoe, are your people ready?”

“Yes, my Lord.”

“Then shall you return to your duties downstairs. Maito will dress me tonight.”

“Oh … yes, of course.” Disconsolate, Kinoe trudges to the other side of the room; turning about, he watches Maito stroll to and from the bed.

“Now then,” says the Master as Maito slides the silken underwear past his ankles, “Jiraiya, have you seen him of late?”

Maito looks up with a grin as the bed chamber’s door slams closed. “No Master, he answers, “but I sensed his presence in the woods earlier. I’m sure he will join us later.”

“That means his assignment in the east has concluded. Is everything is prepared for her arrival?”

“Yes, Master.”

“Excellent, then let us proceed for my guests are waiting.”

Recherché

Notes:

Noboru: “ascend or climb.”

Miyako: “beautiful night child.”

Renegation (British): the act of disowning, denying or renouncing.
Recherche: The Enemy of My Enemy

Recherché

With one strike of a match, greedy flames open wide their mouths, flickering tongues run smooth over jagged teeth, as they rip into and devour ancient tapestries. A shower of splinters and the crackling sizzle of wooden furnishings link arms to escort him down the stairs; the rising stench of burning flesh rushes to greet him, the sickeningly sweet smell does his stomach turn. Soot and ashes adorn his clothing, as from north, south, east and west, a wall of flames converge; he emerges from them, an unscorched silhouette. Upstairs and down, open windows which hungrily sucked in oxygen and fed the flames now doth collapse their frames, shattering their panes. Across the foyer, tall and proud he strides, and at the front door, at last does Itachi turn; watching for a moment, as a lifetime of memories do shrivel and burn. To the stable he briskly walks, stopping only to acknowledge the tall white-haired man who stands there.

"To the Master have I sent the others along," says the mysterious stranger. "Only the finest one remains, a steed swift and strong, to your final destination shall he carry you along; at the house by the sea, fate awaits thee."

And into the night rides the last Uchiha.

Recherché

With necessity compelling them forward and fear of the unknown binding them to their seats, the interior of the metal and leather conveyance is hushed as each man makes peace with the role fate thrust him into. With every click of the horse's hooves drawing them nearer the place appointed and tensions building to fever pitch, there comes a conclusion inevitable.

Izumo turned to his seat mate with a pained look on his face. "Tetsu, what the hell have you been eating?"

Iruka pinched at his nose, "My eyes … they're burning … think my lashes are singed."

"Oh, like you guys never cut one before. I'm sorry, okay … it's pent up energy, that's all."

"More like a cry for help," Izumo laughed.

By the time the Governor's hired carriage rolls to a halt at the front of the line, each man is fighting for breath, their faces red with laughter; it was with relief they watched the inner door handle's downward snap. With a tiny creak was it flung open and the rush of outside air … a mercy granted. At once are they assailed with the aromas of fragrant night blossoms and burning wood, bright lights, muddled conversation, the click of silken fans opening and the crunch of loose sand under politely impatient feet. They find themselves more at ease surrounded by dapper men in dark suits and women swathed in explosions of colorful silk kimono. Izumo is first to exit, ironing down the creases of his black suit with the palms of his hands; in like manner does Kotetsu with his suit of grey. Last to exit the vehicle is Dr. Umino Iruka, cutting a handsome figure in a suit of dark navy, a matching brocade waistcoat, and white shirt. No sooner than the soles of his black leather shoes touch down on the packed gravel and sand driveway does the amulet in his breast pocket grow warm. It is but imagination, he thinks, still he cannot shake the feeling that all eyes, natural and supernatural, are upon him. Nevertheless, he stands enraptured by that which his own eyes perceive.

From a distance, it was as Izumo said, impressive, but up close, it was an architectural marvel; more
than a manor, this was a compound combining elements of ancient castles, grand temples and military fortresses.

"Hip and gable rooves, shingles not tiles," he mumbles, "extended eaves covering the front steps … seamless integration of Cryptomeria and imported stone-"

Tugging at his elbow, Izumo said,"Come along Ruka ... you're drooling."

"Am not," he claimed, absently wiping at his mouth for good measure. "It's amazing … simply amazing."

Only after they join the quick moving queue does Iruka take note of everything else. On either side of the broad stairs is a seemingly endless line of servants; thanking guests for their continued patience, each group of people is welcomed in their own language with warm smiles and cool drinks. To the left of the entryway, standards of the Five Nations and countries abroad flutter in soft breezes, and on the right side of the entrance, is a static, grim faced blue line of constables standing at parade rest. The muted sounds of an orchestra wraps round them, sweeping them up the stairs and into the house before they realize it. Suddenly, a familiar face and voice impedes their progress.

"Good evening gentlemen," Kinoe said as he bowed, "and welcome to house Hatake. Right this way sirs."

Recherché

"Psst, that last bunch," whispered a patrolman, "weren't that Umino and his friends?"

"They match the description," his fellow responded. "What about it?"

"Well, what are we standin' here for? Let's pinch 'em before they get too far--"

"Eh? You just come back from a piss break or somethin'? That order was rescinded … we're to leave 'em be."

"But, this morning … the Inspector was frothing at the mouth about--"

"That was then; twenty minutes ago, mounted patrol rode through and told us the Inspector changed his mind. Aint nobody paying us to think ... we do as we're told."

Recherché

Several dignitaries had already gathered in bunches on the right side of the vestibule, a haze of blue cigar smoke hovering above them as they talked politics and bemoaned fluctuating currency rates. After leading them through the foyer, Kinoe begs them stand before the grand staircase. Though the aroma of hot food and the clink of fine stemware diverts their attention elsewhere, each man in turn executes a formal bow, acknowledging regards to the portraits of Hatake ancestors. Afterwards, Kinoe cheerfully escorts them to the entry of the grand ballroom.

"Presenting Doctor Umino Iruka of London England and Konoha,

       Mr. Kamizuki Izumo of London England and Konoha

       and Mr. Hagane Kotetsu of London and Woolwich England."

He turned to them with a smile saying, "Now, we've attended the formalities; please avail yourselves of my lord's hospitality. Feel free to join the other guests here or you may stroll about the east wing at
"That guy," Kotetsu sniped, as Kinoe disappeared into the milling crowd, "all smiley and uppity … he puts rocks in my jaw."

"You just don't like anybody, do you Tetsu?"

"It's true. Only tolerate you cause I hafta. So, this is how the other half lives, huh? Which now that I think of it Zumo, how do you suppose he knew where I was from?"

"Do you honestly believe Hatake would allow us into his home without first checking into our backgrounds?"

"The first rule of any conflict is to know one's enemy."

"Iruka, don't encourage him. This isn't a conflict, Tetsu, it's a party. And since it is," Izumo said while guiding them deeper into the room, "I want you both to plaster smiles on your faces, spread out and have some fun damn it!"

"Ooh ... food's over there and aint no line ...that's all I care about. See ya!"

"Ah," Iruka chuckled as they watched Kotetsu saunter off, "the bliss of an uncomplicated mind. You do realize, there's gonna be a conflict if you don't catch him up and explain."

"Reckon I should, Tetsu can be downright ornery when he's hollow. I'm on it."

"Thanks. Think I'm gonna step out on the balcony for a bit; suddenly caught a headache, kinda queasy too--" 

"Stop it Iruka, all you're doing is working your nerves down to the white meat. Take these," he shoved a handful of ginger lozenges into a sweaty palm, "'oughta help. Listen to me, there's a gaggle of highfalutin folks packed in this place, it'll be a wonder if you even see Hatake ... a bonafide miracle if he has time to speak to you at all."

"Yeah, you're probably right, I'm the least of his concerns."

Recherché

"And this piece here belonged to Hatake Kama," Master said as he twirled an aquamarine ascot pin between his fingers. "While not exactly to my taste, it does make clear my supposed intentions."

"That of a jaded bachelor in search of his mate?"

"I must hush the mouths of these bothersome humans somehow. Finding a wife," he sighed, "that is the purpose of tonight's gathering. But what need has a soul like mine of love when only power can satisfy? In due time will I broadcast seed in vessels of my choosing ... what ... what ails you now Maito?"

"Forgive me for staring master, it's just ... Lord Sakumo-"

"Ah, you sense his presence as well," the master asks as he turns to look out the window above the main entrance, "or does imagination make us both fools?"

"No, my Lord. You look and sound so much like him right now, it gave me pause."

Pale slender hands trail over the ivory brocade vest, "This ring and this suit ... Mother had them
made for him a week before she died. Afterwards, Father couldn't bring himself to look at, much less wear them. The loss of vitality ... a tragic reward for loving a mortal."

"Yes, but the unrivaled joy lord Sakumo found in Lady Mari ... do you not deserve as much Master?"

"Mark my words ... what I deserve and what I will have, shan't be found in a human. Speaking of those pitiable creatures, Umino has finally arrived. I take it we're ready to receive him properly?"

"Of course my Lord."

Recherché

"I don't understand. They set up this ridiculously large buffet, shove us into a room with good smellin' food and then, they refuse to serve anybody. It's some kinda test, isn't it?"

Steering him away from the serving line, Izumo calmly explains that, "In polite society, it would be a serious breach of etiquette to eat anything before our host arrives. I have an idea, why not feast your eyes on something else instead? All about us is a cornucopia of beautiful women and--"

"There's corn? Where?"

"Tetsu ... focus. It's the last soiree of the 'mating season,' meaning it's the last opportunity these lovely ladies have, to dance and make merry with handsome fellas like us. It is our privilege as gentlemen to mingle and be charming--"

"Too hungry to be charming, aint interested in mingling and I sure as hell don't wanna marry nobody… I just want somethin' to eat."

Recherché

When Ibiki and Mayonaka approach from the other end of the driveway, the patrolmen snapped to attention. "Don't you look a sight, Inspector," said one. "Err, uh ... in a good way, of course, sir--"

"Save it," Ibiki growled. "Sakai, report!"

With a snappy salute, the constable stepped forward and said, "Only one incident thus far sir; medical emergency. I believe it was Lord Orochimaru who took ill; one of the officers rushed him to the hospital--"

"Hmm … Umino here yet?"

"Went in about ten minutes ago, sir."

That he might remain calm, Ibiki wrapped his hands around the saddle's horn as he cocked his head toward the officer. "Sakai," he breathed, "were my orders in any way unclear this morning? Umino and friends were to be detained until I arrived … that is what I said, wasn't it?"

"Yes, sir, but a mounted patrol officer came through saying the order was rescinded--"

"By whose authority?"

"I ... I assumed it was yours, sir."

In the blink of an eye, Ibiki dismounted and was standing nose to nose with the shaken officer. "If it don't come outta my mouth directly, Never. Assume. Nothing! Now goddamn it ... where's Ryota?"
"Ain't here yet," Sakai stammered, "Aoba's inside and--"

His words bounced off Inspector's back as Ibiki stormed away.

Recherché

Faster than he could decipher them did the reports roll in from Sai's field agents; each one more perplexing than the last. "Concentrated activity in the southeast; a river of blood, the perpetrator, reportedly human," he writes. "Unusual noises and frenetic energy radiate underground in the cemetery. One powerful gaki oversees a feeding frenzy further to the east. At the epicenter of activity, a battle between two numina waxes and wanes. Several bakemono carry the power of one of those numen as they scatter throughout a house on the hill ringed with lights; their purposes unknown."

Recherché

"Thank goodness," the young officer huffed as he ran into the station house, "you haven't left yet."

"Brilliant observation," quipped Ryota as he turned toward the out of breath officer. "What are you doing here? Shifts don't rotate for another hour."

"Yes sir, but ... two stiffs in a carriage; I dropped 'em at the morgue just now."

"You left a crime scene to come stand here and flap your gums--?"

"No sir, the carriage is the crime scene ... I think. Weren't no obvious wounds or bloody clothes. Coroner suspected poison right away cause their faces were purple; then again ... could've been strangled, you know ... robbery gone wonky. Once Genma gets 'em on the tables--"

"And these stiffs ... they got names?"

"The chunky one is an Akimichi... knew that afore Genma said it," he laughed. "Didn't recognize the other fella--"

"Then come back when you know of a certainty--"

"Oh, it's certain, sir ... Coroner positive identified them," he said with a glance to a slip of paper in his hand, "an Akimichi Yori and a Nara Hitoshi."

Ryota fixed the man with a steely gaze as the pencil slipped from his fingers. "The Advisory Council members? Where'd they die?"

"Don't know, they were ridin' under Kokucho banners when they rolled up dead at house Hatake. Reckon an officer will bring in a statement from that coach driver directly."

"Shit! I gotta get to Ibiki ... now! Notify the families; and you," he pointed to a desk clerk, "send some officers up Lord Orochimaru's way; we're gonna need a statement from him too."

"Good job the washerwoman brought your uniform over with the Inspector's eh? Might as well change into them fancy duds and head out," the night commander said. "I can handle paperwork for this, I promise."

"Then have a mount readied," Ryota called over his shoulder while stepping away from the desk area, "and don't forget to update the Governor's blotter."

Knowing the washroom beside which the uniform hung was too cramped for a job this big, Ryota
heads toward the Inspector's office, fumbling for the spare key as he nipped down the long hall.

That's odd. Never known him to leave this door unlocked, much less standing wide open. Musta been in a real state when he left.

Braces flopping about on either hip, still he was presentably dressed in a flash and about to turn to lock the door behind him, when he noticed a large manila envelope laying in the center of a clutter free desk. Why don't I remember seeing this before? He approached cautiously, turning the package about with care. Unopened … and from London?

Of course, his mount wasn't even saddled up when he reached the stables and Ryota grumbled through a good ten minutes doing it himself. No sooner than he got one foot in a stirrup, another officer comes barreling out of the station house. "Ryota, come quick!"

What now?

Recherché

His clothing mottled with blood, the hem of his kimono, crusty with loam, his hair disheveled and the odor of kerosene wafting about him, a dazed Uchiha Itachi stands before the watch commander's podium. Without a second thought, Ryota eased the young man into a chair beside the desk, commandeering his own seat from the night commander. "What's happened sir?"

In a voice barely above a whisper, its tone flat, the Uchiha heir tells them plainly;

"The manor is aflame … my entire family is dead. I killed them."

An eerie hush fell upon the station house, each man looking to his fellow, frantic to make sense of what they'd just heard.

"Sir," Ryota said at last, "you've suffered a terrible fright ... you don't know what you're saying--"

"My faculties are intact officer," he replied, "and it is with no regret I say again ... my entire family is dead. I killed them."

Realizing this was a man in shock, Ryota instructs the night commander to take Itachi's statement; fearing the territory was under attack or that their spree killer has gone off on a tangent, he dispatched one officer to alert the fire brigade and a group of three patrolmen to conduct searches of the manor homes in the north. He then ran to Ibiki's office, the key left swinging in the lock as he rummaged through the stash of hard liquors for an unopened bottle and a clean shot glass.

A scant seven minutes have passed since he left the Uchiha's side.

By the time he rounds the corner and races to the desk, the night commander stands frozen in place, bug eyed and slack jawed, lines of horror engraved into his brow. Itachi remained upright in his seat, his eyes losing their light. Ryota already knew; the grim confirmation came when he held the shot glass just outside Itachi's reach. The young man made no move to take it. Woefully, his eyes traveled down the Uchiha's body, coming to rest on the ivory hilt of a tanto sticking out from his belly. A trickle of blood seeped from the corner of the young man's mouth and the shot glass shattered against the floor when at last, Uchiha Itachi slumped into Ryota's waiting arms.

"Fetch the Coroner," he said to the quiet room.

Recherché
The death toll now stands at thirty.

Notes:

Numina: plural of numen. A numen is a divine power or spirit; especially one presiding locally or believed to inhabit an object.

Obake and Bakemono: class of are a class of yōkai, preternatural creatures in Japanese folklore. Literally, the terms mean a thing that changes, referring to a state of transformation or shape shifting. A bakemono’s true form may be an animal or an inanimate object which may possess a soul in Shinto and other animistic traditions. A bakemono usually either disguises itself as a human or appears in a strange or terrifying form. In common usage, any bizarre apparition can be referred to as a bakemono or an obake whether it is believed to have some other form, making the terms roughly synonymous with yōkai.

Assail: of an unpleasant feeling or physical sensation come upon someone suddenly and strongly.

Braces: British for what we commonly refer to as suspenders. Braces differ from suspenders in that they use leather straps to attach to buttons sewn on the inside of the trouser waist. Suspenders typically are fastened with metal clips.

Parade rest (military command): a stationary drill movement. From the position of "Attention", the left foot is moved about ten inches from the right foot; the hands rest at the small of the back, fingers extended and joined, interlocking the thumbs so that the palm of the right hand faces outward. No talking or other movement is allowed.

Yori: "servant to the public."

Hitoshi: "even tempered; level."

Hip and gable roof: In Eastern Asian architecture, the hip-and-gable roof comprise a hip roof that slopes down on all four sides and integrates a gable (a triangular portion of a wall between the edges of intersecting roof pitches) on two opposing sides; usually constructed with two large sloping roof sections in the front and back respectively, while each of the two sides is usually constructed with a smaller roof section. This style arrived in Japan from China in the 6th century. The style was originally used in the main and lecture halls of a Buddhist temple compound but started to be used also for the main halls at shrines later, during the Japan's Middle Ages. Its gable is usually right above the core of a building, while the hip covers a veranda-like aisle surrounding the core on one or more sides. It is still in wide use in Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines in Japan, but also in palaces, castles, and folk dwellings.

Lest we forget, Iruka Umino holds doctorates in anthropology and archeology (which is the study of human activity through recovery and analysis of material culture). The archeological record consists of artifacts, architecture and cultural landscapes. In Europe, archeology was/is viewed either as a discipline or a sub-field of other disciplines; in North America, it is strictly considered a sub-field of anthropology.
The Enemy of My Enemy is My Friend

A/N: Lot of moving parts in this one, but more importantly, will they? Won't they?
Yes! Kakashi and Iruka meet ... at last
or rather ... for the first time ... in Konoha.

Recherché

The heavy leather apron loudly claps against his shins when Genma bounded up the steps of the constabulary. Proudly he stood in the doorway, a huge grin stretching across his face, arms akimbo, but no one seemed to notice.

“Said I'd run errands for ya, but it's kinda bad time now. I got two stiffs over to the shop--"

"And one more makes three," Ryota gestured to the body laid on the floor behind the desk. "Arithmetic lesson's over ... get to work."

"Huh?" Ten strides brought the flabbergasted mortician beside the prone figure. "Dead eh? Knife to the gut, yep, that'll do it every time," he said while pushing aside the apron and fishing about in his pocket. With a small magnifying glass in hand, he awkwardly squats down. "Musta just happened too, no rigor. Not that celluloid crap we ship to foreigners, this here's the genuine article ... grain patterns confirm it. Antique ivory, samurai special. There's writin' carved in it ... looks like old Lightning Country characters." Gingerly does he adjust the bloody kimono folds. "And a left to right cut, humph ... this guy knew what he was doing." Peeling away the handkerchief covering the man's face, he lets it drop with a sigh. "Right then, gather 'round gents, lend a hand." As the six officers carry the corpse out the door, he sidles up to the watch commander. "Damn shame, that's one of them Uchiha boys, eldest son matter of fact; his folks are gonna be devastated."

“Don't count on it. The late Lord Uchiha Itachi walked in here, told us his entire family was dead; said he killed them and set the house afire. Thought he was in shock at first, till he sat right there and killed himself in front of the night commander.”

"So, a death of honor, reckon he had to do it after somethin' like 'at. What possessed him to turn killer I wonder? No mind, I'll let you guys crack that nut, I got bigger problems. Can't remember if it was six or ten of them Uchiha, but I only got three tables, occupied now. Aint no room for 'em at my place--"

"It's in the works," Ryota assured him. "Hospital's settin' up a temporary morgue, they're sending some of their senior medical students to help with the lifting and moving of bodies and your equipment. And the boys at the docks are sending wagons and drivers to your place as we speak."

Genma rubbed his hands together gleefully. "Finally get to crack open them new chemicals."

Recherché

At the stroke of midnight, heaven’s grandest spectacle was set to unfold; by then, this deserted balcony would be filled to overflowing. A ginger lozenge pleasantly warm against his inner cheek, his mind adrift, and palms flat against the cool white marble balustrade, Iruka stands alone. For the briefest of moments, it was as if he were teetering on the edge of the earth looking out into infinity. From a fountain center most in lush gardens of green, comes the gentle fall of water over smooth gray stones, and from soot daubed firepots scattered throughout the property, yellow orange flames
jump and dance. Above it all, a buttery moon shimmers against a deep violet blue sky.

_Were I not in a den of demons ... this would be heaven_, he thought with a smile.

Peace, blithely stumbled into, now painfully encroached upon, as someone slams into his back and walks down the heel of his shoe. A flustered feminine voice immediately floats over his shoulder.

“Goodness gracious sir, I’m sorry. I was so busy looking up, I didn’t think to look right in front of me.”

Sucking in an irritated breath, Iruka turns to see a furiously blushing dark haired young woman; a soft hand pressed against her lips, her brown eyes welling with compunction.

"Perfectly alright ma'am," he said, jamming his heel back into the shoe. "No harm done ... hard not to be enthralled by its beauty.”

“What a privilege to witness something like this. If I stood on my tiptoes, I feel like I could reach out and touch it," came the dreamy sigh beside him.

Uninvited, she’d pierced the bubble he’d built around himself, though she was kind enough to let him enjoy a few moments of silence. However, returning to the world of thought she’d jarred him from would be no easy task, as for every inch he moved left, she moved left as well. Not necessarily unwelcome was the heat of her body pushing the aroma of jasmine toilet water past his nose; he found it a pleasant disruption.

“You think me forward don't you? Standing this close, chatting away as if we've known one another for years--”

"Now that you mention it--"

"Overcompensation for a bad case of nerves, I assure you sir." She turned slightly and held out her hand, “Kawaguchi Takara from the Land of Water; pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“Umino Iruka,” he said clasping the dainty appendage, “also from Water Country.”

“Knew I felt an affinity soon as I bumped you. Also makes sense why you were out here by your lonesome.”

“Yes, well ... I was.”

“There’s an old axiom about those birthed in our land," Takara continued. "They say we above all people, draw inner strength from the light of the moon. Let me tell you, that simply isn't true. I came out here to collect courage for a difficult task and I don't think that moon stuff is working yet.”

Again, Iruka nodded politely and inched further left. "Perhaps if you quietly focus your attention on the moon--" 

“I'm guessing you want to take something away from Lord Hatake before the night ends too?”

“Pardon?”

“Be it an investment of his time, money or the joining of his family name to theirs, we’re all expecting some sort of handout from him. So, Mr. Umino, what is it you need from him?”

The words leapt from his mouth ere his brain could soften their tenor,
“I’m sure that’s none of your concern--”

“Oh, I didn’t mean to pry. I often speak without thinking when I’m nervous. Let me guess,” she moved closer, “you’re a medical student.”

He was running out of room and polite ways to extricate himself from this situation. “My school days are but distant memories.” Standing erect and brushing his hand along the front of his waistcoat he added, “What joyance I found in meeting you.” A polite bow put distance between them, “I should get back to my friends. I hope the remainder of your evening is pleasant.”

“Did it again huh? You’re such a kind man, Mr. Umino and I’ve done nothing but offend and bore you.” She bowed low, “Sorry for monopolizing your time with foolish talk.”

He steeled himself to walk away, managing only twenty paces before the sound of sniffles turned him round.

"I think we’ve got time before our host makes an appearance," he sighed. "Until then, I can spare you a handkerchief, a ginger lozenge, and a listening ear--"

Her eyes lit up as Iruka walked toward her; she met him halfway, launching herself at him for an enthusiastic bear hug. “Oh, thank you sir!” A soft peck on the cheek left him blushing as she unwound her arms from his waist. She stepped away saying, “As this brazen display confirms ... I’m not from a noble house, but I have friends who are. One of them lent me her invitation, another one gave me this beautiful kimono. Those things got me in the front door.” Leading him by the hand, they returned to their places at the balustrade. “As I stood in that ballroom, surrounded by so many important people, I started doubting myself and then I realized why. I’m too self-conscious and timid.”

“Intimately acquainted with those feelings … believe me,” he smiled. "However, I've come too far and I'm far too stubborn to let any personage sway me from the path determined. Now then Miss Kawaguchi, what is it you desire of Lord Hatake?”

She closed her eyes and drew in a breath, “I’m gonna be a renown surgeon one of these days. Been saving up so I could complete my studies in England. I have all the right credentials, training and desire, but as a woman, that means nothing to college admissions boards. A letter of introduction and commendation from Lord Hatake Kakashi would open doors faster than all my hard work ever could.”

"The Fates have smiled on you, bringing you one step closer to your goal--”

"The Fates, Mr. Umino, are fickle witches, dangling the prize before me, ever out of my reach. Fear gnaws gaping holes in the pit of my stomach. I'm scared to death that if I can't follow through on my intentions, everything I’ve worked for and believed in will turn to dust.”

Iruka waggled a stern finger before her lips. "I'll hear no more of this negative talk young lady. Whether or not you get a piece of paper with his name on it, only you can make your dream reality.”

"You sound like my father. Yet, even if Lord Hatake deign spare me a moment, because of who he is, I’m still terrified. Knowing me, I’ll say the wrong thing, trip over my own feet or do something equally embarrassing to disqualify myself in his presence--”

“Always remember, no one can make you feel inferior without your consent. Hatake is just a man, a powerful one, but a man nonetheless. You’re gonna look him straight in the eye and tell him what’s what … hear me?"
“Mr. Umino, you’re very brave, wise and strong. How about standing beside me in the receiving line and lending me your strength?”

Recherché

Two of the servants passed him so quickly, the breeze in their wake almost extinguished a just struck match. Looking beyond the servant's rapidly forming tight welcome line of smiling faces, Ibiki saw a carriage rounding a soft bend in the driveway.

Governor’s finally here … to work then.

Through a brume of cigar smoke, he sadly shakes his head as he walks down the porch stairs toward the scraggy formation of his constables. “Attention,” came the command as his foot landed on the bottom step. “At close interval, dress right … dress. Ready … front!” Inordinately pleased, Ibiki gestured for their captain, “Walk with me Sakai.” It wasn’t until they reached a stand of trees far from the entrance that he said, “This mounted patrol officer, describe him.”

“Never seen him before sir, he was in dress uniform just like us and his horse was decked out with MP insignia; he had dark hair, a mustache and his eyes,” he drifted off, “they were hypnotic like … felt I had to do whatever he said.”

“You been drinkin’ Sakai?”

“No sir! Servants gave us some tea earlier, but that was it.”

Alright, we'll get to the bottom of this once Ryota shows up. Oh, and since I’ve made alternate arrangements for Umino, you're off the hook … for the moment.”

Recherché

“Like a museum in here,” said an invigorated Kotetsu. “Weaponry I never seen before … and samurai stuff too!”

“You’re awful giddy; sure you’re not drunk?”

“From five sips of wine … really?”

“Empty stomach, empty head … yeah, it’s possible.”

“Lest you forget, I’m also quick tempered and prone to violence Zumo … wanna try me?”

“And wrinkle my suit? No thanks. Come on, let's go check on Iruka.”

“Know something else ? The women … here they’re not stuck up like them society dames in London. They’re beautiful … and bold too; walk right up to the man they want and flat out ask him to dance. I kinda like that.”

“I noticed--”

“Musta danced with ten of ‘em already--”

“It was five,” Izumo said as he plucked the wine glass from his friend's hand, “let’s try to remember why we’re here twinkle toes.”

“Can I help I’m irresistible to women? No, I accept it and move on … you should too. ‘Sides, you told me to blend in--"
"Don’t sass me junior … wait a minute, hear that? It’s fanfare; Governor must be here. Reckon our host shouldn’t be too far behind. Don’t need to tell you what that means--"

“Means we can eat, right?”

Recherché

Not five steps inside the vestibule did Kinoe greet them with a formal bow. "Blessings of house Hatake be upon you," he said. “We are honored by your presence Lady Tsunade. And who is this vision of loveliness at your side?"

“She is lovely, isn't she? Put your eyes back in your head, Kinoe, you know full well this my assistant.”

“Of course, Dan Shizune … it is indeed a pleasure.”

“Has Lord Hatake joined his guests?”

“Not yet ma'am.”

“See, told you we’d arrive in time Shizune. What of Inspector Morino, is he here?”

“He was speaking with his officers outside a minute ago. Need me to fetch him milady?”

“Leave him ... Ibiki’s more comfortable out of doors. Well then Kinoe, my drinking time diminishes each moment we piddle about; lead on my good man.”

As expected, she scarcely finished paying tribute to the Hatake ancestors before a legion of dignitaries swarmed her. Pulling Shizune close, she whispered, "With this crowd, there’s no fun to be had standing at my elbow. Go, grab a drink, be mysterious and dance the night away … I'll catch you up.”

Recherché

Lost in a cloud of dignitaries encircling her, Ibiki took a wine glass from the tray of a roving servant. Now that our fair Governor is otherwise engaged, she won’t have space to ask questions. He comforted himself with that thought as he slunk off into a quiet corner of the vestibule. Aoba and Raidou soon joined him.

“What you got for me?”

“Aside from our targets sneaking past the outside guard? Nothing,” said Aoba. “Aint seen Lord Hatake neither, but what I have seen is a puzzlement. How did some of the most wanted cutpurses in the territory get past the front door?”

“Probably stole the invitations--”

“Can’t fault them for that, Raidou … bigger pickin’s up this way. ‘Bout ten or twelve of ‘em floating around here big as day. “

“And rich folk, none the wiser. Startin’ to think some of my officers need eye exams. No matter … more than one way to skin a cat,” hissed Ibiki. “Speaking of which, where’s Umino?”

"Balcony; his friends took a few spins around the dance floor before they went wandering around the east wing. I could stand outside, help Sakai and his men search the thieves before they leave the
property--"

“Negative. You’re both needed inside. Alright, listen tight; I’m guessin’ one of you has a dagger?”

"Stiletto in my boot, another holstered at my waist, neither standard issue."

"Perfect Raidou; make sure one of ’em winds up on Umino’s person."

“Gotcha,” he said turning on his heel.

Recherché

In the distance, the fire bell sounds as the Inuzuka/Morino team crosses the ridge line leading to the pale of the Uchiha. Scarcely do they escape a stampede of a dozen horses running wild. From atop her mount, Tsume sees the flames rising from the manor and shakes her head. “Least we know what spooked ’em. Looks like they’re heading toward your place Hana. Other than hope the stable hands corral ’em, nothing else we can do now.”

Recherché

Target in sight, Raidou casually steps onto the balcony. “Hey there Kohaku,” he said, as Iruka turned. “How’s the wife and kids?” Giving the man no time to answer, Raidou walks right up, turns Iruka about and wraps his arm around the befuddled doctor’s neck.

“I … you … sir,” Iruka manages, “you’ve obviously mistaken me for someone else.”

“Oh, gotcha,” he winked, “that aint the wife eh?”

“She isn’t and I’m not Kohaku. Now see here, since I have no idea who you are, kindly unhand me sir.”

“Well, this is embarrassin’,” he said loosening his grip, “although … looks like the little lady knows me.”

Takara’s eyes widened in recognition, right before she crumpled to the ground in a faint.

“Sorry ‘bout the mix up buddy; here, let me run get some smelling salts for your friend.”

When he knelt beside her, a delicate hand took hold of his ankle as Takara came to herself. “That man,” she breathed, “he reminded me of a friend I thought was long dead.” She grabbed at his other ankle as she sat up. “So much for not making a scene.” Firmly on her feet now with her arm wrapped around Iruka’s waist, they stagger back into the ballroom. As they enter, vocalists are taking their places in front of the orchestra.

“I should powder my nose,” she tells him. “Won’t be a moment.”

Grabbing a glass of wine from one of the servers, Iruka hastily knocked it back in one gulp. *The hell goes on in this place?*

Recherché

With passage to the ballroom blocked, Kotetsu and Izumo lift their eyes to the stairs, as a dark-haired man slowly descends. Not long afterwards, more people spill out of the ballroom lining the area near the grand staircase.

“What's going on Zumo? Why is everybody coming out here?”
“Hatake ... ten o'clock. Don’t forget to bow.”

“To him ... you kiddin’ me?”

“Regardless what you think of Lord Hatake, we are guests in his home ... it’s called good manners.”

Kotetsu sucked at his teeth, “This polite crap ... it’s why I hate comin’ to these things. Hey, I know that guy ... he’s the one who brought the invitation to the cabin. Cleans up pretty good huh?”

Clad in a black suit, white shirt, with a green striped silk imperial neck tie, forest green waistcoat with a gold Hatake kamon embroidered on his left breast pocket and his hair slicked back, the man in question cleaned up quite well indeed. On the landing of the staircase, the servant inclines his head toward Kinoe, who in turn signals the orchestra’s conductor; soon, the voices of a chorus rise above the din in the corridor.

In the meantime, Aoba was on the move. He skirted around the Governor as she was escorted back to the staircase; fighting against the heavy flow of traffic, he pointedly scans the faces of those exiting.

Iruka found himself trapped between the steam tables and the orchestra, watching in wonder as a good chunk of the people stopped what they were doing to clear the dance floor. As if on cue, those remaining lined themselves before the chairs inside the ballroom as the voices of the chorus blend together. Just outside, he hears the announcement and his stomach twists into a knot.

"Esteemed guests, ladies and gentlemen, it is with great pleasure I introduce to some, and present to others ... the Honorable Lord Hatake Kakashi.”

All eyes follow the sweep of Kinoe’s arm to the man now striding across the span to the head of the stairs. With a thundering of kettle drums, the strains of Kimigayo fill the first floor.

Kotetsu and Izumo are rolling their eyes, trying to ignore the women crowded around them without success. All of them atwitter, whispering behind their fans about how handsome and desirable Lord Hatake was, and why each one of them reckoned herself worthy to be his mate.

Dressed in suit of black, an ivory tailored shirt and waistcoat, an ascot of black accented with the aquamarine pin, even Kotetsu can't deny the man cuts an imposing figure. There are muffled squeals of delight from the ladies as Hatake's silvery hair falls over his eyepatch when he stops on the landing and bows to his ancestors. The next few moments are a blur as the lord of the manor greets the assembled bigwigs, sparing each a few minutes of his time, remembering their names without coaching and sharing anecdotes about their families. Suddenly, he’s standing in front of Kotetsu and Izumo saying, "So glad you condescended to attend gentlemen,” before he moved down the line and toward the ballroom.

Recherché

Slipping unnoticed through the receiving line, Ibiki enters the ballroom with a grin pulling at his lips. To his right at the far end of the room stands his target. Raidou is slightly behind the good doctor and the other constables have positioned themselves throughout the room that they might have unobstructed access to Umino. Aoba is walking toward him with a drink in hand. “The bird is in the nest,” he says when he brushes past Ibiki. With an hour and a half left until the arrest warrant expires, confidently does Ibiki stroll to the bar area. And now, with drink in hand, he raises his glass in Iruka’s direction.

Let's see you talk your way outta this one, Umino.
Once Lord Hatake steps foot inside the ballroom, the steam tables begin service as guests flood the space. The music, loud enough to hear yet not overpower conversation, continues in the background as the master of the manor moves down the line. At last, he stands before Iruka.

“Dr. Umino … what a pleasure to see you again.”

“Lord Hatake,” he said with a slight inclination of his head. “Thank you for inviting us.”

Expecting some sign of discomfort as they stood close or an indication of pain when they shook hands, Iruka is stunned when Hatake lingers.

“We have much to discuss Doctor,” he said with a smile. “Since the Governor is here, perhaps the three of us can find a time and place conducive to quiet conversation this evening?”

Iruka elected not to respond verbally; a tight smile and a nod of the head, the only acknowledgement of the other man’s words. Unfazed, Hatake moves on to the next guest.

Having witnessed the stilted encounter from across the room, Izumo and Kotetsu rush to Iruka’s side.

“You alright,” was Izumo’s first question, “didn’t put a whammy on you again, did he?”

“No,” he laughed, “see, still standing. I’m fine.”

Kotetsu, who hadn't stopped glaring daggers into Hatake’s back since he walked into the room asked, “He threaten you Ruka? Just say the word and--”

“Calm down. All he wants to do is have a meeting with me and the Governor for a quiet, peaceful conversation--”

“The hell you say! Not without us being in attendance you won’t. Oh, good gravy, look at him Zum… he’s already considering it.”

“That true Iruka? Because I’m not comfortable with you and him--”

“Not like I'm gonna be alone with Hatake. And yes, I am considering a meeting for two reasons; it won't be long and with as many amulets as we have between us, he won't be able to do anything remotely threatening. Still, I need to think on it a bit.”

“What’s to think? Smells like a trap to me. You of all people should know what we’re dealing with!”

“Tetsu, lower your voice. I'm not going to do anything without consulting you guys first, you know that. All I want now is a few minutes space to collect my thoughts.”

Pulling on Kotetsu’s tails, Izumo said, “If you’re sure you’re alright; I best get some food into this one before he does something stupid. We’ll bring a plate back for you, okay?”

Recherché

From the other side of the room, there is gnashing of teeth as Ibiki paces before the bar. The long-awaited meeting came and went without incident; his plan, dashed to hell. And still there was more good news; one of his undercover officers approached with a disgruntled Takara in tow.

“Looky what I found Inspector. She had some strange looking stones hidden in her obi … along with this,” he said flashing the stiletto.
“Get her outta here!”

*The hell goes on in this place?*

Notes:

*The enemy of my enemy is my friend,* is an ancient proverb which put forth the idea that two opposing parties can or should work together against a common enemy. The earliest known expression of this concept is found in a Sanskrit treatise on statecraft, which dates to around the 4th century BC; the first recorded use of the current English version came in 1884.

Blithely: in a happy or carefree manner.

Compunction: a feeling of unease or anxiety of the conscience caused by regret for doing wrong or inducing pain.

Toilet water: (British) is a form of liquid perfume lighter than perfume; better known as eau de toilette.

Kawaguchi: “mouth of the river.”

Takara: “treasure.”

Tenor: the drift of something spoken.

Personage: a person of distinction or importance.

“No one can make you feel inferior without your consent,” is a quote attributed to Eleanor Roosevelt, from *This is My Story.*

“At close interval, dress right …dress. Ready … front!” These are military stationary drill commands.

Pale (archaic): an area within determined bounds.

Joyance (archaic): delight.

Cutpurse (archaic): pickpocket.

Kohaku: “amber.”

Kimigayo: meaning, “His Imperial Majesty’s Reign” is Japan’s national anthem. Its lyrics are the oldest of the world's national anthems, and one of the world's shortest playing. The lyrics were taken from a waka poem written during the Heian period and the current melody was chosen in 1880 to replace an unpopular melody composed eleven years earlier. A stirring piece, a total of 1 minute and 69 seconds, the accompanying photo for the instrumental version gives you an idea of what house Hatake looks like too. If you care to hear either version, follow the links below.

A Capella version: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dv7Y8hJwlnU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dv7Y8hJwlnU)

Instrumental version: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kyEDyeOkFsc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kyEDyeOkFsc)
A/N: One Hatake, two Hatake, three Hatake, more?

A couple of Uminos thrown into the mix as well.

This chapter is gonna be like a Three card Monte but, if you keep your eye on the real guy, you won't go wrong.

As a reminder, obake and bakemono are a class of yōkai, preternatural creatures in Japanese folklore. Literally, the terms mean a thing that changes, referring to a state of transformation or shape shifting. A bakemono's true form may be an animal or an inanimate object which may possess a soul in Shinto and other animistic traditions. A bakemono usually either disguises itself as a human or appears in a strange or terrifying form. In common usage, any bizarre apparition can be referred to as a bakemono or an obake whether it is believed to have some other form, making the terms roughly synonymous with yōkai.

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**Recherché**

Awash with anger and bewilderment, Iruka crunched down on another ginger lozenge as he turned his back on the crowd. *I don’t understand it, the amulet almost burned through to my chest yet Hatake showed no signs of distress. Did I use the wrong one?* As he stared out onto the still empty balcony, the pane of glass before him showed a stout elderly woman dressed in fine silk kimono heading his way.

“Well as I live and breathe. What brings you back to Konoha?”

*That’s it, not falling for this again.* He spun about, his brow furrowed, and one hand curled into a fist at his side. “Listen, I’m--”

“Umino Tadashi?” Suddenly, her smiling eyes screwed up in confusion, “Oh, you’re not him at all, are you? No of course not, he has a thick brown mustache, rather, he had one then … it’s probably grey and thinning by now.”

He felt himself calm as she stepped closer. *Least this one won’t try to tackle me*, he thought. “It’s quite alright ma’am … often mistaken for him; he was my father after all.”

“Little Iruka? My word, you’re the spitting image of your father and almost as charming. So, where is he? Huddled together with a group of doctors and comparing notes I’d imagine.”

“Thank you, ma’am, but I’m afraid my father is--”

“Surely Tadashi mentioned me … Yukimura Suzu? Known him since he was a simple country doctor and you since you were a twinkle in his eye. Well, wish me luck, “she said as she turned away, “I’ll try my best to find him in this crowd.”

“Yukimura-san, my father is dead.”

The old woman stopped in her tracks. “What’s that? When did this happen?”
“May, this year.”

“I’m so sorry little Iruka.” She turned placing a gnarled hand on his forearm. “My husband and I became great friends with your parents, one ailment at a time. We kept in contact until the end of last year. Pity, my husband and your dear mother died one year apart; Tadashi’s letters stopped coming as frequently then. Come to think of it, I have his last letter with me … put it in my purse to share with a mutual friend of ours. She and I always enjoyed reading those tales he’d spin for us. Stories of strange creatures and even stranger goings on… a clever one that Tadashi.”

“I’m glad you have fond memories of my parents--”

“What an interesting pin on your lapel … looks like an opal.”

“I’m not sure what it is, belonged to my father--”

“And is that a kamon etched on it? No, it looks like words.”

Rolling his eyes to the ceiling, Iruka stood uncomfortably while the old woman poked her nose to his chest. “Afraid my eyes are as old as the rest of me, maybe I could make out the words if you’d allow me to run a finger over it, is that alright dear?” As she reached out, a spark flew from her finger and the stone fell from its setting. As it slid near his right foot the old woman took another awkward step, crushing it under the sole of her shoe. “My word, I found it but I may have destroyed a family heirloom in the process.”

Gritting his teeth as he bent down, Iruka gathered the pieces inside his handkerchief and shoved them into his pocket as he stood. *Clumsy old biddy. It’s a mercy I’ve more amulets.*

“Oh bother, now I don’t remember what I did with my purse … maybe I left it with my wrap, yes, that’s it. Would you be lamb and help me find them?”

It was hard to refuse, what with her nails digging into his wrist as she pulled him along.

As they briskly move through the crowds, Iruka grabbed at the arm of one of the servants. “Excuse me, where is the cloakroom?”

“Right this way, sir,” he said turning as if to lead them.

“See now, that won’t be necessary young man,” Suzu insisted. “Simply tell us where it is and little Iruka will get us there.”

“As you wish ma’am. East wing, fifth door on your left.”

A plate of warm appetizers suddenly appeared under his nose before they could go further. “Oh, thanks Zumo … I’ll be back for it in a few minutes.”

*Recherché*

When at last they reach the cloakroom, Iruka allows Suzu to enter first. He stood near the exit, waiting patiently as she ambled to the armoire and flung it open.

“Give me a hand little Iruka … seems my wrap is caught on something.”

Once again, the amulet in his breast pocket began to warm, but he paid it no mind. As Suzu steps away, he beheld a swirling vortex opening inside the armoire. Wispy tendrils of a noxious black mist reached from it, holding the old woman in its grasp. Iruka turned about thinking to shield her; in
He felt her palms slam against his chest as she brusquely pushed him backwards. The word ‘why?’ froze on his lips when in an instant, the old woman was gone … vanished into thin air; in her place stood an odious creature.

“Oh my god … you’re a Yasha!”

Slimy fingers wrapped tighter around his neck, cramming him into the enlarging hole as he struggled to free himself. The creature opened its mouth, revealing rows of long sharp shining teeth; it’s eyes, blood red and glowing, it’s voice, a hellish cackle as the vortex sucked him further inside.

“Master will be pleased,” it said.

And before he fell deeper into the abyss, he watched the creature transform into his doppelgänger.

Recherché

When he awakes, his hands are in manacles, his ankles shackled to the brick wall at his back. “Where am I?” The response was a frightful growl resounding off the brick and mortar. “Show yourself demon!”

A laugh, masculine this time answers him; there’s a rush of wind and instantaneously, a wolf-like creature stands inches from his face. Its eyes gangrene yellow, fangs dripping with saliva, its breath nauseating with the stench of blood and rotten meat as its claws press into the soft flesh of his neck.

A voice that seemed to radiate from the stone walls around him inquires of the darkness,

“Now, now, is that any way to treat my honored guest?”

The door to his prison creaks open a tad more and as it does, the creature before him falls to its knees; its whiskered snout touching the floor. Iruka’s eyes slowly adjust to trace amounts of light behind the being standing in the doorway; this one is tall and lean with thick black wings protruding from its dorsal side.

“Who … or what are you?”

“You’ve crossed an ocean, dreamed of ripping out my heart and yet you don’t know who I am? How is it possible to forget a being who leapt through your father’s study window, cradling the body and severed head of a man? You wound me Dr. Umino. Up now Maito, take off his restraints; my miasma is sufficient to keep him still.”

The first beast mournfully whimpers as it stands erect. As paw like appendages fumble with heavy iron bindings, it's yellow eyes remain fixed on Iruka’s.

One moment of freedom does he enjoy before invisible bands of searing white heat wrap about his torso and extremities.

“How long I’ve waited for this moment,” said the creature by the door. “Your questions will be answered in due time.” The shadowy figure moves toward him and all Iruka can see of it are its eyes; one blood red, the other yellow; they both glow in the darkness.

“I am the seed of Hatake Sakumo, the man your father betrayed and beheaded.”

“If it’s vengeance you seek … kill me now! There are others who know what you are, and they will
avenge my death--!

“Kill you ... why on earth would I do that? Oh no, Dr. Umino ... I fully intend to amuse myself with you, slowly torturing your body ... tormenting your mind until you go mad or agree to reinstate the research our fathers began--”

“I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about--”

“You lie, but no matter, I’ll teach you everything you need to know. What’s this ... you’re shaking like a leaf? Surely an experienced demon hunter like you isn’t frightened, I mean, you did come in search of a demon, yes? Well ... here I am.”

“I’m repulsed, not frightened Hatake.”

“Ah, then is it my true form which makes you uncomfortable?” In an instant, human skin swallows up the deformed shape of his body and layers of clothing cover his nakedness as he walks into the light cast by a single candle. “If this is the constitution you’re more comfortable with, I’ll be sure to maintain it when next we meet.”

Mightily straining against his bonds, Iruka’s voice rebounded off the brick and pitch walls. “Next time we meet, I will emancipate your head from your shoulders!”

When he was in his true form, whatever it was Umino possessed tugged at his soul; now, it pulled at his mind. Once more, rich laughter bubbled up from Hatake’s belly. “Bold speech from the mouth of a milquetoast. How fortunate it is, Dr. Umino ... I find you amusing,” he said as a crooked grin played across his lips. His eyes fall to an area just above the white high collared shirt Iruka wore and a cold slender finger reaches out to trace over the line of a pulsating vein. “Humans,” he chuckled, “their feeble minds conceive that which their friable bodies cannot sustain.” He let his fingers trail further down, until his hand hovered over Iruka’s breast pocket; the warmth radiating from it familiar. “We’re going to be colleagues and as such, we will meet again. However, before I can let you leave this time, there is one thing I must take from you,” he told him while slender fingers started unbuttoning Iruka’s jacket. Maneuvering the other man’s arms to his side, Lord Hatake removes the jacket, carelessly flinging it aside; his shirt follows shortly thereafter.

Curiously, the force which compelled him come closer, diminishes.

“I’d hate for you to leave thinking me inhospitable, so I have a gift for you as well, my dear Dr. Umino.”

Maito, who has transformed into his human appearance, now stands beside his Master, a porcelain tray balanced on his palm. Three empty syringes lay on its surface.

Once again, Iruka’s arms are stretched over his head and held in place by Kakashi’s power. “Do try and hold still for this, Dr. Umino. A tiny prick ... won’t hurt much.” With a practiced hand, Lord Hatake jabs him in the axillary artery time and again, until each syringe is filled with Iruka’s life force. “There now,” he said, waving his hand over the tray which now holds the cylinders of this precious liquid.

Without hesitation, the Master leans down; the tip of his tongue flickering over each of the small punctures.

In abashed silence, the tray rattles in Maito’s hands as he glances between his Master and Umino. Rather than risk the ire of Lord Hatake, he does an about face and heads to the apothecary cabinet, stunned. His breathing irregular, his hands trembling as they transfer the fresh drawn blood into
three vials. Surely the tiniest drops will do him no harm. Still, he turns hoping to prevent further ingestion of that which was expressly forbidden.

“As promised,” the Master said as he rose to his full height, “here now is your gift.”

He pressed himself chest to chest with Iruka, looking down into determined brown eyes; the sweetness of his breath coming in refreshing huffs against the skin of Hatake’s jaw. Like a whirling dervish, the blood red eye spins as he leans in. “My personal seal … marking you as my servant. With this, my will becomes yours. And from this moment forward, wherever you are, whatever you’re doing … you will quit all to rush to my side when called—”

Iruka lifts his head to spit in the master’s face. “I’ll not be your lap dog Hatake!”

Though the floor rumbles beneath their feet, and mortar dust flies from the quaking walls, Hatake moves not an inch. “Why, ‘little Iruka,’ you’re quite the feisty one. I’ll take special care to beat that out of you. And so that we’re clear, you shall be whatever I choose, Umino.” As the spittle slides down his face, Hatake presses his hand to the other man’s chest. The smell and sizzle of searing flesh and the sound of Iruka’s screams make him smile before the good doctor passes out from the pain.

Having returned to Lord Hatake’s side, Maito stands astonied as his Master’s eyebrow raises. “The seal is meeting resistance … something’s in the way; he must be further humbled.”

“What would you have me do my Lord?”

At that precise moment, Kama's spirit awakens from rest inside Kakashi bringing with it the urge to snap Iruka in twain.

“Strip him completely, then stand back.”

Shivers ran along his spine as he saw Master’s hand reaching for the fasteners of his trousers. He could not hold back now, as he remembered Jiraiya’s warning. “No, my Lord, you mustn’t … I beg you, please do not do this! The third element--!”

“It is secured!” Hatake bellowed.

“Master, should something go awry, we need take precautions.” With the power of the rising moon, Kama’s spirit grows enraged and the collar around Maito’s neck painfully constricts. “My Lord … please … no good will come of this!”

Hatake pressed his body against his quarry once again, his fangs scraping over skin of Iruka’s exposed throat; his body shaking with need as Iruka can offer no resistance. The taste of innocent blood still fresh in his mouth … he must have more.

Heedless of consequence, Kama forces him to take the first bite; euphoria makes weak his knees and Lord Hatake staggers backwards as if drunken. Maito quickly pulls him away and for his effort, he is immediately back handed through the opposite wall. The voice which speaks to him this time, is not his Master's.

“Will you choose banishment above obedience?”

“My duty,” he choked out, “is to protect my Master--”

“Infidel!” Boomed the voice. “A slave’s duty is to obey! You dare prevent the will of a god?”

Unconsciousness is only seconds away, this Maito knows. Before his eyes there forms a thick grey
mist and through it steps a savior; the specter of Lord Hatake Sakumo stands beside an incoherent Kakashi.

The apparition held up its hands in surrender, it’s voice doleful.

“Kama … my father,” he said with a bow, “thy will be done, but as in days past, I beseech thee; turn back thine anger onto me … release my son! He is flesh of your flesh, bone of your bone … let me order his steps, let me guide him in the paths you have set forth, and by my plight, he will walk therein.”

In the blink of an eye, the crushing pressure against Maito’s windpipe lessens, Lord Sakumo vanishes and Kakashi lets out a yell, falling to his knees; in an instant, Maito is freed from the broken bricks about him and runs to collect his Lord ere he keels over.

Cradled in the arms of his servant, the Master whispers, “The seal holds … leave me. There is still much to be done this night. Set a watch, I shall summon him at the appointed time.”

Recherché

"What ya think,” Kotetsu asked, “he seems more relaxed than before, right?’”

“Yes, but he’s been avoiding us since he got back. I saw him and the Governor with their heads together for a while and since then, he’s been dancing up a storm.”

"So what Zumo? Geez … he’s having the time of his life, let him.”

Recherché

“You been avoiding me Inspector?”

"Not just you, Lady Tsunade … I’ve been doing my damnedest to avoid everyone.”

"Then thank the heavens I’m not easily offended,” she said with a smile. "Come, dance with me ... tell me something good.”

“Well, I heard Orochimaru was taken to hospital earlier, currently his status is unknown.”

“Such a pity, though I can’t imagine why his sudden illness would keep Danzou from being here. I do hope my dear friends are alright.”

They looked to one another and burst out laughing as they stepped onto the dance floor.

Recherché

A runner dispatched finds the Coroner between the old morgue and the town square. "Come quick!”

Leaving the students to sort out equipment and bodies, the runner and Genma head out. “Seen flames over the ridge line so we came arunnin,’ a member of the fire brigade said as Genma alights from the wagon in the bend of the driveway. "Pulled out as many as we could fore them timbers started fallin.’ Worse thing I ever did see, folks all cut up like ‘at.”

Bowing before him with hat in hand, the Coroner said, “For this last act of kindness, I thank you and your friends on behalf of the family. Reckon we're gonna need more wagons.”

Stacked up like cords of firewood are the charred remains of one of Konoha’s noble families and their servants. This sad convoy will quietly wend its way from the Uchiha compound to the hospital.
morgue. Twenty-one souls lost. Into the night will they work, examining what they can salvage from the bodies, coating them with embalming powders and finally, wrapping them in yards of fine linens and aromatic herbs. And from the lumber mills, wagon after wagon will haul kiln dried pine to weary cabinet makers roused from their beds to fashion coffins.

*Recherché*

“My father’s presence,” said the Master as they walked to the place of sacrifice, “I sensed it earlier and distinctly heard his voice while Umino stood before me.”

Realizing his Master was unaware of Lord Sakumo’s intervention, Maito dares not contradict. “The shaman said your ancestors were calling to him, and to you as well.”

“This was a singular voice that became more perceptible after I placed the seal on Umino.” He wrinkled his nose saying, “And that smell--”

“Burning flesh Master?”

“Something far more repugnant.”

“You will forgive me my Lord, but the only scent I detected was fear--”

“Probity … I could taste it in his blood.”

“Understood, I’ll have the Yasha--”

“Need I remind you to whom Umino belongs?”

“No, Master.” He outpaced his Lord by a few steps to kneel before him. “Grant your servant permission to speak freely.”

Kakashi halted and inclined his head.

“This probity you speak of My Lord … I’ve heard stories of it being the downfall of a great house; righteousness triumphing over evil--”

“Stand to your feet. I’ve told you before, Umino and his friends are no threat to us. All though the evening, they were jostled about on the dance floor and in the buffet line; their periapts systematically removed and destroyed by our special guests. Though the constables have one of them in custody, the Yasha will attend to that situation. My seal rests over his heart rendering him like unto any of my servants--”

“Master … this Umino … he is nothing like Kinoe was. He doesn’t fear you in the same way, nor has he respect for you my Lord.”

The Master’s smile was a confident one. “Not yet … but he will.”

*Recherché*

Having successfully disentangled himself from the Governor, Ibiki was standing at the bar with Aoba when Lord Hatake approached.

"Sorry I missed you earlier Inspector. I do hope you're enjoying the evening thus far. The servants are setting up blankets on the back lawn, bonfires should be lit soon and Kinoe tells me there will be a firework display later--"
"Nothing personal sir, but this sorta gathering isn't exactly my cup of tea."

"It isn't mine either," he whispered, "but one must do what is expected from time to time." He looked about the room and leaned in to whisper, "I was thinking of slipping off to the salon for some cognac and a good cigar. Care to join me? We could pass the time with a quiet game of shogi--"

"Now you're talking my language. But I must warn you Lord Hatake .. I'm a damn good player; I won't let you win easily."

"Excellent. Challenge accepted Inspector."

"Mind if I let my men know where to find us should they need me?"

"Of course not, I am at leisure to neglect my guests; your work is far more important."

"Let me know the second Ryota gets here," he instructs Aoba. "I'll be in conference with the master of the manor, down the hall in the salon."

**Recherché**

"Three numina ... are you certain?" Sai asks of the messenger. "And Dr. Umino is where? I must get word to his friends, though I doubt they can help him now; he bears the seal and has received the first bite. You and your brothers, gather these supplies from the forest,” he says hastily scrawling a note. “Perhaps there is still a chance to cleanse his blood.”

**Recherché**

When Iruka comes to himself, he’s still pressed to the wall, arms above his head and naked from the waist up. Another loathsome beast his keeper.

"You can't hold me here forever," he snapped. "My friends are--"

"Nothing more than salubrious mouthfuls for beings like me," mocked his jailor. "Be grateful ... the Master's mark is the only thing that keeps you from being my next meal."

Notes:

Yukimura: “snow village.”

Suzu: “bell.”

Odious: repugnant, disgusting, abominable.

Doppelgängers: an apparition or double of a living person.

Probity: the quality of having strong moral principles, honesty and decency. Complete and confirmed integrity.

Friable: easily crumbled or pulverized.

Milquetoast: timid, meek or unassertive.

Abashed: made to feel uncomfortable, disconcerted or embarrassed by something that has taken place or been said.

Astonished (archaic): briefly deprived of the power to act; filled with the emotional impact of
overwhelming surprise or shock.

Axillary artery: a large blood vessel that moves oxygenated blood to the lateral aspect of the chest, the axilla (armpit) and the upper limb.

Doleful: expressing sorrow, full of grief.

Plight (archaic): to pledge one’s word or oath; solemnly pledge or promise (faith or loyalty).

Periapt: a charm or amulet.

Salubrious: conducive or favorable to health or well-being.
All's Well That Ends

Chapter Notes

Descriptions of VIOLENCE, SEXUAL ABUSE AND RAPE.

Out there … in the wooded area ringing the estate … the ritual begins.

Under the watchful eyes of her guards, Uchiha Suté undergoes a rite of passage which will forever sever ties with the name, fortune and sins of her former family. Once completed, she will be welcomed onto the grounds of house Hatake. Dressed in a simple kimono of palest pink, green and yellow, her long black hair is secured into an elaborate headdress befitting her new status as chief bridesmaid. Gaki surrounding the manor must perforce bow before her as she's led to the hallowed vaults where the purification process will take place.

As she kneels before the Yasha a chalice of gold is pressed to her lips, this in preparation for her mind to receive the Master, she drinks deeply of the potion; absinthe mingled with traces of her guard's miasma. Her garments carefully removed before she's made to stretch out on pallets of Cryptomeria. Gently will the Yasha massage and manipulate her body with the oils of sandalwood, cedarwood and juniper berries. Afterwards, she will be wrapped in woven white cotton while her attendants impart their knowledge of the Hatake ancestry by the laying on of hands.

Once the fabric is peeled away and burned, the ashes are collected and mixed into a paste of marjoram oil and a finely powdered herbal compound. Bathed in rain water scented with the resins of frankincense and myrrh, she is then be laid upon the altar. Using ink infused with the Master’s blood, the Yasha paint sacred symbols on the canvas of her body from forehead to the soles of her feet. It is at this point of the ritual where she must be forcibly held down while the symbols sink into her flesh and burn into the depths of her being. All the while, the Yasha continue chanting centuries old incantations which will bring the sacrifice forth from the grave at the time appointed. Finally, draped in raw silks, she will lie in repose upon the altar until he Lord arrives.

Recherché

With his hand hovering above the door handle, Lord Hatake suddenly declines to oversee the preparations of the bridesmaid as was usual; instead he declares she will be claimed at the precise moment of the eclipse. He turned to look back at the cell where Umino was recovering and then again to the door where the Uchiha waited.

“I retire to my bedchamber Maito … go, fetch him.”

A current of excitement runs through the ballroom as the hour of the eclipse draws nigh. While the orchestra continued playing, Kinoe busies himself herding guests out the front door, directing them to the massive back lawn, where fluffy blankets with plump bolsters are spread and bonfires illuminate the gardens and orchards.

Maito eases up behind him whispering, "Our Lord is foul of spirit … he has need of you."
Quick as lightening does Kinoe hasten to his quarters, grabbing up the essential items, he nips down to the vaults via a passageway in the kitchen. On the hunt for the friends of Umino, Maito searches every room in east wing.

Recherché

Holding the bundle close to his chest, Kinoe calms his breathing and knocks once. A thick black mist slithers beneath the door and hangs heavy inside the enclosed space as he's drawn inside. In the far corner of the room, glowing eyes bore into his soul. The door behind him slams closed of its own accord as he stands momentarily transfixed. Posthaste does he divest himself of adornment while walking to the center of the room.

The air about him, frigid, his breaths, wispy puffs of white.

The cruse of oil still clutched in his hand is broken open, spilled forth and quickly applied. In a flash, a malevolent force wraps round his body and without further ado, the crack of a braided whip shatters the silence as it slices through the air; its bite burning into the skin of his thighs, laying open the flesh on his back and slashing across his chest as the fury of his Master is unleashed.

Nary a sound escapes him as in the bliss of agony he finds solace.

Time and again does the lash fly, the pain unrelenting until at last, his knees buckle, and his lips kiss the cool stone floor when he crumples before his Lord.

On all fours as a beast in estrus, he has but a moment to catch his breath before claws dig into his shoulders to hold him in place. In the space of a blink is he speared; long crooked barbs mangling the soft lining of the passageway intended as an exit, his screams serving to double the force of that which thrusts inside him, till he can scream no more. Spent, the Master leaves him a bloodied mess, and in that instant, does he hear footsteps approach; it is a trio of Yasha, bearing salves for his wounds. Despite the pain, for Kinoe this violent act is a source of pride; providing Master an outlet for his wrath, he’s cemented his position of usefulness to Lord Hatake which is the only thing that matters.

Outside the chambers where Iruka is held and the sacrifice lies in readiness does the Master pace. He stills for a moment to watch as the Yasha lead a battered Kinoe back to his quarters. Pangs of remorse hold him in their fiery grip; his head feeling as if it will split open any second, he slumps against the cool stone wall. The hell goes on here? Is this hunger ... the effect of the rising moon ... bloodlust? Willing his body upright and pushing away from the support at his back, he knows he must flee this place at once ... or else be consumed. To the safety of his bedchamber does he return, the smell of Kinoe’s blood still lingering in the air.

It is hunger, he reasons, soon will I know satiety.

Recherché

The search almost over, Maito senses the unrest of his Master. At once, he bounds down the stairs opposite the lounge to the vaults below. As soon as the sole of his shoe touches the last stone step, he’s knocked to the floor by a sledgehammer like punch to the solar plexus.

Jiraiya stands no more than ten feet from him. “It is Kama’s wrath I perceive; the Master is beside himself. What have you done?”

Clutching at his midsection, Maito slowly rises. “He has tasted of the blood of his enemy. Ere I could prevent our Lord, the guarantee on Umino’s soul was exacted.”
“Fool! Didn’t I warn you!” Jiraiya lunged at him, transmuting into his true form mid leap. Claws the strength of graphene blindly swipe and gouge at Maito’s flesh, but youth, agility and speed like unto a cheetah keeps Maito just outside his reach. He grabs hold the arm of the elder, turning him about and sinking his fangs into Jiraiya’s shoulder. Growling and grappling they tumble to the floor, neither holding the advantage over the other for long. Screams from the Master’s bedchamber brings the fight to its end. Gathering themselves, they race along the dim corridor; Maito reaching the door first. It slams against the wall and to their surprise, they discover Lord Hatake has clean quit the area.

“Shit! His appetite whet, his mind clouded, Lord Kakashi is a liability for all of us. He may well rape or kill whomsoever crosses his path--”

“No,” Maito protested, “my Lord would not stray far from the sacrifice!”

Down the hall a door squeaks open and they run out into the corridor in time to see their Sovereign emerge from Iruka’s holding cell.

“Questioning the self-control and judgment of one's Master ... that is unwise and very disrespectful.”

“Master, you must feed--”

“Last time I checked Jiraiya,” he said walking toward them, “this is my home, everything and everyone in it is under my command and moves in accordance with my wishes. Which means, all things should be done in accordance with my timing. What say you?”

“My Lord, I did not mean to presume--”

“And yet you did. Oh …right,” he added with a snap of his fingers, ”while I’m thinking along these lines, if ever you lay a hand on any of my servants without my permission…”

The crackle of lightening forced them shield their eyes; the power of their Lord's fury swept Jiraiya off his feet, slamming him against the opposite wall, ” … I will end you. Need I repeat myself?”

A tiny voice, raspy with pain answered, “No ... Master.”

“It's settled then; at the stroke of midnight will I claim the sacrifice, afterward, you will transport her to the place appointed Maito. Umino bears my seal which unfortunately, makes him a delectable target. As he is defenseless against your hordes of gaki, you will make sure he arrives home safely Jiraiya.”

Recherché

2300: Ryota shows up at house Hatake and quickly finds Aoba in the exiting crowds. “Where’s Ibiki?”

The other man gestures to end of the hall with a jut of his chin. “Conference with the head of household. What’s up?”

“Just go get him … I’ll find Raidou. We meet back here in the foyer … five minutes tops. Aint got time to repeat myself.”

Recherché

Content that his two messengers await their arrival near the door of the cabin, Sai goes over his notes one more time. The sacrifice will take place soon. Denied access by a guard on the inside and seals placed the outside of the door. Extremely powerful beings lie in wait in the forests. “Shit ... Iruka!”
Recherché

There’s a light rap on the salon door; a smiling servant greets him and Lord Hatake bids him enter.

“Sorry to interrupt sirs … need to have a word with the Inspector if you don’t mind.”

“Aoba, your timing’s perfect; Lord Hatake would’ve had me in just four more moves. I do hope opportunity presents to do this again sir,” he said as he rose from his seat.

“Always a pleasure to face a worthy opponent Inspector.”

As the servant ushered them out, Ibiki was heard asking, “Ryota’s here, right?”

“Yeah. Had a pinched look on his face when he went off to find Raidou. Wants to meet up in the foyer.”

“I see him and that look means bad news. Shit!”

Raidou signals them to a meeting place in a corner of the vestibule.

“Alright,” Ibiki sighs, “we’re all here, what’s the--?”

“Akimichi Yori, Nara Hitoshi … dead. Entire Uchiha clan … dead. Orochimaru, Danzou and Kabuto missing, presumed dead … there was a lot of blood in the Kokucho conservatory, no sign of the bodies--”

"Sonofabitch! Aoba … Raidou … you stay put. Let's go Ryota!"

He could see Mayonaka standing beside Ryota’s mount as they made their way through the line on the stairs. A firm grip on his shoulder prevented him from going further.

“Leaving so soon,” the Governor said, “what’s your hurry? Fireworks haven’t started yet--”

“Something’s brewing,” he said when he turned about. “Fill you in on the details in the morning.”

They took off at a normal gait so as not to draw attention, breaking into a trot as they cleared the property line. Along the way, Ryota brought him up to speed with the other goings on. “We got domestic animals running wild and woodland creatures running amok … hares chasing wolves through town … that sorta thing. Bar fights been breaking out like crazy … holding cells are at capacity--”

“I got it, Ryota … whole territory’s gone nuts. We stop there first,” he gestured toward the hospital.

The sickeningly sweet smell of burnt flesh and the pungent odors of chemicals turn their stomachs as they were led through to the basement; naturally, Genma was at the center of activity with a huge grin on his face.

“Welcome to my world Inspector. Reckon you wanna know cause of death for ‘em, eh? Throats cut, plain and simple. The weapon? Not sure, but my money is on a sword with a broad blade. As you can smell, they’re all burnt up … no telling who is who.”

Their journey back to the constabulary was spent in silence. Once behind the closed door of his office, Ibiki rifles through his stash of hard liquors. The dented flask of whiskey trembles in his hand as he turns it up and gulps it down.

Recherché
Dr. Umino Iruka is translated from a dank cell, to a plush upholstered chair in one of the lounges of the east wing. Servants have notified Kotetsu and Izumo that their friend has fallen ill; they direct them to where he sits dazed.

“For heaven sake Iruka, snap out of it!”

He looks around, panic stricken, “Zumo? Where am I? How’d I get here?”

“The Governor arranged a coach for us ... remember?”

“No, after that, the old woman, the cloakroom ... and then I was in another place,” he insisted as he grabbed hold Kotetsu’s jacket. “It was dark ... Hatake and another creature were there too--”

“Ruka, you’re scarin’ me man. Let go and calm yourself alright? Take my word for it,” he assured him while prying his fingers from the fabric, “you’ve been sitting right here in the same spot for the last ten minutes--”

“God damn it! Listen to me! I was in a dungeon ... Hatake ... a seal--”

“Okay ... it’s alright,” he heard Izumo say. "We were told you got overheated ... collapsed or something." Bringing the back of his hand to Iruka's forehead, he went on to say, "Maybe the places and people you saw were part of a fever dream; you are a little warm--”

“It wasn’t a dream Zumo ... don’t you believe me?”

“Umm, they’re bringing the carriage around. Let's get you home and into bed; you’ll feel better in the morning--”

“Hey, what gives with his throat? Looks bruised--”

“Let me see,” Izumo said, “... it’s a rash, I think. There were some exotic foods on the menu ... maybe he ate something he’s allergic to. Iruka, you having any trouble swallowing? Open your mouth, let me have a look--”

“No, I’m fine,” he insists frantically batting away Izumo’s hands. “Oh no, no ... no,” he says as he runs his hands into his pockets, “the amulets ... they’re gone!”

“Don’t worry buddy, we still got ours--”

“Tetsu ... we’re in the den of demons ... unprotected!”

“All the more reason we should leave now.”

Iruka was babbling incoherently but conscious when they stuffed him into the carriage. But not three minutes into the ride, he was fast asleep.

"Would ya look at that?" Kotetsu says, “All tuckered out and callin’ hogs."

"He shouldn't be so tired this early in the evening. I’m starting to get worried--"

"Zumo, make up your mind. First, you were all bent outta shape because he was having fun, now you're all twisted up because he's worn out from having too much fun. And now I’m bent outta shape because we’re missing the eclipse--"

“That’s why they put windows in these things, so people could look out of them. Can you stay on topic for a minute ... can ya?”
"You don't have get nasty about it ... geez--"

"Listen, we both know Iruka can’t hold his liquor, but I don’t think he’s drunk--"

“You think he’s sick or somethin’?”

Recherché

Twelve minutes to midnight ... the door to the hallowed place opens slowly. The Yasha assume their normal appearance as they fall to their knees in obeisance to the Master. The faintest gasp escapes Sute’s pink lips as lord Hatake appears in his true form before her. Her body trembles as she sits up to recite the words of the vow:

“I have renounced all my lord and
pledge to thee my fealty for eternity.

Sanctify me your bondservant, for freely I give myself to thee.”

As shades of red creep across the face of the moon above, the silk covering her body is rent in twain; the spirit of Kama overtakes Lord Hatake as they exact the final revenge upon the last surviving member of the Uchiha. Angered that he couldn’t humble Umino when the opportunity presented itself, Lord Kakashi falls upon her, wresting her virginity in a manner most violent; her screams riling the Yasha and spurring on Master’s repeated abuse of every available orifice. Her body broken and torn, he returns her to a prone position and rips open her throat, cutting through the carotid artery with his fangs to drink his fill of her blood.

Recherché

Dropped off at the Administrative complex, they stand in awe of the blood red moon before hitting the trail to home.

"Still think we should have taken a room at an inn," Kotetsu grumbles.

"Nonsense, the night air will do us all some good. Besides, you do see all these people milling about us, right? I'm sure the inns are full, and I'd much rather talk to Iruka in a place where he feels comfortable."

"It's not like he's gone mental ... I mean, he's not gonna freak out ... is he?"

Izumo cuts his eyes at Iruka gibbering between them. "I think he just needs to unwind, sleep in his own bed--"

"Would you two stop talking about me as if I'm weren't here please? I'm not mental or drunk and when we get home ... I'll prove it."

Recherché

"Eclipse ... seen it ... appropriately impressed by it and now, I'm ready to peel off this get up and go to bed. Hope you enjoyed yourself Shizune, but it's past my bedtime ... we're leaving."

"Fine by me, milady," she yawns. "I could just kick myself for scheduling a farewell breakfast for 8:00 am. Thank you again for letting me tag along. I've a feeling this is a night I won't soon forget."

Recherché
"What the hell are those things?"

"They're called owls, Zumo. They fly and hunt at night."

"Don't patronize me. I meant what are they doing standing outside our door?"

"One of them has something in his beak, I think it's a scroll," Izumo said as he moved closer to the bird. "Oh, these are Sai's drawings." One of the owls took wing, dropping the scroll into Izumo's open palm, the other simply exploded, leaving behind a small package.

"What does the note say?"

"It says, 'Dear Mr. Tetsu, go inside and fire up a lantern so Izumo can read the scroll.'"

"Back to normal, are ya Ruka?"

As they settle in and start changing clothes for bed, Izumo and Kotetsu realize their amulets are missing too, even the ones they had in their socks.

"What's this world coming to," Kotetsu gripes as he joins the others at the table. "Never thought we'd get pinched in a high-class joint like that."

"So what now Iruka? Any information Sai collected tonight is practically useless to us without protection."

"Who knows," he said rubbing at his temples. "Maybe his mice recovered some of our smaller talismans--"

"Gimme that thing… I'll read it," Kotetsu said. "Oi, this kid's got a lotta nerve … what a little … get this,"

'Blend these together and make tea for Iruka … and only Iruka.

Will explain later, imperative you follow my instructions.'

"Again, his mice may have seen what made Iruka ill; I reckon the teas he sent are medicinal ... that was a nice gesture."

Kotetsu was already tearing into the package. "What the hell is this stuff? It stinks."

Izumo took a deep breath and sighed, "Brings back memories doesn't it?"

"Yeah. Whenever Father needed dry herbs or roots in a hurry, he'd mix up a compound like this. Sprinkling it on the fresh ingredients didn't alter the effect of the medicines, just made them stink to high heaven." Iruka pulled the package closer to himself, "Let's see what we got here. Burdock root, red clover, Reishi mushrooms and dandelions … should be good. I'll make regular tea for you Tetsu."

**Recherché**

His enemies defeated, his belly full,

yet satisfaction lay beyond his grasp.

The same drawing force he felt when Iruka was near prickled at his nerves from a distance, taunting him through the open window of his private study.
Damn you Umino.

There is yet one more thing I must take from you.

Notes:

Perforce: of necessity; necessarily; by force of circumstance.

The numbers four and nine are considered unlucky in Japan. The word written ‘four’ closely resembles the word used for ‘death;’ the number ‘nine’ sounds like the word for ‘pain and suffering.’

Sandalwood oil is an antispasmodic, relaxing the nerves, muscles and blood vessels. It is also a disinfectant and has a mild sedative effect. Cedarwood oil is an antiseptic and it too has a mild sedative effect. Juniper berry oil prevents sepsis (blood poisoning); also used as a blood purifying agent. Marjoram oil is a vasodilator, making wide the blood vessels and increasing the flow of blood in the body.

Satiety: the feeling or state of being sated; the supplying (of someone) with as much as or more than is desired or can be managed.

Solar plexus: a complex of ganglia (a structure which contains numerous nerve cell bodies linked by synapses and radiating nerves of the sympathetic nervous system) at the pit of the stomach.

Whet (archaic): a thing that stimulates appetite or desire.

Graphene: one of the strongest metals known to man.

Estrus: a period of sexual excitability when female mammals are receptive to males; in heat or rut.

Recumbent: suggestive of repose; lying down, reclining.

Divest: to undress or strip, especially of clothing, ornament or equipment.

Adornment: something that adds attractiveness.

Myrrh: derived from the wounding of certain trees causing them to 'bleed' this resin. The ancient Egyptians combined it with natron to embalm bodies. It is said to produce blood moving powers to purge stagnant blood from the uterus. In Biblical texts, myrrh was one of the core ingredients of the anointing oil used for the consecration of the tabernacle and the high priests which would serve at its altar, as well as being part of a purification ritual for a queen.

Bloodlust: the uncontrollable urge to kill or maim; desire for blood shed.

Wrest: to gain something by force or violence; take away by force.

Gibber: to speak inarticulately or meaninglessly.

Burdock root removes toxins from the blood. Red clover treats fever, Reishi mushrooms and dandelion root act as liver detoxifying agents.
"Skip the tea … I wanna hear this alleged ‘proof’ about you being in one place while we had two sets of eyes on ya in another place. Go on then, make me believe it."

"Tetsu!"

"What? Now aint the time to humor him. If he’s cracked in the head, then as his friends we oughta tell him straight--"

"I agree that delusional isn’t a good look for him Tetsu, but, there’s a right way to go about everything. He doesn’t need condemnation … we should be supportive--"

"We aint got time to pussyfoot around either. We need a solution to a real problem … like how we’re supposed to defend ourselves against goo-gobs of gaki--?"

"I handed over your little cache of weapons, didn’t I?"

"If I was fightin’ human opponents that would do me but--"

"That’s what I tried to tell you in the carriage, but did you listen?"

"Both of you … shut up," Iruka snapped as he started undoing the buttons of his night shirt. “I realize there’s no rational explanation for what happened, but before you write me off as crazy, get a load of this.” Suddenly, he pulled back the material and puffed out his chest. "You can apologize at any time."

Izumo and Kotetsu looked him over for a few seconds, straining to see something other than bare skin.

"Well?"

"I’m sorry Ruka, cause all I see are the same six chest hairs you had since I’ve known ya--"

"Then you need glasses. You see it, don’t you Zumo?"

After a weighty silence, he shook his head and breathed, "Iruka … buddy … aint diddly squat there--"

"Seriously?" Grabbing at the other man’s hand, Iruka guided it over a broad area of his skin. "It's burned into my flesh; surely you feel it?"

"Alrighty then … I sense you guys need some privacy--"

"Take your seat smart ass! Iruka, I can't see or feel anything, so do me a favor … tell me what you see--"

"For cryin' out loud … it’s the exact same herald as the one in Hatake’s foyer! Of course, it’s upside down for me, and a lot smaller but," he traced the lines in his skin, “right here and here … two grey wolves standing on their hind legs, and right here, their front paws … supporting either side of the letter ‘H;’ they’re wearing braided gold crowns, for heaven sake!"

Izumo and Kotetsu looked again, even taking turns running their fingers over the areas Iruka kept pointing to and still, nothing.
“Wait a minute … do you remember drinking or eating anything that tasted like fennel?”

“Haven’t eaten anything since lunch yesterday Zumo. And I had one glass of wine before the old lady latched onto me, though it may have been a liqueur; it was sweet with an anise aftertaste--”

“Was it green?”

“Green? No, I’d remember that. It was a pale color, I think. I just gulped it down--”

“First of all, you should never do that and secondly … Absinthe. I saw one of the servants carrying a tray of cloudy drinks … probably intended for the French delegation--”

“And?”

“Tetsu, in those sensitive to its ingredients and especially on an unfed stomach, Absinthe is rumored to cause mild hallucinations--”

“So, he’s not crazy?”

“That’s a debate for another time. Cover yourself Iruka and let me have these packets,” he said when he rose and headed toward the kitchen. “As I don’t trust you near an open flame, I’ll make tea and some miso soup for you. You’ll be right as rain by morning.”

Kotetsu also stood, reached across the table and lightly rapped Iruka upside the head.

“That was for drinkin’ weird stuff … amateur.”

Recherché

Shuttled through the kitchens and out the back door, Takara was shoved toward the open bed wagon, her one-way ticket to a holding cell when a mounted patrol officer rode up.

“Inspector wants me to take this one to the outpost,” he said.

She was hefted onto his horse without further conversation, handcuffed, she sat in front of the rider for a quiet bumpy ride through the forests. Fifty yards from the border, the rider halted, releasing her from the cuffs and lowering her to the ground.

“For keeping his prize out of the hands of the constables, my Master is most appreciative. As your reward, he has granted you conditional freedom; but you must cross the border now and never return to Konoha.”

“Lord Hatake is most gracious. Please,” she said with a bow, “thank him for me sir.”

The checkpoint in the distance her only focus, she took off running. At the ten-yard point, near the terminus of the woods, two large grey wolves moved to block her path. She slowed, leaning against a tree, catching her breath, her eyes scanning the surroundings for another exit. At the rustle of leaves behind her, she turns and watches in silent horror as strange and terrifying creatures emerge from the soft loam; inch by inch, the wolves have crept closer, their hackles raised, and teeth bared. While the vegetation swallows up her screams and the cracked earth sucks down splatters of her blood, the mounted patrolman and his horse vanish in a puff of black smoke.

The other of Lord Hatake's special guests are led down to the vaults where the Yasha, empty of belly wait to feast on them.
Recherché

By 1:15am, the orchestra and their instruments are piled into rickety wagons and headed toward the center of town. In the kitchens, the chefs have offered up congratulations to the victors; exhausted, they too load into ox drawn carts headed toward the inns. Many of the dignitaries are taking their leave, and as he’d done in welcome, so too does he in farewell; a genial host, personally thanking each guest for sharing this magical evening with him, lord Hatake presses a tiny gift into their hands as they step into ornate carriages which will bear them to the inns. On the back lawn, those sixteen men chosen by lottery, mind the dying bonfires. One by one, each man is pulled aside by a comely house maid and enticed into the wooded areas for a special treat. Passions aroused by her ministrations, his body will be torn asunder the moment of la petite mort; his flesh, sustenance for the Yasha, his wagon and supplies, broken down as fuel for the embers of the bonfires, and his horses will become meat and drink for the gaki.

Recherché

Not long after their conversation ends, Kotetsu, Izumo and Iruka trudge off to their rooms; their bellies full and spirits lightened. The flame of his lantern extinguished as Iruka crawls into bed, his father’s dagger beside him on the nightstand, the remaining amulet plucked from the breast pocket of his waistcoat, now secure under his pillow. Yet, as he hunkered down, into that gentle goodnight … he will not go. Visions of grotesque creatures, rotate continuously on a spindle of worrisome thoughts and words left unspoken as he lay staring up at the ceiling.

Recherché

2:00 am: A serenade of howls echoes about him as through the woods and by tiny moonlit streams he walks; his thoughts a shamble, noticing everything, yet seeing nothing. Logic defines not that which drives him, ever onward to the source of his disquiet. And now he stands before the cabin in which his prey fitfully tosses and turns upon his bed.

Flagging conviction, nagging questions cast off,

shrugged aside as through the walls he passes,

that he may stand in the room where answers lie.

One step, two steps, three steps, four…

desire to rise up and slay,

kept under pressure

now froths and seethes;

from their hiding places, do fangs and claws slip, bared for maximum damage.

Five steps, six, seven and nine,

beneath a thin sheet and through the fabric of his nightshirt shines

bright the seal.

A beacon to a mind adrift in the roiling sea of wrath.

The arm drawn back ready to strike,
the hand poised to smother,
stopped by a voice...

“Kakashi, my son ... he is key to achieving your goal; he must be spared alive.”

His mind, a conflagration, his insides churning; he turns his back on the target for a moment as articulation escapes him ...

Like a flash, Iruka is upright, the dagger held tightly in his hand. “What are you doing here?”
"The seal ... it is intended to draw you to me ...not the other way around." he growled when he turned to face him. "I'm here to find out why."

"Stay back demon!"

"My dear Dr. Umino, you use that appellation as if it were an insult.

I am a demon,"

he said as he drew closer, "a very powerful and vengeful ... demon. I warn you ... test not my patience for though my grace sustains you, that will not be the case forever."

"And I'm warn you Hatake … don't come any closer!" The dagger having shifted, now weighs heavy in his left hand; reaching under the pillow, his eyes remain locked on Kakashi's as he slowly withdraws and holds forth a small red stone.

Without his consent does his hand obey an order unspoken, trembling uncontrollably as the knife slips from it. In a breath, the stone is snatched from his other hand; his eyes wide as it glows white in Hatake's palm.

"So, this is where it was coming from. And what a lovely shade of carnelian," he said running his fingers over the jagged nugget, "like unto the color of flesh."

Iruka pressed his back against the wall, pulling his knees to his chest. "Blessed and anointed by holy men, that stone repels evil," he mumbled, "supposed to be anathema to you!"

"Funny," he rolled it around in his palm, "doesn't seem to be working--"

"How is this possible?"

"Well, if it's any comfort, the stone is a deterrent to gaki of a lower class--"

"Pfft," Iruka cut his eyes at him, "what comfort should I expect ... clinging to a lie all this time? The old lady ... a Yasha; didn't seem to bother her or your manservant--"

"Neither of them are of the lower classes. So, Tadashi never explained the purpose of the stone or how he came into possession of it?"

Iruka shook his head.

"I see. Then I'll not leave you ignorant. This was a gift from my father to yours; it's a receptacle for a portion of a numen's aura--"

"Sakumo is dead! Whatever power he possessed, disintegrated with him--"
"You have much to learn, Dr. Umino," he said while casually pocketing the amulet. "I reign over the gaki in the territory--"

"I'll be sure to organize a parade for ya Hatake."

"The moment I came close to you inside that holding cell, the stone resonated with my power; I felt its pull, but I didn't understand where it was coming from or why. Not that it matters now; the seal in your flesh represents a claim against your soul. It also serves to protect you from envious gaki--"

"Be it understood now, my soul belongs to the god who created it. I don't want your protection Hatake!"

"Ah, yes … but in the coming days you will certainly need it. Mark well, Umino … you will belong to me … body and soul."

"Is that a threat?"

"Think of it as preparation--"

"I've grown weary of your posturing and these words of vanity. You got what you came for … begone!"

A silvery eyebrow raised in amusement. "If you dare issue orders to a god, then the seal needs reinforcement. I'll tend to that next time we meet. For now," he said extending his arm toward Iruka, "you will take your rest."

Without another word, Iruka felt his body stretching out to its full length, his pillow a puffy cradle for his head, as his eyes fluttered closed and an invisible hand pulled the thin sheet about his shoulders.

Hatake spared his prey a final look before exiting. "Such simple creatures these humans." Once outside the cabin, his fey smile disappeared as Jiraiya approached.

"My Lord," he said as he knelt, "do with me what you will, but I must warn you of the dangers--"

"Of fraternizing with humans? Years spent in the presence of my father gave me knowledge and from his missteps, have I gained wisdom; you needn't worry."

"I will speak plainly, Lord Kakashi … it is dangerous for you to spend time alone with Umino."

"Danger lies in wait for the human. Every breath he draws infuriates me to the core, yet am I prevented from killing him outright. You've no idea the frustration building inside me, yearning for release--"

"It is not frustration my lord … it is confusion, a conflict which will steadily weaken your resolve."

"I will hear no more of this." He made to walk away as the servant said, "You are your father's son, his strengths and glaring weaknesses made manifest in you." Kakashi stopped in his tracks, turning about slowly as Jiraiya continued, "I know what you've done … ingesting the remains of your mother and grandfather. Such a dichotomy renders judgment deceitful. Having tasted the blood of the sacrifice and of your prey, compassion will surely gain a foothold in your thoughts. The grant of mercy you struggle with is incompatible with your true nature, but I've assembled a remedy--"

"Jiraiya … faithful servant and confidant to my father, guardian of my life and trusted mentor; do you still not understand? Human emotion is no match for the strength of my ancestors--"
"I understand that even Lord Kama cannot compete with the love of a mother for her child." As Master sidestepped the kneeling form, Jiraiya grabbed him by the arm. "My Lord, if you are to rule over the Five Nations, it is imperative we crush these … feelings of pity--"

"Though you speak truth, it is as one unacquainted with my true nature …. see," he said as the bones of his servant’s hand snapped beneath his, "I’ve given mercy no place, even toward one I’ve known for an eternity. You do well not to meddle not in the affairs of your Master."

Recherché

Ensconced in the inner sanctum of his office where wads of crumpled papers litter the floor and desk, and the volume of a shot glass lessens by the half hour, Ibiki vacantly stares at the blank piece of paper before him that will eventually become his report to the Governor. The leather back of the chair sighs along with him as he flops against it.

"Pardon the interruption," Ryota says as the door creaks open a mite. "While everything was going to hell about us, forgot to give you this."

"Is it another bottle of whiskey? No? Then I’m not interested."

Undeterred, Ryota strides toward him. "I think you will be, Ibiki … it’s from London."

"Gimme and get out."

Ryota dropped it in the center of the desk with a grin. "You’re welcome."

When the door drew closed, he lazily leaned forward. Shaky hands grab hold of the envelope and rip it asunder. Bleary eyes skim over diagrams of the crime scene, the Coroner’s report and witness statements until they fell on a single sentence. Once more Ibiki flopped back in the chair, arms clutching around his midsection to hold back the laughter.

And just when I’d given up hope of pinning you down Umino.

By 4:45am, alcohol and sheer exhaustion have pushed the Inspector to the brink. His hands folded in his lap and chin dipping to his chest, the creaking of his office door rouses him from slumber.

"The hell do you want?"

The night commander stood at the corner of the desk, nervously clearing his throat. Finally, he managed, "Sir … we got another victim."

"What!?"

"Patrol almost tripped over the body… propped up against the Admin Complex front door she was. They carted her off to--"

Ibiki had his overcoat in hand and was striding to the rear exit of the building before the night commander finished speaking. Once again, he made the trip to the hospital’s basement.

"Didn’t expect ya so soon," Genma called as he walked into the room. "Just finishing up with the external exam and I think, I may have single handed solved your lady killer case. Wondered why she wasn't with the rest of ‘em--"

"The hell are you on about Genma?"

"Fully dressed and her throat was all tore up like the other ones, but damned if her lady parts aren't a
bloody mess. Now I understand why that boy had to kill himself--”

“I don’t follow--”

“Come closer, take a good look at her … it’s one of the Uchiha girls.”

The noise level dipped as Genma’s assistants cleared a path for Ibiki to zigzag through the tables.

“Damned ironic, isn’t it? Suté … the forsaken foundling.”

“Yeah,” Genma sighed. “Anyway, call it a hunch, but I think the brother was raping her when Fugaku walked in on ‘em; that’s why this Itachi fella panicked and decided to eliminate witnesses--”

“What? Itachi died hours ago. This girl was just found. How come nobody noticed before? And who the hell would put her there?”

“Haven’t the foggiest,” he said with a shrug of his shoulders. “Read somewhere that liver temperature renders approximate time of death; it’s worth a try. As to that other business, people say them Uchiha inbreed, you know … incest? And I also heard tell they dabbled in witchcraft. So, I’m thinkin’ he cast a spell to keep the body hid until first light--”

“That sounds ridiculous--”

“Coming from you, yeah it would; coming from me … townsfolk would eat it up.”

“I can’t ask you to do that Genma--”

“What ask? Already outta my hands,” he whispered as he pulled Ibiki aside. "See these medical students? They’ve been with me all night … in awe, matter of fact; can’t blame ‘em … not every day they’re in the presence of greatness.”

“For god sake man, those chemicals are rotting your brain.”

“You’re just ticked off because I closed the case before you could. When word gets out about the slaughter of an entire clan, guess who folks are gonna ask for all the gory details? Me, naturally, but since I can’t be everywhere at once … these young folks will happily fill in the blanks,” he said with a wink. “Yep, based on my expert opinion since I am the undisputed authority on death and its causes … what I say carries weight. Of course, I’ve cautioned these students not to breathe a word about what they’ve seen and heard tonight. Reckon you owe me one, Inspector.”

Ibiki sucked at his teeth as the light of understanding clicked on behind his eyes. "Yes of course; thank you for your time Mr. Shiranui. I await your complete report."

“Most of ‘em are done already … I tell ya, these kids learn quick. Hope you’ll pardon me for not seeing you to the door, gotta lot to finish, tying up loose ends and all that.”

A beefy hand landed between the stunned Coroner’s shoulder blades, as Ibiki grinned to beat the band.

“Never thought I’d say this to your face Genma, but you’re a genius.”

Notes:

La petite mort (French): “the little death,” an expression meaning the brief loss or weakening of
consciousness as when one experiences orgasm.

Conflagration: large, disastrous fire; conflict, war; destructive fire, usually an extensive one.

Articulation: the formation of clear and distinct sounds in speech; the act or process of speaking or expressing in words.

Carnelian: a translucent quartz stone; available in red orange, pink and brown colors. Its name is derived from the Latin words for ‘horn’ and ‘flesh,’ or ‘made of flesh.’ It was used as a talisman to counteract doubt and negative thoughts; it was also said to protect from and drive away evil. Talismans of carnelian were worn to keep the dark forces from influencing the wearer’s mind.

Anathema: in this case it is a damning curse embodied in the stone marked as a holy and consecrated object. To the righteous, it is a blessing … to the damned it is confirmation of their final destination … the pits of hell.

Dichotomy: a division or contrast between two things that are represented as being opposed.

Absinthe is a distilled, highly alcoholic beverage with an anise flavor derived from the flowers and leaves of grand wormwood, green anise, sweet fennel and other medicinal herbs to give it a natural green color. The traditional French preparation involves placing a sugar cube on top of a specially designed slotted spoon, which is placed atop a glass filled with a measure of absinthe. Iced water is poured or dripped over the sugar cube to mix the water into the absinthe. As water dilutes the spirit, those components with poor water solubility, such as the anise, fennel and star anise, come out of solution and cloud the drink. The resulting milky iridescence is called the louche or ladle. The release of these dissolved essences coincides with a perfuming of herbal aromas and flavors that "blossom" or "bloom," to bring out subtleties otherwise muted in the neat spirit. This is the oldest and purest method of preparation, often referred to as the French Method.
“He’s to be first in line at the Assessor’s office this morning, and this one,” Jiraiya said handing over the satchel, “is for the Arles penny. All he need say is, horses were brought to us late last night along with news of the Uchiha tragedy. Lord Hatake requests appraisal of their value; short and simple.”

“Rest confident, Kinoe knows how to work with the humans--”

“As you say. Master’s newest acquisitions require health certificates, have him set a time convenient for that Inuzuka woman to examine them … today preferably.”

“Yes sir. And does Master require further of me?”

“He said nothing, however, I need you. Our Lord lies troubled Maito; no safe haven has he from that which disquiets his soul, this … Umino,” is hissed out through gritted teeth, “the chosen of a numen--”

“And we, prevented from destroying him. Would that I could have reasoned with him sir … I failed, yet am I unwilling to stand idle while his … ‘chosen’ weakens our Lord--”

“Since it’s up to us now, prithee calm yourself young one … all is not lost. We will do whatever it takes … seize every opportunity as it presents itself, for we cannot allow a soul tie to form between them.”

0515: He comes blazing through the plaza as if his hair were on fire. After a tortuous dismount, overworked leg and back muscles scream in agony; one moment to settle down. His trusty pipe, packed tight and lit; a burst of nicotine fills the lungs, clears the head and energizes his next steps. And on this, an exceptionally humid morning, the door to the constabulary stands ajar. Perfect. A stiff breeze pushes him up the stairs, a hearty call rings out as Genma dramatically props himself against the door frame.

“Don’t come at me all at once fellas … enough of your favorite Coroner to go around!”

Activity inside the station house screeches to halt. Officers nearest him suddenly back away; grimaces etched on their faces, they scurry hither and yon.

“You lot are right hilarious … not that ugly, am I?” A lack of response, the sound of windows being flung open, ignored; the wide berth given, he takes, blithely marching to the front desk. “Oi, Ryota … what ails those mugs?”

The watch commander’s head jerks up, forearm pressed to his nose a bit too late, the heavy uniform material incapable of blocking out the wall of stench standing before him. “Good god man!” A single tear escapes the corner of his eye. “The hell have you been rolling around in?”

Momentarily bewildered, Genma nervously chuckles while lifting the fabric of a rumpled jacket to his own nose. “Oh, that. It’s the manly scent of hard work … shouldn’t wonder why you and the boys don’t recognize it--”
“Bullshit,” wheezes Ryota, “you reek of death run under the broiler--”

“What’d ya expect? You knew where I was and what I was doing when you sent for me--”

“Yeah, but ... damn! Right, step back and listen tight. Inspector wants you with him when he meets the boss lady. For god sake man,” he said fanning away the funk, “do her and everybody else a kindness … air yourself outside beforetime.”

Recherché

0537: Repeated knocks on the front door of the Governor’s private residence finally rouse Shizune. A rumpled yukata thrown over night clothes, hair sticking every which way on her head, she greets this unwelcome visitor with a surly, “Have you any idea what time it is?”

“Aawful sorry for the hour Miss,” the night commander takes a step back, “been another murder--!”

She slams the door in his face and takes off running through the house. At the threshold of the bedchamber, she sucks in a calming breath and into the quiet room painted amber by dawn’s light through silk twill curtains she calls, “Milady?” From the opposite end of the room comes a soft snore, a rustle of linens, but no answer. “Please, ma’am… wake up!” Once more, no response from the figure beneath the covers. Leather soled slippers skid over polished wood as she rushes to stand at the bedside of her mistress. "Lady Tsunade … it’s urgent!"

At last, a lazy arm slithers from under a lustrous duvet; blindly does it swing about in search of an alarm clock on the nightstand. "The hell time is it girl?"

“Murder morn … Inspector needs to see you immedi--!”

“Damn it!” The Governor bursts free of the silken cocoon with a roar, “Get the office open! I’ll be there in fifteen minutes.”

Recherché

0549: The Morino home/Inuzuka temporary clinic

Maintenance of the same bland expression and a distance of three feet; keys to his freedom. “Relax … I got it covered,” where the last words Tsume heard before his bedroom door politely closed in her face. Hana stood in the middle of the room, half dressed and giggling behind her hand. “Come here you,” Idate said gathering her into his arms. “Your mother’s in fine voice this morning--”

“Surely you aren’t surprised dear. After the night we had? It’s a mercy she isn’t throwing things at people--”

“Or in her case … throwing people at things.” They share muted snickers while Hana snuggles against his chest. “Trying to remember the last time we put a stallion down; been a while, yeah? But in less than seven hours last night, we put three down--”

“I know, destroying something so beautiful is always difficult.” She pushed back to look up at him, “Know what bothered me most? Every one of the horses had bone deep gouges in their flanks but no claw marks near the belly or throat. A wolf pack or mountain lion would’ve at least aimed for gaskins to hobble larger prey. What sort animal makes wounds like those?”

“I haven’t the foggiest; it was as if whatever attacked ‘em did it for sport.” The slight shudder of her body prompted him tighten the arm around her waist. “That’s all behind us now. What say we leave off talk of death and destruction and focus on something,” his lips graze her forehead,” you
know … life affirming?”

“Goodness me,” her halfhearted attempt of wriggling out the clench left him heated. “Someone’s a randy little devil this morning--”

“Entirely your fault my sweet.” His other hand trails down her spine, gently pushing their bodies closer. “Just look what a mischief you’ve wrought.” He pressed himself closer to her as blunt nails grazed the small of his back. “However shall we rectify … this?”

“Well, she cooed, “I’d recommend prompt action before the situation becomes ... noticeably uncomfortable.” Her soft words burble against his chin, “I pray you maintain focus, five seconds more--”

“Can’t expect me to promise … specially if you keep doing that--”

“Point taken ... shall we get down to the nitty gritty?” was punctuated with a kiss to the bottom of his chin. “Our medical supplies are next to nothing.” Freeing her arms from his, needy fingers trace patterns over tensed biceps. “Kiba and some farm hands are off buying provender ... no telling how long they’ll be away. Still following, my dearest?”

Idate mutely nods, his mind elsewhere as her fingers walk up to his shoulders. Comprehension obliterated when she took to subtly grinding her hips against him. Breath catches in his throat as those same nimble fingers card through his hair.

“Sweetheart?”

“Hmm?”

Suddenly, she grabs locks of his hair in each hand, lightly tugging at them. “If you don’t leave for town in the next few minutes,” she whispered, “my mother will break that door down and wrap you in a headlock. I doubt either of us wants that.”

With a roll of the eyes, he blew out a peeved breath. “My wife is a wily vixen, one who knows well how to deflate my … spirits--”

“On the contrary … I think your wife a very wise woman. Upon your return, I’m certain she will clear out the entire house, locking the doors and barring the windows. And then shall the exasperated husband be at liberty to chastise his errant wife--”

“Uh ...I’m leaving? Yes ... leaving right now,” he stammers, tripping over his own feet as he heads for the door.

**Recherché**

By the time Shizune arrives at the Complex at 0549, two lines of monks are encircling the front entrance. Their prayers mixed with the wailing of flutes as thick clouds of incense hang above them. They seemed not to notice or care when she tiptoed through their ranks. Fumbling for the keys, she couldn’t help thinking how they’d never done this before. The lobby lights hurriedly switched on, she makes for the outer conference room. Leaving the Governor’s private office with notepads and pens,伊地き and Genma are heading toward her.

“Lady Tsunade is on her way. I was about to nip out to one of the inns for tea; would you care for anything else?”

“Nah,” said Genma, “can’t stay long anyways ... funerary stuff; lots of it needs doing. Just have ‘em
make my tea black, extra strong.”

“Mr. Shiranui ... even I know it doesn’t take long to prepare one person. And with half the temple barricading the entrance,” she added, blocking her nose with a notepad, “arranging a tsuya should be a breeze. You willing to risk offending the Governor in favor of your schedule?”

“Got a point there Missy,” came out with a dry laugh, “but … well, you see it’s not just—”

The click of the Governor’s heels silenced him ere Ibiki could. They turn as one, bowing as she enters the space.

“Two things; why are those monks blocking the front door and … what the hell is that smell?”

Genma raised his hand with a sheepish smile, as Shizune answered, “Milady ... I didn’t want to disturb—”

“Well we can’t have them chanting prayers for the dead out in the plaza now can we? Ibiki, herd them inside—”

“No ma’am. Until these grounds are purified to their satisfaction, they’re not gonna budge.”

“Come again?”

“Early this morning, patrol found Uchiha Suté propped against the front door; rest of her family’s dead too.”

As if struck from behind, her knees buckle, and body suddenly limp, she slumps against the chair.

“What?!?”

“Her stepbrother Itachi confessed to setting the manor ablaze after he slaughtered his family and their servants—”

“Yep,” Genma proudly chimed in, “hospital basement is my temporary morgue. You woulda been proud ma’am; them student nurses and some of the doctors helped me get ‘em prepared. Warms the heart I tell ya. Next generation of undertakers sproutin’ up before my eyes. Damnedest thing though, none of us ever seen anything like it before; heads hangin’ on by a thread … most all the bodies burnt to a crisp—”

“That’s enough Shiranui,” she said collapsing into the seat. Having recovered somewhat, Shizune runs to fetch a glass of water for her. “Inspector … I take it Itachi is in your custody?”

“Actually ... he’s in the Coroner’s custody. Killed himself at the watch commander’s desk—”

“Feel as if my head will explode. I... I can’t believe this—”

“Afraid it true,” the oblivious Coroner interrupted, “I got him over to the morgue before rigor set in. Helluva thing ... so many of them Uchiha; never gonna fit ‘em all inside the Temple proper. Kinda hoping to bury today ... memorial service later—”

“Genna! Are you insane? The Uchiha is,” she stopped short, “… was, one of Konoha’s founding families. I won’t let you throw them away as if they were nothing! Now I don’t give a damn how you get it done, a tsuya will be tonight, understand me?”

“Had a feeling you’d say that. Alrighty ... tonight it is.” He exits quickly with a tip of the hat and a polite bow. Shizune takes her leave as well. It isn’t long afterward that the monks invade the lobby
for commencement of the morning blessing and oblations.

“Businesses opening soon ma’am, inns lettin’ out; plaza’s gonna be jammed with people--”

"I know Ibiki. And not that I don’t appreciate the smell of the incense, but would you please close that door? Hard enough to concentrate without all the noise--”

“Gonna get noisier soon,” he softly said. “Listen ma’am, I wanna get the truth out to the people before--"

“You suggesting a town hall meeting?"

“Something like that,” she heard him say as he crossed the room. “We needta issue a joint statement, soon as possible. To that end, carpenters should be putting together the old rostrum as I speak. Once everything is confirmed, we’ll post the tsuya time in the Admin center window--”

“Everything … moving too fast--”

“Nothing you can’t handle,” he smiled, “just take a breath--”

“Incredible … that’s what it is.” Little comfort found in running her fingers over the netsuke, her voice is tiny and tinged with fear. “Never heard of anyone killing their entire family before. How the hell am I to offer comfort to my people, when I can’t even understand my own feelings right now?"

“It is a tragedy … but act we must, and quickly.” In just a few paces, he’s at her chair side. “Don’t forget, today starts an assessment week. Your staff will be arriving earlier than usual … no telling what they’ve already heard. On that note, I think we oughta continue our conversation in your office,” he said glancing over his shoulder to the closed door behind them.

“Yes … of course,” she mutters looking up at him through misty eyes. She's in a daze as he helps her stand; shock having left her without strength to walk unaided. Trusting his support, they were slowly making their way down the hall when Tsunade suddenly stops mid step. "The farewell fete… surely I can’t be expected to attend now--!"

"You have to. It’s imperative our version of the truth goes with those returning to Europe--”

“At a time like this, I should give a damn about those foreigners?"

“Time isn’t our ally ma’am.”

As that chunk of truth sinks in, her grip tightens about his forearm. “Uchiha Fugaku … strident hardliner, a thorn in my side. Fought me at every turn. Though, whenever the mood struck, he could be one of my most ardent supporters; now he’s gone.” Taking another deep breath, she released his arm and straightened to her full height. “Alright Inspector … what’s our next move?”

“Simple. Let some Uchiha family background slip into your explanation at the breakfast, our trading partners embellish the details. By the time they return to their respective homes, it’s gonna look like one psychotic family was behind all of Konoha’s recent misfortunes--”

“You mean that rubbish about them dabbling in witchcraft, propagating themselves through incest and the resulting insanity?”

“I’m certain you’ll word it more delicately, but yes … that rubbish.”

He guides a compliant Tsunade into her office and behind the desk, helping her settle into the seat
before taking his place in the chair beside it. “My plan for our people is solely dependent on the loose lips of those medical students and Genma, of course--”

“Dear god … I’m already frightened--”

“My officers are rounding up the remaining Council members; they’ll be here shortly--”

"I see ... present a united front before the people--"

"That … and I want ‘em to know about the deaths of Akimichi Yori and Nara Hitoshi before it’s publicly announced--”

"What? How did ... when did this--?”

"In a carriage on the way to Hatake’s party last night. Coroner thinks they were poisoned. Danzou, Orochimaru and Kabuto are presumed dead as well--"

“You told me Orochimaru took ill--”

“All I knew at the time, ma’am. A search of the Kokucho estate turned up blood in the conservatory, but no bodies. Danzou wasn’t at his residence either. And, on a stranger side note, livestock from the Kokucho, Shimura and Uchiha stables are also unaccounted for. Sent a civilian patrol to my brother’s house … he and Tsume can be on the lookout for ‘em--”

"Bastards! Guess I shouldn’t be surprised those two had Yori and Hitoshi killed--"

“Well, if you think that, Advisory members will too. It’s a known fact that Orochimaru and Danzou would’ve done whatever it took to usurp your authority--”

“Wasn’t exactly a secret about them being lovers either,” she said with a shudder. “Obviously they had some sort of falling out, wound up killing each other; Kabuto discovered the bodies, disposed of them and hightailed it out of the territory--”

“Now you’re thinking like a detective ... I like that.” The huge grin slowly turned into a tight lipped smirk. “Let’s also consider this. In everything concerning them, Kabuto held the trump card. What he knew of their ‘relationship’ had potential to derail any side dealings with our foreign guests. He may have asked for cut to keep quiet; so they killed him, dumped the body outside our borders--”

“Makes sense to me. Oh god Ibiki … all my watchdogs have vanished--”

“I’m still here for ya ma’am.”

Lifting her head, smiling eyes of amber lock onto his. “Forever grateful,” she whispers, “but, the executive Advisors … the Hyuga, Nara, Akimichi. Nobody left to keep Danzou and Orochimaru from skimming tax monies off those trade agreements--”

“Exactly. Money equals power … enough of it in the wrong hands--”

“Their businesses and Council seats intact,” she fumed, “they would’ve made out like bandits!”

“Calm yourself ma’am ...that’s one less worry for us--”

“Right.” Arranging the pens which lay askew on the desk, she said, “Back to the Uchiha and the lies you want me to tell--”

"I’m not asking you to lie milady; we just need to let what isn’t said, but commonly known do the
legwork for us. Given the folklore, intimating their complicity in the murders won’t be a stretch—"

"Careful Inspector," she said leaning against the chair back, “you sound as crazy as Genma."

"Humpf … that would be an insult under normal circumstances, but truth is, our Coroner has a tighter grip on the people’s ears and imaginations than either of us. Just takes one careless mention of Suté’s brutal rape—"

“Got it.” As she thought, her fingers play over the netsuke, “And since none of the others were ravaged, it might suggest the murderer had intense hatred toward the girl—”

“She was the daughter of Fugaku’s first wife after all … the one who cheated on him? He may have been taking sexual liberties with her for years—”

“Hold right there Ibiki … that man was many things I found despicable, but even he wouldn’t do that.”

“Really? Who’s left to say otherwise? How do we know Itachi didn’t catch his father and stepsister in the act? Maybe there was an argument … a struggle and Fugaku winds up dead. And what if this, ‘accidental’ death happened in the presence or hearing of other family members? In a panic, Itachi may have felt the need to eliminate all witnesses. Sounds like a crime of passion to me—”

“No. I can’t say something like that in good conscience —”

"Then leave it to me," he said leaning closer. “Told often enough… lie becomes truth.” It’s his turn to lean back in his seat, palms flat against his thighs, “Which brings me to Dr. Umino Iruka—”

“Oh now you go too far Ibiki! What’s he have to do with any of this?”

“I’ve said it before and it bears repeating; he shows up outta nowhere offering ‘proof’ of an unknown murder's identity. Accuses one of our prominent citizens of being the culprit, then claims Lord Hatake Kakashi is a creature of myth. And you say I go too far?”

“That’s old news—”

"Ma’am? Inspector? A little help, please?"

At Shizune’s voice, he rises slowly. “All I’m sayin’ is … Hatake aint our killer. Genma told me Suté perished shortly after midnight; Lord Hatake was seen of over a hundred people during a time span when the murder took place. Hell … I was playing shogi with him at the time—”

“Just get the door Ibiki.”

Halfway across the room he turned back to look at her; elbows propped on the desk, finger pads massaging at her temples. “One more thing … at that time of the morning, only longshoremen and fishing crews were in the vicinity of the Complex. Nobody saw nothin’—”

“They never do … so what?”

“A spell …Coroner thinks somebody used one to conceal the body til dawn—”

“Pfft, ridiculous!”

Her arms shaking under the weight of a heavy tray, her eyes darting between the peeved Inspector and flustered Governor, Shizune stands still in the frame of the open door.
“Come on in. Ibiki, do take that from her.” Skirting around the Inspector she timidly walks to the place where her mistress sits. “Relax Shizune … not upset with you. That’s better … now, you’re going to stand in my stead at this farewell thing. All you need do is tell our guests a pressing matter detains me; I’ll be along shortly, alright?”

The second the door closed, she was onto the Inspector within a blink.

“Ibiki … you said Suté’s body was discovered around 4:00 a.m. At what point did your men lose sight of Dr. Umino?”

“They didn’t. The three of them left the party before midnight. Sloppy drunk, Umino needed help getting into and out of the carriage. Never left the cabin after that—”

“Which means he isn’t our suspect either … correct—?”

“Why do you insist on taking up for him? He's a liar … and now I have proof.” He steps away from the small table, pulling a crumpled paper from his jacket pocket. “Here … case report from the night Lord Hatake Sakumo died—”

“Where’d you get that?”

“It’s called a professional courtesy ma'am.”

The smug look on his face made something twist in her gut. She stands slowly, eyeing him suspiciously. “And what answer will you have for the people next month should we be presented with the body of another young woman?”

“After eight months of terror, our people want to feel safe. We can offer them that hope… tempered with a caveat—”

“That’s your intention … placate them for another thirty days … is that it?”

“If we let them think a killer still roams free, they’ll start leaving Konoha in droves. How then will we meet our trade obligations?”

“It’s wrong … and extremely dangerous—”

“Lady Tsunade,” he said taking a step toward her,” do you trust me?”

The question falls to the floor, lying there unanswered for all of five seconds. “Course I do. But what are we supposed to—?”

“I have a plan, which I’ll share once everyone arrives. In the meanwhile, come along ma’am; tea is getting cold.”

Recherché

The cabin in the woods at 0555:

Izumo stops rattling around in the kitchen when the door to Kotetsu’s bedroom creaks open. He looks away from the task of measuring out tea leaves with a grin. “What are you doing up so early?”

“Can’t a man enjoy a sunrise in peace Zumo? ‘Sides, somebody needs to check the traps if we plan on eatin’ today. Making enough for me?”

“Maybe, got lots on my mind … Iruka being primary, of course—”
“Poor little fella,” he sighs shuffling into the kitchen, “heard him talkin’ up a storm in his sleep. Reckon the nightmares are startin’ again.”

They stand side by side, staring out the kitchen window as the tea steeps. “Had a few nightmares myself. Still can’t wrap my head around how we lost every single amulet—”

“I know right? Real head scratcher. And that absentia stuff aside—”

“Absinthe, Tetsu—”

“Whatever. Too much happened last night that don’t make sense. Ruka’s convinced he was locked in a dark room with Hatake, when all the while, I know we were looking dead at him. And don’t get me started about that weird rash around his neck and that ‘thing’ on his chest—”

“Cuckoo city …right? I’m taking him to see Lady Tsunade today, whether he wants to go or not. Maybe she can help—”

“Sleep … I say we let him get as much as he needs; even I know that’s the best medicine. And here’s another a surprise,” he said after a sip, “this is pretty good … for a change.”

They finish their tea in silence, caught up in their thoughts for the day ahead.

Finally, Izumo says, “If we're going to stay in Konoha, we’ll need to find work; we’re gonna need more amulets too. Why not pay your friend Michio a visit after breakfast?”

“How ‘bout I don’t? Let that Sai character and his rats handle it—”

“Capital idea … and how do you propose we contact him?”

He cut his eyes at the man across the table, mumbling, “Hate it when you make sense Zumo. Fine, add that to the list of things I hafta do around here today.”

Recherché

At 0603 in the underground chamber of Lord Hatake:

The early morning hours find him tossing and turning in his bed; the words of his mentor playing time and again inside his head.

*Compassion … incompatible with true nature; never confront your prey alone, danger … dichotomy … judgment deceitful.*

As the smell of sulfur creeps past his nose, Lord Hatake angrily flips onto his stomach, pulling the covers over his ears.

*“Into your bosom have you invited trouble. If you do not turn from your ways, you will unleash into this world an evil unspeakable.”*

At the sound of this voice, he bolts upright. “Doth my mind maketh sport?” Opposite his bed, the shadows ooze a mist, thick and black as the voice reaches from it once more.

*“That which was intended for your good now becomes your destruction.”*

With great haste does he quit his resting place to kneel before the column of brimstone infused fog.

*“Have you come all the way from the pit just to scold me?”*
“No … I came to caution and impart wisdom--”

“Then only speak those words which will free me from error’s grip Father--”

“Alas is the die cast Kakashi … destiny sealed. The words of my vow and your own deeds of late, will surely render you bondservant to the will of our ancestor … Kama. Tis a pity. His misguided quest for power drives you toward the throne but beware … uneasy lies the head that wears the crown as ruler over the Five Nations.”

“Of the benefits and risks I am aware--”

“Yet woefully unprepared to face them. Treachery and intrigue litter the path to victory; there will be grave consequences--”

“Spare me the lecture … I know what I’m doing. The other reason you’re here is--?”

“To beg forgiveness; were it not for my selfish desires, the quandary tormenting your soul would never be.”

“I am also acquainted with the folly of the great, Hatake Sakumo--”

“Folly? Perhaps. Out of my mind in love … yes. Like you, I latched onto something that filled my soul and I refused to let go. For as long as the confines of her humanity allowed, I was determined to remain at your mother’s side. And when she was found with child … that same love consumed me. I would have done anything to keep both of you safe … forever--”

“This so called love, it begets weakness--”

"But to the one who finds it, love bequeaths strength. How I wish your soul could be satisfied, taking a bride, perpetuating our name, ruling over this territory," he groaned, "instead, Kama’s greed will overshadow any happiness which rightly belongs to you. Do you not see it Kakashi?"

"No. I never understood it or you," was the curt reply as he lifted his head. In the days of my youth was I obedient to your teachings, I admired your power, until I saw how this … happiness broke you. From that point onward, I despised your impotence, vowing never to fall prey to its siren’s call."

Out of the darkness stretches forth a hand; shadowy plumes of smoke rest upon the crown of his son’s head. "Three hundred plus years old and still, you are but a child. The frailty perceived in me grew into the power to defy our ancestors; to bargain for the life of the fruit of my loins. You may disparage and attempt to deny, but I know, that same fire burns within you--”

"Which proves you don’t know me as well as you think Father," said he gathering himself to stand. "For appearance sake will I espouse myself; the bride of my choice, a mere receptacle for the lustful demands of this flesh prison. As it was in generations past, only the Yasha will raise up seed to our name. And through it all, my heart will I give to no one," he sneered, “especially a human.”

"I thought the same way when I was your age," he laughed. “But I’ve learned that time is the cruelest of all taskmasters Kakashi, exposing loneliness of the soul and showing forth the naiveté of our hasty words. Alas, time … I have little of it to spend with you; so listen carefully. The only reason I fell in league with and exploited Yamada’s work was because of your mother. But as you wish not for love and marriage, his research is unnecessary to your goal--”

"Again Father, you’re wrong. To effectively rule to rule over the humans, I must appear like unto them--"
"Ah, you still have much to learn about these mortals. But if you’re determined to stay this course, I beg you … release the younger Umino. There will be others like him who can pick up where Yamada and Tadashi left off—"

"I am determined, and will do as I please," he said turning away. "The mere thought of exacting revenge on Umino Iruka fills me with a pleasure indescribable--"

“Headstrong and fool hearted,” Sakumo sighed, “just like your mother. And here stands the chief of fools who never could say ‘no’ to either of you. Sobeit, I have but one set of instructions which you must obey to the letter.” Kakashi slowly turned about. “There is a divergent path to reach the intended end; a secret weapon, if you like. Will you promise to do as I ask my son?”

Notes:
Coo: to murmur or talk fondly or amorously.
Burble: to speak in an excited manner.
Gaskin: large muscle in the hind leg of a horse, not unlike the calf muscle in humans.
Flank: the area where the hind legs meet the barrel, or the part of the body that encloses the rib cage and major internal organs of a horse.
Chastise: to discipline, especially by corporal punishment.
Errant: straying from the right course or accepted standards.
Rostrum: a raised platform on which a person stands to make a public speech.
Arles penny or earnest payment; deposit rendered to demonstrate commitment and to bind a contract with the remainder due at a particular time.
Usurp: take a position of power or importance illegally or by force.
Oblation: a thing presented or offered to a god.
Intimate (archaic): to make known.
Caveat: Warning or proviso of specific stipulations, conditions, or limitations. A modifying or cautionary detail to be considered when evaluating, interpreting, or doing something.
Brimstone: an obsolete name for sulphur; a simple mineral substance, very inflammable and when burning, it emits a suffocating odor. Evokes the acrid aroma of volcanic activity.
Impotence: the lack of power to change or improve a situation.
Naiveté: lack of experience, wisdom or judgment.
Prithee: please (archaic), used to convey a polite request.
In absentia: in the absence of the person involved.
Divergent: moving or extending in different directions from a common point.
1886: Tokyo Electric Lighting, a private company, began operations as the nation’s first electric power company; the following year they started supplying electricity to the public at large.
Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown, *King Henry the Fourth, Part Two*, William Shakespeare.
Alacrity percolates through the squad room, the atmosphere akin to a reunion of old friends. The drone of their voices almost soothing while the shuffling of papers and signing of chits is seemingly more important than legitimate concerns of the citizenry waiting. He knew enough to know this was a morning atypical, but as precious minutes flitted away, such knowledge did little to counter the souring of his mien. Finally, Ogawa Shinji could take no more. Leaving his seat in a huff, he pushed through a knot of uniforms making a beeline for the front desk. Now, only a spindly banister stands between him and the object of his ire.

“You gonna keep me waiting all day?”

“Shinji … you been here less than ten minutes,” Ryota said, his eyes never leaving the forms and folders spread before him. “We’ll get to you, I promise.”

“No, the old man’s palms slapped down on the desk, “we do this now! Time is money, Ryota … been bumpin’ my gums and wasting both since I got here!”

“We’ll get to ya soon I said--”

“Listen you, hadta fight my way through a mob of undesirables in the plaza just to get here, so don’t futz with me … already in a foul mood--!”

“What a coincidence … so am I. Now either make time to file a report or get steppin’!”

Shinji reared back, his jaw tight, “I don’t think you realize who you’re trifling with. I could have your job--!”

“You're welcome it,” Ryota gave him a sly grin as he continued on with his paperwork. “Now, go back and sit down, please.”

“I’m warning alla ya right now … the Governor will hear of this!” Shaking his fist in the air, he turned and stomped toward the door. “Smug bastards … thanks for nothing!”

After hearing the Inspector’s plan, it only took a few minutes deliberation before the Advisory members and head priest give their assent; Asahi, the wizened sage, absolutely thrilled for any
opportunity to speak to a large gathering, readily signaled his acceptance as well.

“That leaves one,” Ibiki said as all eyes turned to her. “What say you ma’am?”

A sad shake of the head was accompanied with a muttered, “Still don’t feel right about this--”

“I know, our situation is critical; there aren’t many options left us. If we don’t get answers out there, I guarantee the territory will fall into a panic like we’ve never seen before--”

“We’re delaying the inevitable and you’re applying undue pressure--”

“Pardon for being blunt Lady Tsunade but right now, we need to cover our asses--”

“You’re underestimating the intelligence of our people! Honestly, who’s gonna believe such drivel?”

"Our land overflows with gullible and deeply superstitious folk--"

“Listen to yourself! That old ‘if you can’t dazzle them with brilliance, baffle them with bullshit,’ bit isn’t gonna work! Mark my words Ibiki, these lies will catch us up!”

Hefty arms cross over a barrel chest. “Alright … I take it you have a have a better idea ma’am? No? Then I say we go with what we got.”

Recherché

Alone on a gently winding path, morning sun filters through deep mahogany maple leaves, dew laden grasses glisten as tiny crystals, komadori trill and mourning doves coo; he pauses but for a moment to breathe in the earthy aromas of damp forest loam and moss covered ponds. Ah yes, this was exactly what he needed. A relaxed smile spreads over his lips as three Ohgomadara butterflies dance on the flowing breezes. Then came another … his smile broadened a tad,

as another joins them …prompting a quirk of the eyebrow

… and then another,

until he find himself the center of an annoying kaleidoscope.

“Hey! Whadda I look like, a rose bush or somethin’?” Wildly swinging his arms at them he barked, “Go on ya stupids …shoo!”

From the shadow of a tall elm in the distance, a young man emerges, fighting back a grin and shaking his head while Kotetsu continued flailing through a fluttering curtain of wings.

“Sorry about that Mr. Tetsu,” he calls, “thought they’d be the least threatening way to get your attention.”

“Shoulda known you were behind this; these lot aint native to this area idiot.”

“My apologies … they’re the only kind I know how to draw sir.”

“Sic a rabble on me huh? Gettin’ real annoyed kid, c’mon ... call ‘em off.”

In an instant the other man is standing ten inches away and with a snap of his fingers, the swarm disappears into thin air.
“Alright, you got your chuckles ... now beat it! I got somewheres to be--"

“Give this to Dr. Umino please,” he said dangling a small burlap sack before Kotetsu’s eyes. “No need to be frightened ... more ingredients for his tea. Make sure he drinks a cupful at least three times a day.”

The sack slapped to the ground with a gruff, “Hey now! Don’t shove stuff in my face; surest way to get yourself punched.” Sidestepping the young man, Kotetsu made to continue his journey saying, “You know where we live … take it yourself.”

“I’d be happy to sir, but I also have somewheres to be.”

A quick pivot found him face to face with Sai. ‘You mockin’ me punk?’

“Umm … no? Matter of fact, I was quite pleased when the mice alerted me to your presence on the path.”

“Why’s that?”

“As the skeptic and dullard of your group of friends, you’re perfect for this errand. If I can make you understand the urgency of our situation, there’s a good chance—”

“I aint gonna be too many more dullards, hear me?”

“And yet you prove my point every time you open your mouth—”

“Careful ... nobody’s here to protect ya from a beat down—”

“Yes … now do be quiet Mr. Tetsu … I have very important news—”

“Get on with it or get outta my way—”

“Don’t forget this,” he said, holding out the small sack. “I think we’re headed in the same direction. Shall we go?”

Snatching up the parcel and shoving it into his pocket, Kotetsu snaps, “Talk quick.”

“Yes sir. At the party last night, doppelgängers were employed to—”

“What kinda gangs?”

“Doppelgängers,” he sighed, “gaki that can take on the appearance of another—?”

“Oh right … them bakedmondo things --”

Mercy sake, he thought, I chose poorly. “Here’s all you need to know Mr. Tetsu, the numen used one of those things to fill Dr. Umino's absence while it marked him with a seal in his flesh and a curse in his blood.”

“Sure kid, sure. Which of ‘em was it, Ruka or Zumo?”

“Pardon?”

“One of ‘em sent you to make me believe that cockamamie story ... yeah?”

“No, and please stop talking.” Reaching into the small leather pouch at his waist, Sai drew out a
scroll. “Would you also take this to the one who rules over the territory ... tall woman, large breasts, long blonde hair--?”

“I’m familiar … and it’s not gonna happen. Got no time to play messenger boy for ya.”

Exasperated, Sai stopped walking. “Mr. Tetsu, this scroll contains a sketch of--”

“Don’t care about your scribbles kid,” flew back in Sai’s face. “See ya!”

“It’s a sketch of the one who placed a decedent outside the Complex this morning. Bulk of a man, massive eyebrows ... servant of the one called ... Hatake?”

“Shit!” Kotetsu turned mid-step, "He killed another one?"

Finally. Seizing this small window of coherence, Sai quickly added, "Your amulets … pickpockets lifted them while you were dancing and making merry. Smashed to pieces, thrown into the bonfires; I ’m afraid the thieves fared no better … they were a buffet for hordes of gaki.”

“Good idea, leave no waggin’ tongues behind,” he said coming closer to where Sai stood. “So, how many dead folk we talkin’?”

“Multiple decedents. Soon as my investigation wraps up, I’ll let you share that information with the proper authorities. Right then, let’s be off,” he said brushing past Kotetsu. “Must continue surveillance of the manor house by the cemetery ... strange things go on there.”

“Specifics?” Kotetsu asked as he caught up with him.

“Unclear; messengers kept bringing conflicting data all through the night. I can say that since Dr. Umino’s release, the numen has undergone violent changes--”

“Wait a minute … you sayin’ Ruka really was held captive somewhere last night?”

“Thought that was clear when I mentioned the mark in his flesh--”

“So I’m a little slow on the uptake, alright? That numen, going through changes ...what’s it mean?”

“If I knew the answer to that Mr. Tetsu, my surveillance would be at its end--”

“You’re a real smart ass kid. How bout you tell me plain ... what's gonna happen to Ruka now?”

Sai simply shrugged his shoulders. “Don’t know yet; after the numen left Dr. Umino’s bedroom this morning--”

“Hatake was in the cabin … our cabin?”

“Do try to keep up Mr. Tetsu and don’t forget to put this scroll in your other pocket.”

“Fine,” he huffed yanking it out of his hand, “you gonna finish this story or what?”

“Yes, well, the numen left the cabin in possession of a glowing white talisman; upon exit, it encountered another powerful creature and still another numen showed up once the Hatake returned to its manor home--”

“There’s three of ’em? Alright kid,” he said grabbing Sai by the wrist, “change of plans. You’re coming with me.”
Centermost the square, black bunting, the color of mourning drapes the same platform she used to sign the new trade agreements weeks ago. Pushcart vendors and shopkeepers hawk their wares as they weave through a maze of tourists queued up for boat or carriage rides home. Her doubts still fresh as they lined up in the lobby, Lady Tsunade stands frozen at the entrance of the Complex, blankly staring out at the teeming plaza. With a whispered, ‘You can do this,’ and Ibiki’s confident smile at her back, she squares her shoulders and leads the somber procession through the crowd. The weight of expectant eyes monumental, focusing on her every step as she approaches the platform. Crossing the dais with head held high, she ends up grasping onto the lip of the podium for dear life. Curious faces, questioning eyes scrutinize every facial tic and twitch. Butterflies in her stomach refuse to settle, even after several steadying deep breaths. Blue uniforms act as cushions between her and the crowd. With Ibiki at her right hand and the Advisory members to her left, still her knees tremble. Shizune nudges her back to reality, lightly tapping at the back of her hand; a prepared statement slips under a sweaty palm.

The crowd quiets while she fumbles about with her pince-nez; silence descends like a shroud when she clears her throat to speak.

“People of Konoha ... I stand before you with a heavy heart. While we slept last night, a tsunami of tragedy swept through the territory. As you can see, four of our Council members are absent. Lords Akimichi and Nara are confirmed deceased; Lord Kokuchō, his servant Kabuto and Lord Shimura are missing and presumed dead. Additionally, all members of clan Uchiha, as well as their servants, lay in the hospital’s temporary morgue … their ancestral home, burned to the ground. And if that weren’t enough … a deranged murderer claimed another victim.” She wiped away a solitary tear as wails of despair drifted up from those assembled. “Inspector Morino will provide us with further details, but before he comes … let us observe a moment of silence, honoring the lives of these great men and one of the founding families of Konoha.”

Motioning for the head priest, she stepped back to stand beside Ibiki. With head bowed and eyes closed, her heart broke as he lead the assemblage in prayer.

He was followed by Asahi, Konoha’s oldest and most revered sage who told them, “In the history of our land, this is not the first time we have been visited by such evil. Nay, even before we became a territory, a murderous entity would cyclically claim the lives of innocent women under the light of a full moon.” Even as murmured whispers of agreement rippled through the masses, he continued speaking, “As Konoha rose to prominence in the Land of Fire, it’s attacks became more frequent. Books of antiquity record how this evil followed a specific pattern; taking the lives of at least a dozen victims before its reign of terror ended. It would prey first on women of ill repute, slitting their throats open, draining their bodies of lifeforce. It would move on to women of modest reputation and finally … to women of unquestioned chastity, those born into lives of wealth and privilege.” A hush fell over the crowd as these words. “Once its thirst for human blood was fulfilled, Konoha would enjoy many years of peace. In my day it was thought this ‘purge’ lifted the weight of our sins from the land … and these women, sacrifices for our prosperity. Ashamed to say, but the elders of my time rejoiced while grieving … this was regarded a righteous judgment from the gods and accepted with tears of thanksgiving. Last night, we witnessed a wonder in the night sky, one I’d heard tell of but never seen; a blood red moon. I trembled upon my bed, knowing it bode ill tidings. Unfortunately, I was right. This evil possessed the heart of a brilliant young man, driving him to slaughter his own family. Mark well, the land will absorb more innocent blood before the tally of our sins is paid in full.” As the wailing women lifted up their voices once more, the sage pressed on, “Save your tears, mothers of Konoha … beseech the gods for the protection of all those who luxuriate in the lap of privilege.”
The crowd stood in awe as Asahi stepped back gesturing the Inspector come.

“As our investigations are still ongoing, I’ll be brief and unable to take questions,” he began, laying two folded pieces of blank paper on the podium. “Lords Akimichi and Nara died somewhere between the Kokucho and Hatake estates. Coroner immediately suspected poison; ‘a toxic plant based substance,’ he said. As a precaution, we dispatched patrols to Lord Orochimaru’s home. They found the door to the manor ajar and signs of a violent altercation inside the conservatory—”

“I bet they’re still tied up in an antechamber waiting for help,” someone shouted. “Tell the truth ... your men were too lily-livered to look down in the basements, aye Inspector?”

He sharply cut his eyes at the heckler, baring his teeth in what was supposed to be a smile. “From cellar to rafters, my constables and their civilian counterparts scoured the manor and its adjacent grounds. Nary a body was rescued or recovered. Moving on ... in the wee hours of the morning, Uchiha Itachi presented himself to the watch commander stating he’d murdered his family and set their home aflame. Providing no motive for these actions, he summarily took his own life in the constabulary’s squad room.” As the crowd’s murmurings grew in volume, he lifted his voice, “Hours later, a patrol discovered the body of a young woman propped against the front door of the Complex. Coroner positively identified her as,” he looked questioningly at the paper before him, “... Uchiha Suté. Her body bore the same distinctive wounds as the other victims, however, there was evidence of ... a savage rape—”

That set off a tumult of outrage and disgust through the masses, which Ibiki allowed; the words ‘incest’ and ‘witchcraft’ popped up time and again, which he never discouraged or corrected.

Hands raised in a gesture of conciliation, he begged, “Your patience please. If you allow it, I’m gonna change course for a moment. We all know Emperor Meiji’s dictum to unite the Five Nations into one country has been met with pockets of resistance and outright bloody rebellions; rumors of naming Konoha capital of this new nation, made many our enemies. It is therefore with the utmost respect, that I must disagree with our honored sage. I’m of the unpopular opinion our destroyer is not an evil unseen, but persons, who—”

“Then why aint you caught ‘em yet?” rose above the crowd. “Big talk from ya, a wasted use of our tax money—”

“Yeah,” another spoke up, “the sage is right ... how you reckon to protect us against a spirit?”

“Allow me to finish,” his words came softly, as if he were speaking to a frightened or confused child, “… you’re absolutely right. I can’t protect you from an eidolon—”

“See? What we need is an exorcist,” came another voice from the middle of the crowd. “Head priest oughta do somethin’ about that.”

“As I was saying,” Ibiki continued, “our history is well known amongst the other Four Nations. Those envious of our advances and successes have covertly moved against us in the past … sabotaging industry or stealing something more precious … the lives of our citizens. You know I speak the truth. It’s not outside the realm of possibility that this ‘unseen evil,’ would show up to again to prevent our dealings with the West—”

“Aww ... you’re crazy, it’s a spirit I tell ya!”

“No! Inspector’s on point,” bellowed another, “you ‘member when a gang from the Land of Earth burned down all four of our cotton mills? Our grandfathers hung ‘em in the town square—”
“Yeah, and before that … Land of Water pirates killed all them sailors--!”

The religious fanatics, those more secularly minded and the common sense plain folk each playing their parts, under the wary gaze of a master manipulator.

As Ibiki watched them bicker and fuss, hard pressed was he to keep the smirk lurking inside from showing up on his lips. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he said at last, “it’s my determined desire to see these persons or nations held accountable and as the gods are my witnesses … brought to justice. The entire law enforcement community shares this commitment. I implore your help. If you saw or heard anything out of the ordinary last night, please … contact the constables immediately. Thank you.”

Done and done, he thought when he stepped away from the podium.

Recherché

“Well, you look a fright,” Izumo said turning from the morning dishes, as Iruka shuffled from his bedroom to the dining table.

“Tea … who do I hafta kill for a cup of it?”

“Coming right up and for heaven sake,” he chuckled, “sit down before you topple over.”

“Poking fun at a man with a heavy head … you taking Tetsu’s job?” Blearily he scanned the immediate area, “Where is he anyway?”

Tea strainer in hand, Izumo watched him wearily plonk down in the nearest chair. “The temple by now, I reckon. Went to talk to Michio about making us some amulets.”

“He’s gonna bust a gut, cause we don’t need ’em anymore,” he said with a grin as he yanked through the hair tangled at his nape.

“Aha! I knew you kept a stash somewhere--”

“Nope … they’re all gone. It’s over Zumo … we’re done.”

“Here ... take a few sips of this; then we'll deal with this defeatist attitude of yours when you’re fully awake-- ”

“Not delusional you know ... just facing reality--”

“Hush up and drink.”

The warmth of the cup and the bouquet of Gyokuro tea lifted his spirits; savoring the first mellow sweet sip, he looked up and said, “Surprisingly good; sure Tetsu didn’t make this before he left?”

Izumo nudged him in the side he sat down. “I’m capable of many of things you know, good tea is but one.”

“We’re screwed buddy,” he said taking another swig, “absolutely, positively … screwed.”

Izumo held his peace and temper until Iruka emptied his cup and motioned for another. “Obstacles in the road don’t necessarily mean we’re on the wrong path,” he said from the kitchen. “Just the opposite.”

“I wholeheartedly disagree. With everything that’s happened, the universe is tryna tell me to abandon
this stupid quest for revenge. For once ... I’m gonna listen.”

Just then, an out of breath Kotetsu barges into the cabin with Sai in tow. “Look who I ran into!”

“Yes, yes we can see … come in and sit down. Iruka is in the midst of a meltdown or an epiphany; haven’t figured which one yet.”

Sai acknowledged both men with a nod as he moved to take a seat at the far end of the table. Kotetsu strode in, standing by his own chair directly across from Iruka. “Time’s tickin’ on this breakdown; let’s go, let’s go … we got great news--!”

“Top of the morning to you too,” he said absently, “I was just telling Zumo, it’s time to pack it in … head for home--”

“Is he still drunk from last night? Ruka, where’s this coming from?”

“Not sure really,” he whispered when he took the cup from Izumo who sat down beside him. After running a finger around its rim, a tentative sip soothed a throat too dry. “I don’t understand it myself, but the desire to kill Hatake … just seemed to vanish.” Kotetsu shot a glance at Sai as Iruka continued, “You know … I almost feel sorry for him; sentenced to an eternity where hunger and thirst are never satisfied--”

“Like I give a damn about Hatake! The good news is, you’re not crazy after all! And it gets better … Sai knows what ails ya and how to fix it. Still,” he stroked at his goatee, “there’s the whole double thing, three numen and lots of dead folk-”

“Tetsu ... either make a coherent point or stop blathering--”

“Oh, so you want coherent,” he said stretching across the table to slap Iruka hard across the face, “there … point made. Ruka! Get a grip on yourself man, we got things to do!”

Izumo was on his feet and standing a breath away from Kotetsu in a flash. “Have you lost your damn mind,” he barked, “why’d you do that?”

“Gentlemen, please … there’s no need for--”

“Stay outta this kid,” Kotetsu hissed. “Been a long time comin’ eh, Zumo? Let’s see what we’re working with ya little dandy!”

"God damn it!" Iruka’s chair made a cringe worthy scrape against the floor backward when he rocketed from it. "Zumo … let him go … and you, Tetsu, shut up!"

Izumo shoved the other man backward and no sooner did Kotetsu regain his balance that he might charge him, a gigantic snarling tiger suddenly appears between them. In an instant, long black ropes shoot out from its fur, binding the arms and legs of the would be combatants. Too startled to move, they look to Sai, an ink brush held loosely in one hand and a blank scroll hanging over the edges of the table.

“And here you thought my mice were frightening Mr. Tetsu,” he said with a quirky smile.
“That’s it! Everybody calm down!” Iruka settled himself with a deep breath and looked to Kotetsu while rubbing at a reddening cheek, “Guess I needed that—”

“Yeah, you did. And this business about gettin’ kidnapped and that thing on your chest ... well according to Sai it really happened, so there!”

“Well,” Izumo whistled, “I’ll be damned—”

“Highly probable ya jackass. And … not only did Hatake arrange for our amulets to disappear, he killed another young woman last night. So, what’s it gonna be Ruka? We gonna keep sittin’ on our thumbs? I say, hell no!”

“Yeah,” Izumo pitched in, “what he said!”

“Ruka, buddy … I know how you feel about blood and guts, but it’s gotta be done and soon. You, me … and this jerk,” he thrust his chin at Izumo, “we made a promise to end Hatake, remember? Now aint the time to turn tail and run. Speaking of which … for the love of god Sai, make this damn thing turn us loose!”

Sai moved to release the tiger but Iruka prevented him. “Not just yet,” he said, cutting his eyes between the two shamefaced friends. “You have something to say to one another?”

“Fine,” Izumo mumbled, “I’m … sorry, okay?”

“Whatever.”

“You call that an apology Tetsu?”

“Just kidding Ruka … geez,” he said with a smile. “Umm …Zumo …sorry, alright … but damned if you don’t fight like a girl.”

**Recherché**

Escorting the Governor from the rostrum and into a waiting carriage, Ibiki turned, elbowing his way through the dispersing crowd. He bites down hard on the tip of an unlit cigar; wary of the smiling faces and pats on the back. Between shouts of

‘Well done,’

‘About damn time,’

‘We’re praying for you Inspector,’

which were mixed with

‘Take back all the bad stuff I said about ya,’ and

‘We know you’ll catch ‘em,’

his head was spinning. Jostled about as he patted himself down for a box of matches, an indistinct voice behind him said,
“I'd know that smirk anywhere … exactly what do ya think got away with this time Inspector?”

NOTES:

Alacrity: cheerful readiness, promptness or willingness.

Ohgomadara butterfly: one of the largest class of butterfly in Japan; with a spotted design of black and white, it’s often called a ‘Newspaper Butterfly.’ Native to Okinawa.

Sic (sicced): to set upon or incite to hostile action; urge an attack, pursuit or harassment.

Rostrum: a raised platform on which a person stands to make a public speech.

Shinji: “true second son.”

Gyokuro tea: also known as ‘jade dew,’ is considered one of the highest grades of Japanese green tea. It has a rich, savoury taste and is higher in caffeine than most green teas.

Whinge or whinging (British): complain persistently and in a peevish or irritating way.

Kaleidoscope: gathering of butterflies; also called a "swarm" or "rabble."

Bode: an omen of a particular outcome; (archaic) to announce beforehand.

Asahi: “ray of light on the shore, daybreak rising, morning sunshine, or bright rising.”

Dictum: formal pronouncement from an authoritative source.

Eidolon: a specter or phantom.
"You!"

When the bear of a man spun about, he wasn’t surprised. When that flesh covered meat hook gouged into his wrist and cigar tinctured breath filled the space between them, these too were met with an overweening smile. But when those nothing left to lose eyes looked straight through him, a chill shot up his spine.

Still, the cocky captive shook off intimidation. "I see the reflexes and temperament of a bouncer haven’t abandoned you Mr. Morino."

With seconds to spare, recognition dawnd; muted pain in the eyes meeting his spark remorse and a slackening of the vise-like grip on his inadvertent prisoner. “Idiot! Tryna get your head bashed in?”

“What’s the matter big fella ... can’t tell the difference between a jest and a threat?”

"Nobody got time for your foolishness, hear?"

"I just thought you gave a good speech… what little I heard of it anyways. Ya happy now?” Blunt nails dug deeper into his wrist. “Geez .. guess not,” his laugh almost as awkward as the free handed punch aimed toward the other man’s chest, “c’mon Inspector, loosen up.”

Exchanging one joint for another, Ibiki caught hold the man’s elbow jerking him forward. "Walk with me,” he growled, “and for god sake, keep your voice down.”

“Well that much hasn’t changed. No good deed goes unpunished eh, Biki?”

He’s met with a withering sideways glance as their awkward shuffle through the plaza continues. “Get the message about the livestock?”

“Yeah, we’re bustin’ at the seams and slap out of everything. Animals gettin’ on fine, it’s the people what’s the problem--”

“Idate ... focus,” chuffed out as they come to halt. “The horses ... you got ‘em or don’t ya?”

“I swanee .... its regular menagerie up there. We got horses, sheep, pigs ... some real strange lookin’ ducks--”

“Damn it man!” Ibiki pulls him close once more, “Patrol didn’t tell ya?”

“Weren’t no patrols on the back roads.” It’s Idate’s turn to frown up as he finally wrested free his arm. What is going on?”

“Wrong time for stupid questions,” scrapes against his ear as Ibiki steps behind him. “Tell ya in my office. Now move.”

As if he had a choice; forearm pinned above the small of his back, he’s no more than a plowshare while Ibiki steers them toward the station house.

**Recherché**

POP!
With a snap of his fingers, the ferocious tiger dissipated into small bubbling puddles of blackness much to Izumo and Iruka’s relief. Naturally, Kotetsu had a different take on liberty newfound.

“Oi! Ain’t you got no home trainin’?”

“Yes sir,” was Sai’s somewhat confused response as he walked to the opposite end of the table. “Point of fact, the majority of my training was accomplished at home.”

Kotetsu pointed to the effervescent ooze, “Listen tight smart ass, you mess it up … you clean it up!”

“It will be my pleasure sir. Mind your steps, dirty soles corrupt the ink’s integrity.”

“Gotta lotta cheek kid.”

“Tetsu … let it go--”

“Me? He comes in here splatterin’ stuff all over the joint, then gets uppity about us contaminatin’ his stuff? That ain’t right!”

“You’re gonna do yourself a mischief if you don’t calm down,” Izumo said as he hooked him by the elbow. Together they hopscotch through the maze of splotches. “Wasn’t so bad was it?”

“Mr. Tetsu, I realize these things are abstruse to one such as you, nevertheless--”

“He just call me obtuse Zumo? Lemme at him--!”

“I think not, pugnacious pal o ‘mine.” Gesturing to the chair at Iruka’s right side, Izumo tightened his grip. “Now cool down and have a seat.”

Sai inclined his head in gratitude as his oppugner was firmly held in check. With a wave of his hand, the blotches on the floor start reaching out for one another. Mesmerized, Iruka and Izumo watched them congeal into a writhing mass of fat black snakes; Kotetsu cared nothing for the spectacle. It took but a moment for them to slither up the table leg and dive back into the scroll’s inkpot. “My comrades are at rest and I appreciate your indulgence. Kindly take your seats gentlemen; I’ll bring you up to snuff on last night’s events.”

“How’s he gonna do that Zumo; I didn’t see him nowhere last night … you?”

“Maybe if you shut up for a minute, we’ll find out together.”

Sai remained in place as Izumo settled in the chair to Iruka’s left. Kotetsu went the other way round just to bump Sai with his shoulder before booting his chair away and flopping down.

“Magic ink, mice, tigers and snakes for friends; is it any wonder he’s a twisted nut?”

“I’m devastated sir… you completely forgot about my butterflies--”

“Come over here and say that punk … I’ll show ya devastation--!”

“That’s it!” Iruka slaps a palm against the tabletop, “Had it up to my back teeth with the lot of ya! Sai … speak your peace and Zumo, Tetsu … hush!”

Recherché

The rehearsed lies were quickly and easily told and with every good wish extended and every sympathy accepted, the fragile teacup she held rattled in its saucer. Lady Senju Tsunade, center of
attention, object of pity … pariah. These strangers, their smiles warm as they pledged unwavering support; their hearts cold and minds active, hatching plots for advantage in this moment of perceived vulnerability. Above it all, panic cleaves her heart in twain, each time the free hand searching for its touchstone comes up empty. Frustration builds almost as quickly as does the urge to hie away, till this ambience of fraudulent fellow feeling be done.

Alas … as the embodiment of Konoha, she was hopelessly bound.

Recherché

He felt it in his bones … Master had need of him elsewhere; his mind said elsewise … being here was more expedient. Cold comfort as he stood in a slow moving line outside the Morino homestead. As he fidgeted about, checking and rechecking the applications for purchase in his breast pocket, Kinoe amused himself by eavesdropping on the locals as they rehashed fractured fabrications of last night’s events.

“…bloody kimono in the forest they did,” said one. “Kamons on it brung ‘em to the girl what it belongs to. She’s still alive, so what you reckon?”

“No idée fixe,” came another whisper, “whole territory was a bedlam; hopin’ my sows wandered over here in the confusion. Damn fools, every full moon they break outta their pens–”

“Sure they broke out? I heard tell animals was gettin’ snatched up everwheres. Them things use ‘em as sacrifices to the moon god you know--”

“Who things?”

“Evil spirits ya dolt!”

The other man sucked at his teeth, “Ain't no such! Sows is stupid; moon struck ‘em lunatick is all.”

Recherché

Even in the sunshine and fresh air, it still felt as if she were suffocating inside a cold dark box. Naked without it, stomach twisting in on itself, just the thought of meeting sorrow filled glances made her nauseous. Instead, misty eyes continually searched along the path, hoping the heirloom would magically leap from the bushes or call out to her from inside a cobblestone crevice. Probably lying somewhere in the office. Yeah … has to be. She ran first to the safety of her private residence; down the stairs she flew, hefting open and digging through musty cedar chests in the basement. One treasure retrieved. Another fifty feet to the safety of the Complex; it’s waiting area crowded with irritated constituents. As they grumbled and complained to the staff, she slipped unnoticed through the throng. And by the time the door of the outer conference room shuts behind her, Lady Tsunade was in a cold sweat.

“Good heavens ma’am--!”

“Ginger tea … quickly!” Body atremble, legs barely able to keep her upright, she staggers to the table and clings to a chair back.

“Right away!”

“My schedule,” she breathed, “clear it. Can’t possibly see anyone till tonight--”

“What should I do with the lawyers ma’am? We can’t postpone this meeting again--”
“Shit! Forgot about those idiots. Show them in; once I get rid of them, don’t let anyone else through to my office … understood?”

Recherché

After several minutes of tense silence, Sai finally speaks. “Two elderly men, a young man and one large family lost their lives at the hands of humans. More than thirty others, including sixteen workmen and the victim of the month were lost to gaki. I can’t say with certainty that the blood moon influenced these actions but I do know widespread mayhem is a hallmark of demonic activity—”

“Well hell ... I coulda told ya that--”

Izumo kicked at his shin under the table, “Quiet lunkhead ... want him to sic more of his little friends on ya?”

“One table, two smart asses,” rumbles from Kotetsu as he threw his back against the chair, arms folded over chest with a scowl knitted brow, “must be my lucky day.”

“Additionally,” said Sai, “gaki of every description were scattered throughout the territory; all of them under the control of a powerful lycanthrope type beast. Inside the manor, an exorbitant concentration of bakemono masqueraded as party guests. The intelligence I’ve gathered thus far suggests they were appropriating vital essences from visiting dignitaries. How, or for what purpose the Hatake intends to use these spiritual energies, I’ve no idea. My apologies Dr. Umino,” he turned and bowed deeply, “I’d intended to present a conclusive summary of last night’s events for you, unfortunately,” he straightened to his full height and glared at Kotetsu, “I was prevented--”

“Sai … that’s not helpful--”

“Pardon… allow me continue. During the festivities, two bakemono took on the Hatake’s physical appearance; one played chess with the police chief while the other enjoyed a lewd burlesque show in a private salon--”

“What? I missed that?”

”Quiet ya perv ... let him finish.”

As Izumo and Kotetsu trade insults, Sai leaned down, whispering to Iruka who said, "No. In no way is that a friendly appellation."

"Understood sir. Gentlemen, if we could maintain focus for a moment?” Once the other two quieted down, Sai’s methodical recitation proceeded. “Another creature appeared before Dr. Umino, that one in the guise of an elderly woman--”

“Yeah, I remember … ugly old broad--”

“Tetsu … that was an inaccurate assessment,” Iruka said with a hoarse laugh, “she was hideous in her true form; it was a Yasha.”

“And after leading you away, it pushed you through a portal and took on your appearance to rejoin the party.” Sai turned his attention to Izumo saying, “In one of the manor’s subterranean vaults, Dr. Umino was lashed to a wall and menaced by another creature before the Hatake finally took over. Injecting it's miasma and placing the seal, took less than ten minutes, though I’m sure it felt like hours--”
“Hold up kid, you watched all this happen to Ruka? Why didn’t you do anything to--?”

“Mr. Tetsu, my scouts are witnesses to and reporters of events. Neither they, nor I were to interrupt--”

“You hearin’ yourself? Hell, Ruka ain’t even my kin and I woulda tried to prevent--”

“Only to have the Hatake kill you before his eyes? How would that help Dr. Umino?”

“Sai ... I got this,” Iruka said. “This isn’t a question of fidelity Tetsu. Try to understand, if we’re gonna defeat Hatake … which we will, first we have to understand the methods he employs and the level of power he possesses, okay?”

“No … that aint okay--!”

“You might not believe or comprehend the ‘why,’ right now, but what happened to me last night will actually benefit us in the long run--”

“How? You’re startin’ to sound goofy again Ruka--”

“I see where you’re going with this and I’ll explain it to him later,” Izumo said. “Cheer up Tetsu, least we know the copy didn’t shy away from us because you’re a stultifying bore.”

“You mean it? Gee, thanks buddy ... hey!”

“If it helps any Mr. Tetsu, the Yasha only knew it was to be seen by others. Safe to say, it possessed enough of Dr. Umino’s memories to avoid you two; who else could’ve picked up on the fact it was a replica?”

His eyes darted between them, “That was a compliment, yeah Zumo?”

“Definitely but answer me this Sai, Iruka said and you’ve confirmed that Hatake bit him. I found no evidence of a laceration; how could that be?”

“Did you happen to notice what seemed to be a rash around the area of his throat?”

“Yes, couldn’t miss it.”

“I’ll leave off the mechanics for clarity sake, suffice to say, an enzyme in the Hatake’s saliva makes easy concealment of its activity.”

“So, the rash was a reaction to his saliva … disgusting--”

“And effective. The Hatake was mid transformation when the bite was inflicted. And as you know, yokai have toxic organic compounds in their um … ‘flesh,’ so what you saw was akin to a chemical burn, which, I assume,” he glanced at Iruka’s still open collar, “healed quickly?” Both Izumo and Kotetsu nodded. “Excellent, as it means the numen wasn’t trying to poison him outright. Dr. Umino, have you bathed since the party?”

A quiet, self-conscious “No,” fell flat on the table.

“Then with your permission, I’ll scrape some epidermal cells for analysis--”

“Gonna feed ‘em to your little rat friends huh?”

“Bravo … you’re finally catching on Mr. Tetsu. Using those as markers, my scouts can track the
numen’s movements more efficiently.” This time he directed his commentary to Iruka. “My greatest concern is that traces of the Hatake’s miasma remain in your bloodstream. Until I figure out an antidote, I’ll keep you supplied with ingredients for that tea. Promise to avail yourself of it?”

“Sai,” eased out as a relieved breath, “if drinking hot smelly brown water is the worst of it, I’ll do it gladly.”

“You do understand it’s a stopgap measure ... not a cure?”

“Naturally and boy am I grateful. Before you backed me up, those two thought I’d lost my mind--”

“Who could blame them sir?”

Iruka’s smile crumpled, “Again… that’s not remotely helpful--”

“Sorry,” he said stepping closer to the table. “My other concern is its mark which heralds troublesome times ahead; placement defines purpose. The Hatake situated it above your heart, correct?” Iruka nodded as Sai took a piece of paper from the pouch at his waist. “Describe it please.”

Baring his chest once more, Iruka went into excruciating detail; his friends sat agape and agog as an exact and slightly smaller image of the seal flowed from the artist’s inkbrush.

“Hmm … a family crest, denotes ownership and protection. And these bold precise lines here, and here, bespeak authority--”

“So, I won’t be free of it until Hatake is ... destroyed.”

“Exactly. Until then, it will exert a trifold purpose. Letting lesser gaki know you’re under the cloak of a powerful numen is but one, it also represents a claim of your loyalty to the Hatake. Last of all, it acts as a summoning device, drawing you to the numen’s side whenever it has need of--”

“That’s damned annoying kid. Ain't ya got nothing in your bag of tricks to turn it off?”

Sai didn’t look up from his drawing. “I’ll consult my father’s writings for further guidance, but I’m certain tampering with the mark of a beast will unleash severe repercussions for Dr. Umino. And, if that weren’t enough ... the numen’s miasma gives the Hatake access to Dr. Umino’s mind, meaning its liable to alter his thoughts and words.”

“Well that makes sense,” Izumo reached out, patting Iruka’s forearm, “now we know why you felt sorry for him buddy--”

“Then,” Kotetsu proudly said, “good job I slapped some sense into him.”

“I’d advise against that in future sir.” Sai laid down his brush with care and leaned across the table, looking Kotetsu square in the eye. “The numen considers Dr. Umino its property; repeated abuses of said property will provoke a retaliatory response.” He turned again to Iruka, “Everything comes down to the strength of your will. Any impulse contrary to what you hold true must be actively resisted--”

“All well and good when he’s awake Sai, but sleep equals vulnerability. What are we supposed to do about that?”

The young man thought for a moment. “Nothing. Mr. Zumo, the numen has an avenue of access to his thoughts; we might be able to use the same to our advantage. If we can cause Dr. Umino to recall things said and done under the Hatake’s influence--”
“Whoa! Ain’t that the same as tamperin’ with him?”

“Not changing anything Mr. Tetsu, simply extracting information--”

“Oh good god Sai, you aren’t suggesting, hypnosis?”

He dipped his head, sparing the trio furtive glances beneath a fan of black lashes; his response they strained to hear. “Mr. Zumo, Dr. Umino … yes, it is a pseudo-science, a parlor trick at best, but it may be the only option available--”

“Humpf … lotta good that hypnotrick stuff’s gonna do once his brains get scrambled. Suppose Hatake tells him to bump us off … then what?”

“I’m certain killing you two would be contrary to his will Mr. Tetsu--”

“You can guarantee that smart ass?”

“Guys … settle down,” Iruka said, when the atmosphere took a sudden spin as Izumo and Kotetsu turned menacing eyes on Sai. “These are uncharted waters for all of us. Nobody is married to the idea of hypnosis, because if done incorrectly, it can lead to confabulation, which of course, would be counterproductive--”

“What’d he say?”

“He said we’re gonna table that idea for the time being. Whatcha think Tetsu … that work for you?”

“I’ve had no idea what the hell you been talkin’ about all this time; now it matters what I think Zumo?”

“Not really Mr. Tetsu, but whatever you decide Dr. Umino …the three of us, your best friends are behind you all the way.” Izumo looked aghast; Kotetsu groaned, rolling his eyes and Iruka hid a smirk behind his hand. Nevertheless, Sai pressed on, all the while readying a different ink brush. “Dr. Umino, if you describe the amulets lost, I’ll sketch patterns for the monks to follow--”

“Nix! I’d rather have some of the ones you got kid.”

Sai shot a perplexed look across the table at the grinning man. “Other than my grandfather’s necklace and the carvings on my body, I have no--”

“Horseshit! You gotta be using something; not gonna kill ya to share--”

“Tetsu, he said he doesn’t have anything else. Why can’t you just leave it at that?”

“Because it's impossible Zumo, that’s why! He told me he was doing up close and personal surveillance on Hatake--”

“You’re doing it again, jumping to conclusions--”

“Really? Hatake knows every time one of us breaks wind. So how can this guy be damn near under his nose without him knowing about it, huh?” Satisfied he’d asked the unanswerable question of the day, again he folds his arms across his chest with a loud harrumph.

“Mr. Tetsu, the only protection I have against the Hatake and its ilk lies within.” He’s met with a raised eyebrow and an unblinking stare. In desperation, he looks askance of Iruka and with permission granted, he whined, “But sir, were I to trace my lineage in a way he’d apprehend, it would exhaust us all.”
“Then for my sake, do the best you can.”

“Yes sir … for your sake.” The young man took a deep breath and began, “As a seventh son of a seventh son, sundry powers are mine by birthright Mr. Tetsu.” Slowly did he push back the sleeve of his garment revealing an arm covered in welted scars. “Each time I passed a level of training, different symbols were graven into my flesh; these amplify my innate powers. My grandfather’s necklace serves as the focal point for my abilities, allowing them to flow through my body and into objects of my choosing, which means—”

Kotetsu waves off further explanation with a curt, “Gibberish. What are you grinnin’ about Zumo? Since you act like you know what he’s talkin’ about, why don’t ya translate what he just said?”

“No need, he’s speaking Japanese, knucklehead!”

“Takes one to know one!”

“Gentlemen please, no more fighting; I have to conserve my inks. Let’s try it this way Mr. Tetsu. I’m descended from a family of mystics. Our sole purpose in this world is to hunt down and exterminate demons—”

“So?”

“My abilities allow me to detect the presence of malevolent spirits, all the while, masking my humanity from them.” The furrows in Kotetsu’s brow grew deeper as he shook his head. “I can funnel my essence into special inks … you’ve seen that much. The creatures I draw are used to infiltrate the haunts of demons and spirits. They then gather and relay information to me, that I might know how best to destroy, said demons and spirits.” Slightly winded, Sai sags down into the chair beside Izumo, arms dangling at its sides. “Now do you understand?”

Kotetsu cocked his head, rubbing at his goatee. “You got an answer for everything, don’t ya?”

“Pay him no mind. Iruka and I will gladly show your drawing to Lady Tsunade when we see her later this morning—”

“Hang on … we’re going to see the Governor?”

“Oh, that’s right,” gushed out with a titter, “forgot to mention I intended to drag you there for an exam. You know,;” he waved his hand in the neighborhood of Iruka’s chest, “…the whole Kampo thing? Not gonna hurt talking to her and who knows, maybe she can augment the tea’s effects with some other treatments … no offense Sai.”

“Since you’re goin,’ take this with ya,” a small scroll fished from his pocket hits the table with a bang, rolling toward Izumo. “Kid says it’s a picture of whatever dumped that dead woman on the Governor’s doorstep this morning.”

Didn’t take long for the blue ribbon binding the scroll to fall to the floor. The trio craned their necks to see who this mystery creature was.

“We know that guy! Even better … he’s a direct link to—”

“Forget it Zumo. We show this to the Governor, along with our story of the seal and whatnot … it’s gonna look like we’re trying too hard to frame Hatake—”

“Yeah, even a knucklehead like me knows ya gotta present solid corroborating evidence. What? I know big words. Anyways, think you can get us some, punk?”
“Short of making the Hatake transform in front of witnesses? I don’t think so.”

“Well spoken,” Iruka said as he wrapped up the scroll, “and Mr. Hagane? You’re batting a thousand this morning. I agree, for now we should keep this one close to the vest—”

“Is that a harebrained scheme I smell cookin’ Iruka?”

“Maybe. Sai, you wouldn’t happen to have floor plans of where Hatake lies in repose would you?”

“I have a few prepared sir,” he said searching through the pouch at his waist, “somewhere.”

“Alright then, here’s the plan. Tetsu takes the patterns to our friend Michio at the Temple. Zumo if you would, see what you can find out from your contact at the constabulary. I’ll meet you in the plaza in an hour. Sai … we need to speak privately.”

“There he is!” Kotetsu crowed as he stood, “Decisive and to the point, that’s the Ruka I remember. Alright gents, I’m out!”

He was striding across the room when a boisterous “Not yet,” halted an exultant exit. “Give this to the monks as well, please.”

“What ya got now kid?”

“Courier scroll. When the amulets are finished, the monks simply unroll it and place them inside. The parchment absorbs them and ‘whoosh,’ they’re delivered directly to Dr. Umino.”

Half expecting the darn thing to explode or grab him by the arm, Kotetsu turns about approaching the young man with comical stealth. “Bout time you come up with somethin’ that makes sense—”

“Thank you,” he smiled brightly. “And it looks like you ended up playing messenger boy for me after all.”

The scroll was snatched out of his hand in a blink as Kotetsu grit his teeth and stomped away. “One of these days … gonna strangle that kid,” he was heard to say before the front door slammed shut.

Recherché

Up the stairs and down the hall of the station house he pushes him. One foot over the threshold of Ibiki’s cool quiet office and the captive is finally freed.

“Drink?”

“Little early in the day for liver picklin’ if ya ask me—”

“Didn’t,” he said closing the door behind them, “gwan … sit down.”

Taking a few steps while trying to work a crick out his back, Idate grumbles, “Think ya dislocated my shoulder, jackass—!”

“Aw quit whinin’ … you’re fine.”

“And what pray tell, has burrowed up your butt this morning Inspector?”

Question ignored as with determined pace Ibiki crosses the room and sinks down in his chair with a groan. Once, twice, thrice, he taps on the desktop. “There you are my beauties,” he said when a bottom right hand panel slid open revealing his secret stash. From the rear of the cabinet came a
clinking as he fished out a half empty whiskey bottle and its accompanying shot glass. A squeal of cork, a bouquet pungent wafts in the air as light brown liquid spills into a waiting receptacle.

“Good god! Smells like turpentine … how can you drink that stuff?”

“Years of practice.” Elbow bent, Ibiki winces in pleasured agony as the shot burns down his gullet; the glass hitting the desk with a satisfied thump.

“Okay … one and done. You gonna tell me what’s going on or what?”

"Figured you’d heard the news by now--"

"Biki … weren’t like I had time for tales over the fence this morning; believe it or don’t, I’m still tryna catch my breath from last night."

Again, he seemed to look right through his brother as a shaky hand tenderly caressed the bottle’s neck. “Yeah. Ain't been round stuff like that since the war. Helluva thing … Uchiha’s prize race horses, choice sheep from the Kokucho and Shimura estates gone missing--"

"By the gods! Hope it wasn’t them--!"

“What?"

“Three stallions,” Idate mumbles rubbing at his nape, “somethin’ tore ’em up real bad; no choice … hadta put ’em down. We checked for identifiers first … weren’t none.”

Ibiki hung his head and laughed, “Can’t win for losing can I?”

Watching Ibiki pour a refill he sniped, “No reason to drink yourself into a stupor--”

“Listen and understand why don’t ya?” Cradling his glass, Ibiki defaults to morose monotony. “When I first heard about the fire, I was sure arson was a ruse to cover theft; figured whoever had the horses set the blaze, right? Then I find out, Uchiha Itachi torched the place. So I reckoned, when the horses fled the stables, they probably wound up over to your place; now I can’t prove that either.” He downed the drink in a flash. “All my theories shot to hell … can this morning get any worse?”

When he reached for the bottle yet again, Idate stretched forth his hands. “Hang on, everything ain’t lost yet. Why don’t you come up and look through what we still have?”

“Nah, paperwork needs tending. Gotta tsuya for clan Uchiha later tonight--”

“Say what? Didn’t realize fire took out the whole clan … so that’s the part of your speech I missed–”

“And here I thought you were just being your oblivious self--”

“Shush you! Know what else is strange? We had a runner from the Uchiha come fetch help round midnight. Naturally, Hana and Tsume saddled up and took off after him. They said he disappeared into thin air and they turned back after seein’ flames come over the ridge--”

“Gods preserve me,” Ibiki swiped at his eyes chuckling, “stuff’s stronger than I remember … damned if I ain’t seein’ double now.” Nevertheless, he spilt nary a drop when he poured another shot. “Reckon I oughta take a lay down soon--”

“Keep swillin’ that rotgut and it’ll lay ya down alright … idiot.”
“Seen what I saw last night, you’d be drinkin’ too … twit.”

“Fine, just … you know … don’t let this situation take you down that dark path again, okay?”

“Worry too much kid--”

“Gotta say, you do look like hell Biki. Seriously …. anything I can do on my end to help ya out?”

“Yeah,” he murmured into the shot glass, “find me a serial killer before the next full moon.”

Notes:

Tincture: trace; a smack or smattering.

Overweening: showing excessive confidence; arrogance.

Livestock: farm animals regarded as an asset; both beef and dairy cattle, pigs, sheep, goats, horses, mules, buffalo and camels. The raising of birds (commercially) for meat or eggs, like chicken, ducks, geese, turkeys, guinea fowl and squabs, is treated separately.

"I swan," or "I swanee," was popular in the north of England and in many regions of the southern United States; it's a nice way of saying, "I swear."

Plowshare: cutting edge of a plow.

Expedient (archaic): beneficial; make fit or ready.

Bedlam (archaic): insane asylum or madhouse.

Kamon: Japanese heraldic symbol; family crest.

Idée fixe: an idea or desire that dominates the mind; an obsession.

Lunatic(k): the word derives from lunaticus meaning "of the moon" or "moonstruck."

Abstruse (archaic): secret or hidden.

Obtuse: annoyingly insensitive or slow to understand.

Lycanthrope: werewolf or alien spirit in the physical form of a bloodthirsty wolf.

Oppugner: one who assails with criticism, argument or action.

Lashed (archaic): bound or fastened with a rope, cord or the like.

Vault: a large room or chamber typically used for storage, especially an underground one.

Epidermal: the upper or outer layer of the two main layers of cells that make up the skin. The epidermis is made up of flat, scale-like cells (squamous cells), under the squamous layer are round cells (basal cells). The deepest part of the epidermis contains melanocytes which produce melanin, which of course, gives the skin its color.

Stultify(ing): appear stupid, foolish, or absurdly illogical.

Stopgap: a temporary way of dealing with a problem or satisfying a need.
Confabulate: fill in gaps in memory by fabrication; unconsciously replace fact with fantasy in one’s memory.

Nix: put an end to; cancel. Expressing denial or refusal when used as an exclamation.

Ilk: a type of people or things similar to those already referred to.

Titter: to laugh in a restrained, self-conscious or affected way as from nervousness.

Lineage: lineal descent from an ancestor; ancestor or pedigree. Descent in a line from a common progenitor.

Seventh son of the seventh son is a concept from folklore regarding special powers given to or held by such a son. The seventh son must come from an unbroken line with no female siblings, and in turn, be born to such a seventh son. In some beliefs, these special powers are inborn, inherited simply by virtue of birth order; in others, these powers are granted by God or the gods because of his birth order.

Gwan: go on.

Introduced into Japan as early as the 1860s, hypnotism was initially presented both as a new and important subject of modern medicine and science and as a genre of Western magic, staged in theaters in Tokyo. Kenzi Ōsau, professor of Physiology at Tokyo Imperial University, was the most famous and influential of the few medical professionals attracted to hypnotism at the time. He translated ‘hypnosis’ into Japanese as ‘Mausi’ (literally, magic sleep), publishing a book titled Masui Zyutsu (literally, skill or technique), wherein he introduced a wide range of Western theories and techniques of hypnotism that included Mesmerism. He gave special emphasis to Charcotism, describing its stages of hypnosis in detail. (Jean-Martin Charcot was a French neurologist and professor of anatomical pathology, best known today for his work on hypnosis and hysteria). Although Ōsau did mention the role of wish in the induction of hypnosis, he emphasized the neurophysiological and neuropathological nature of hypnosis rather than the psychological mechanism. Outside academia, there were also a few essentially different types of practitioners using hypnotism either as a cure or an entertainment, some of whom were clearly in favor of Mesmerism (Animal magnetism, AKA mesmerism, the name given by a German doctor, Franz Mesmer in the 18th century to what he believed to be an invisible natural force possessed by all living/animate beings, humans, animals or vegetables. He believed that the force could have physical effects, including healing. He tried and failed numerous times to achieve scientific recognition of his ideas.)

In Japan, those interested in hypnotism at that time, whether academics or not, shared an interest in the scientific explanation of ancient magic, witchcraft and tricks. The general agreement was these ancient wonders were nothing but hypnotic phenomena that modern science could and should explain. But magic and witchcraft were controversial, as was the seemingly supernatural power of hypnotism.
Resolution's Conflict

Nary eyebrow raised, nor body turned at the sound of fast approaching footfalls; neither would the old man cut short enjoyment of his tea, even as the heavy breathing servant ran up behind him and began speaking:

“Coroner… collapsed in the gardens … can’t rouse him! What … what shall we do Master?”

The stiff set of the elder’s shoulders spoke volumes; his portentous silence shaving corners off the sense of urgency. The young man took back a step, wincing in anticipation of the chastening sure to follow. Instead, after a loud slurp and deliberate dab at his lips, the doyen cleric simply asked, “What is it I always tell you my son?”

Collecting himself with a deep breath, the acolyte muttered from rote, “A wise monk cultivates discernment through meditation, observation and … common sense.”

“Well done. And before you ran in here, did you stop to consider possible reasons why the Coroner is worn to the quick?”

“No sir. I … I just panicked.”

“Then shall I not lay it to your charge … this time. Come, kneel before me and listen well.” He paused for another sip of tea as the young man settled in place. "Under the light of an ominous moon an indescribable horror snatched away innocent lives. Ours is not to question why for we are called to facilitate grief and perpetuate remembrance. With the gods granting him wisdom to bestow final dignities on the noble Uchiha family, the Coroner toiled throughout the night.”

“I was unaware of this sir. I now stand beholden to the gods for Mr. Shiranui’s dedication--”

“My dear boy, surely you haven't overlooked the most blessed gift imparted?”

"Sir?"

"In their infinite wisdom, the gods have granted us temporary reprieve from the Coroner’s interminable chatter. For this reason alone should we praise them from the mountaintops!”

Michio hid a smile behind the sleeve of his garment as the elder lifted his eyes from the clay tea cup in his hands to the place where Genma lay. “Perfecting that which remains undone is how we will honor the Coroner’s labor. Run along, assist your brethren, but first … fetch bolster and coverings; attend to Mr. Shiranui’s ease, but do not his rest disturb.”

Recherché

Three hundred forty nine …

the number of seams between smooth stone slates; fifty seven times he’d counted them as he paced up and down the corridor outside Master’s place of rest. In vain, a mind simple wrests a situation complex. To rush in, offering assistance unasked, was to risk Master’s wrath, yet, daily standing idle, watching his Lord’s vigor diminish was a torment ineffable. Once more, he’d come to a brick wall and for the fifty eighth time, this stalwart champion turns about, his Master left alone to wage war unseen, with an enemy unknown.

Upstairs, in the private salon of the former Lord, another servant walks the floor; this one confident
he alone held the answer to a conundrum perplexing. To a task unassigned was he energetic, determined to examine each word, each sentence, line by line in the books and scrolls littering every surface in the room. Keen of mind, wily of motive, his objective singular; the elevation of status.

Back downstairs, ensconced in caliginosity, behind the oaken door of his sanctuary, Lord Hatake Kakashi tosses and turns upon his bed. Exasperated, befuddled, two things restrain him follow the prolific path of destruction forged by his ancestor; a cryptic promise from his father and an unwelcome stirring in the center of his chest.

He can stand it no longer.

Enraged, his coverings flung away as he bolts upright. The corner of a silken sheet, dragged along, lay crumpled in his lap as on the edge of the bed he does perch; one leg tucked under his thigh, the other dangling above the tread.

“Maito!
Get in here!”

In an instant, a sliver of light punctures the darkness as the bowed head of his servant pokes through a crack in the door. “You called my Lord?”

“For the love of all things unholy … what is your problem?”

“A soul distressed Master,” the faithful varlet says as he slips inside the room and falls to his knees. “The pain of your disquiet … too onerous for me to bear—”

“So instead, you willfully disturb my rest, snorting and stomping about like an enraged bull? Is that the right of it?”

“I plead mercy; you have only to speak the word and I would travel to the ends of the earth to extinguish the source of aggro.”

An ivory hand rakes through tousled silver hair before limply falling into his lap. “What am I to do with you Maito? Alas, that which vexes me, lies far beyond your capacity. But as you obviously need something to occupy your mind, go … fetch Kinoe—”

“At once,” he answers with a smirk, “surely he is meet to alleviate—”

“What’s this? Attempting to shoulder my burdens, presuming upon my intentions … since when did you become so bold?”

“Master … I meant only—”

“Incline your ears, let your lips cease their flapping! The suite adjacent my upstairs quarters has lain empty lo these many years; Kinoe is to prepare it for—”

“But, my Lord … wasn’t that—?”

“A direct order? Yes, I believe it was … see to it.” When the swift scuttle of shoes didn’t reach his ear, at this the Master raised his head. “How now Maito … you slacken to obey?”

“Again, beg pardon my Lord, but does not Master Jiraiya have lodgings elsewhere?”

“Must you test the limits of my patience? I said nothing about him!”

His Lord’s fury doth set his liver aquiver. “My liege … an incorrect assumption, it won’t happen
“Beginning to think pain is the only way to--”

“No ... no my Lord,” he said crawling backwards, “I go to do your bidding.” As the sole of his foot brushes the door jamb, the servant dares lift his eyes at the Master’s voice.

“An impudent servitor disrupts my repose ... I shouldn’t be surprised overmuch. You’ve been throwing pheromones about like a frightened porcupine since you came down here. Tell me, which fuels this obstinacy Maito … curiosity or fear?”

“Bits of both my Lord.”

“I see,” he said reaching for his robe, “and in exchange for making you privy to my plans comes a guarantee of prompt obedience?”

“To carry out your will … that is the sole reason for my existence--”

“Enough … you’re all but useless to me in this current state; listen carefully.” Worrying at the purple silk raiment resting heavy on his shoulders the Master said, “In the coming days will I entertain a particular guest. At first, his visits will be intermittent, in time he will become a fixture, having limited reign under the shadow of my wing. Kinoe is to ensure every hospitality of the manor affords him. Maito, you are to keep watch over and defend him as necessity demands--”

“Defend? Master, this guest is ... human?”

“You wished insight into my plans, and I deign it so,” Master stretched forth his hand, the collar of Maito’s subjection slowly constricting, “and now would you question the decisions I’ve made?”

“Forgive me … your trust shall not return void my Lord.”

“See that it doesn't,” he said as his servant recovered ability to breathe. "Now then, in anticipation of his arrival, I rise to attend other of his accommodations.”

Maito pulled himself erect at once, holding open the chamber’s door. “Thank you … Master.”

As Lord Hatake ascends the rear passageway, Maito takes off in the opposite direction, bounding up the steps which led to the main hallway. Seconds after bolting shut the vault's entrance, his back slams against the door under the weight of Jiraiya’s smug aura.

“Hold! Are you still in possession of the vials I gave you?”

“Would that grace grant favor,” he said, bowing before his betters, “they are close to hand, but not on my person as instructed. You have need I fetch them?”
Jiraiya laughed, shaking his head, “How you tempt me with such disobedience. Be grateful I know what ails you and even now I’m working on something to assuage our Lord’s melancholy. Upon my return and in my timing, I will divulge all. Best be on your way little one … lest mercy withdraw its humor.”

**Recherché**

At one end of the brown table lies a large rectangle of white composed of eighteen smaller squares. Tadashi’s hefty leather bound portfolio and personal notebook await examination at the table’s far end. Betwixt them stand science and mysticism, logic and emotion, each quietly formulating argument and rebuttal as images on the squares before them are scrutinized.

“Still don’t understand why you’re fighting me on this,” Iruka said as he plucked up a single piece of paper, “it's our best option--”

“Says the one with zero demon hunting experience. Dr. Umino, this ‘option’ you insist upon carries with it an eighty percent probability of failure. You're thinking too simplistically--”

“Exactly! We'll have the element of surprise--”

“No,” he said snatching away the small paper and restoring it to proper alignment with the others, “… there is no surprising an omniscient and omnipotent being--!”

“His mark is in my flesh Sai, the symbol of a mindless lackey. The last thing he expects is outright rebellion. Now, while I still have my wits--”

“I pray you give ear to reality. You were sealed against your will so the Hatake eagerly anticipates rebellion … makes crushing your spirit far more satisfying. It has employed preemptive measures to ensure you remain under its control. Attempts to free yourself provide the Hatake with license to torture you.” He turned sad eyes on Iruka adding, “I realize you don’t want to accept these truths--”

“You want truth? Okay … if we don’t move quickly, there will be more murders--!”

“And if we rush headlong into the Hatake’s lair without a plan, the next four deaths will be ours. I’ll not allow blind vengeance discount expertise, nor shall expediency overrule caution--”

“Your way is gonna take forever!”

“Sir, we’re contemplating assault on the Hatake and legion of voracious gaki … that requires more than wishful thinking. We’ll have only one opportunity to get it right … everything must be in readiness beforehand and that takes--”

“Yeah, I know … time.” Iruka grabbed a chair from table’s end, dropping himself into it with a sigh. “How much time we talkin’?”

“Dr. Umino, you want to cut to the quick and be on your way; I can appreciate that. However,” he said pulling up another chair and sitting beside him, “formalities must be observed, procedures adhered to … and consent granted--”

“Consent … from whom?”

“Did you honestly think it possible, that one from the lowliest tribes of Water Country could waltz into another’s territory and begin offering strange fire on their altars?”

“How was I to know … why would I even consider such things?”
“Ah right, that’s why you called in an expert to handle the details--”

“These indulgences Sai … how much time will they consume?”

“It’s more a matter of respect, than time. Fortunately, I’ve attended several things in advance. The very night I arrived in Konoha, I sought audience with the Yamabushi. After presenting my credentials and making known my purpose, they granted their blessing.”

“So now what do we do?”

“We wait … familiarize ourselves with the portions of my plan already established. Worry not, even as we speak, my scouts roam the territory, seeking those endowed with special abilities--”

“That really necessary? Thought sure our amulets and your powers would be enough to--”

“Better to have assistance available and not need it … then need it and not have it.” With a smile wistful, he continued, “Unlike you sir, I have no emotional attachment to the Hatake’s demise … it’s a duty to be accomplished. Nonetheless, I understand the frustration you feel.” Just then, a soft growl emanated from Sai’s midsection.

“And I understand borborygmi. What a neglectful host I’ve been; so caught up in your work … not a care for your sustenance.” Iruka made to rise, “Lemme get you something--”

“Quite alright, sir. But I must insist, as one sanctified from birth for missions like this, you have to let me work unfettered. It’ll take a few days for the monks to assemble the amulets; by then my plans should be complete … just a matter of assigning responsibilities. Now if you don’t mind, I shall return to the surveillance point where I’ve food aplenty--”

“Nonsense, won’t do to have you collapse on the way back, will it? Tetsu’s the real cook around here, so it won’t be fancy; pretty sure I can rustle up some miso soup without burning the place down--”

“Why does he hate me sir?”

“Eh? Don’t be silly.” Iruka went back a step, sitting down to explain, “Quiet as its kept, Tetsu only picks at those he’s taken a liking to--”

“Then he must be completely enamored of Mr. Zumo--”

“You two are very much alike” he smiled, “unconventional thinkers, outdoorsmen and zealous guardians of your solitude … you’ll be thick as thieves before you know it.”

Recherché

With mind and office free of distraction, confirmation thirsted for turns to confusion; solitude longed after, transforms into a prison cell.

Missing something. Surely, I’m not that thick, am I?

From desk drawers and ransacked cupboards, assorted papers, notebooks and scrolls are strewn hither and yon. It was over, search abandoned … for now. Yet the cycle continued; she’d walk a few steps, stop to read a passage or two from thrown away notes before the aimless march began anew. Third trip around the suddenly smaller space, Lady Tsunade glared at the information confined to the small conference table.
‘Pellucidity emerges from the knot of chaos, patiently teased,’ that’s what Grandfather used to say. So much for that rubbish.

“At least, Ibiki and Asahi got enough truth out there to quell the common folk,” she said to the pile of books and papers. “Won’t be long before the privileged are at my door looking for protection … natural or otherwise; Inspector’s gonna love that. Right,” she sighed as she took a seat and flipped through a few bookmarked pages, “let’s do this one more time.” Her eyes grew weary as her fingertips traced over smudged black inked lines. “Here it is. Grandfather Katsuro noted the murders seemed to coincide with milestones in our history; increases in industry, expansion of our borders, striking accords with other nations and such like. And here, he mentions that in his time, three noble families were thought to have a hand in sacrificing young women to the gods or various demons in rituals thought to protect the land.” Stretching her back as she rose, she thought to head for the door. 

Nah … long dead by now. But, if by some miracle scion remain, maybe there’s a way to reverse the curse. She allows the pince-nez retract as she retakes her seat. “Who am I kidding? I try to discuss this with anyone other than that windbag of a sage … they’ll think me insane. Already talking to inanimate objects, so they wouldn’t be too far off.” She flopped against the chair back, “What to believe … what to do? Can’t go for a walk unmolested and sure as hell can’t look at this stuff anymore lest my head explode.”

Yep, definitely time for a drink.

Recherché

Just not cutting it, he thinks watching Ibiki down another shot. “You had a disastrous night … I got it, but you really need to slow down--”

“Relax,” blew out in a patronizing breath as the bottle tipped toward the glass, “last one, I promise.”

“Terrible thing … old geezer like you, crisp around the edges--”

“Crisp is good--”

“Yeah, for a pie crust. Come home with me huh Biki? Hana will feed ya till you pop, the stable hands will take good care of Mayonaka and you can get a few hours shuteye. ‘Sides, we aren’t that far from the Temple--”

“Told ya before, gotta stay close to town case somethin’ happens. And I’d rather conk out in my own bed if that's alright with you.”

“I know ya … got somethin’ stuck in your craw, won’t rest till it's settled. Biki, you always were a mean drunk, given to brawling--”

“Changed since then,” he said, fingers tightening around the shot glass, “too old for that kinda foolishness--”

“Yeah? You’re sotted and punchy--”

“Your point?”

“All its gonna take is one idiot sayin’ or doin’ the wrong thing at the wrong time; hell, you almost broke my arm and you hadn’t started drinkin’ then. Come on, get it together!”

“Concern noted and appreciated, but as I said,” he smiled before draining the shot glass and putting away the bottle, “I’m fine.” Carefully studying the man before him, Ibiki conceded, “I’ll walk ya out and then you can watch me stagger to my doorstep. Deal?”
“When you’ve finished here, Master wants you prepare the suite beside his upstairs bedchamber—”

“Expecting another dignitary are we?”

With a shrug Maito explains, “Our Lord plans on entertaining a guest at length. That’s all I know.”

“At length? Rarely do entertain visitors and now we’re being overrun. I can’t remember Master ever allowing such things … you?”

“It’s happened. Right before you joined us there was another serving in your capacity; he was fed to the Yasha after displeasing our Lord one time too many.”

“Are you implying this ‘guest’ might be my replacement?”

“Just the messenger Kinoe; you have your orders,” he said turning to leave with a huge grin on his face.

Recherché

“Welp … larder’s empty, kettle’s still on though … care for a biscuit?”

“Thank you, no—”

The kettle came to a shrieking boil, unnoticed by Iruka as he rummaged through upper and lower cupboards. “I’ll be dogged … hid ‘em so well from Tetsu that now I can’t find the damn … oh, never mind. Ooh and they’re digesives too … you’ll like ‘em—”

“Again I must decline,” Sai called out, “not a fan of sweets. Tea will suffice.”

Iruka returned to the dining area with a steaming mug balanced atop a flat blue tin. Once the container took up residence in the center of their workspace he turned to Sai, “Okay, what’s with that face? One biscuit won’t kill ya—”

“Sure it won’t … it’s just, still a few things I don’t understand. Why would the Hatake draw blood using a syringe,” he wondered reaching for the cup, “and why is your blood still being held in reserve?”

“Who knows? Maybe he needed to save room for the main course that night … or maybe, he plans to use it as an appetizer before his next feed?” Sai pulled a disgusted face as Iruka drained the dregs of his lukewarm tea. “Lighten up … that was a joke. All I remember is, it hurt like hell.”

“Well,” he said watching Iruka return to the kitchen, “using the axillary artery was prudent; less opportunity the drawing site being noticed.” He snuck a biscuit from the tin, gave it a sniff and took a nibble. “Sir … this Hatake is more complex than yokai I’m accustomed to—”

“Not getting cold feet are you?”

“I don’t think so, but with the recent blood red moon, gaki are multiplying at an alarming rate. Add to that, the wholesale slaughter of animals considered unclean, plants, flowers and trees blooming out of their season … too many curious things at once. Most troubling of all is, in the short time I’ve monitored the Hatake, rapid shifts are occurring in its temperament,” he said around a mouthful, “its aura grows more ominous as the days go by.”
Iruka poked his head into the room, “Good huh?”

“No sir, that’s extremely dangerous--”

“I was talking about the biscuits. Go on, you can have as many as you like.”

“Thanks,” he mumbled pocketing a few for later. “As I’m sure you know, gaki are drawn to power but they’re fickle. While they’ll pledge allegiance to any entity stronger than themselves--”

“My father used to say, ‘A gaki’s true god, is its belly.’ Long as Hatake allows them feed regularly, they’ll stick with him.”

Sai chuckled, breaking a biscuit in half, “That remains to be seen. Enthroned over a territory and the gaki which inhabit it, a numen rules by virtue of familial right, until of course, another arises to challenge it’s governance.”

“Not likely I assume. From my own research I know clan Hatake were founding members of this territory. He’s ancient … roots run deep.”

“True, but these days, the Hatake is being pulled in divers directions; if the gaki catch wise to an imbalance in power, the results will be disastrous. The outcome of this conflict determines whether the gaki revolt against or unite behind the numen to engulf another territory.”

“So, Tetsu was right; not just Konoha is at stake.” Fresh mug of tea in hand, he retrieves the portfolio from table’s end, sets it down beside the biscuit tin and peers over the young man’s shoulder. “You mentioned ‘others’ … might these murders be a consequence of infighting?”

“Another puzzlement sir. Far as I can tell, only one reigns supreme over the territory. The creature which met the Hatake outside your cabin knelt before it, acknowledging subservience. And of the two inside the vault, one showed deference to the other … whereas the Hatake gave grudging obeisance--”

“Obviously, he’s not as powerful as first thought--”

“On the contrary, my scouts tell me this conflict is internalized; the other demons sense it too and they’re trying to compel the Hatake move a certain way. Somehow or another, the amulet taken from you plays a role in their struggle.”

He pretended not to notice when Sai snagged three more biscuits. “According to Hatake, it was a gift to my father from the previous numen--”

“Interesting … that means Umino Tadashi was never sealed.”

Iruka’s eyes fell to another of the drawings as he said more to himself than Sai, “Always wondered how he defeated Lord Sakumo so easily. Now I understand why the current Lord sealed me first off… not gonna make the same mistake twice.”

“Right. One of our first priorities is discovering the source of animus between these demons. We also need to find a way to make your soul less desirable and of course … prevent another murder--”

"One thing’s sure,” Iruka smiled, turning his attention to a particular floor plan, “leaving only this exit to the forests unguarded, we can smoke him out. Direct sunlight will kill him quicker than we can--”

“Would it were that easy. It bears repeating Dr. Umino, a coordinated assault requires skillful
strategy--”

“Ah, but we have a secret weapon; the Governor.”

Sai shook his head, “A human?”

“Yes … for reasons unknown, Hatake fears this particular human--”

“By the gods! Are you that naïve … do you not comprehend what we’re up against? I’ve no idea who the Hatake holds under its sway and I’ll not wager my life in a fool’s gambit. It’s settled, my plan may take longer to execute, but I know it will work.”

“Fine … you’re the expert,” he snapped, flipping open the portfolio.

“Least we’re understood.” Iruka’s jaw tightens as stony silence blankets the room. “Dr. Umino, as a man of science, you know full well harbored anger furthers nothing. So, beginning with the end, let’s work backwards to achieve our goal. Tell me, how do you envision the outcome of this confrontation?”

“The way I see it, the biggest hurdle we face is closing the gateway. Once done, Hatake should be sufficiently disoriented for step two; forcing him out the only available exit. Into the sunlight, his body withers and disintegrates, but not before I carve out and rip his heart to shreds--”

“Gruesome … but that comes after my assistants knock out the other gaki.”

“Whatever. Here … the diagram I told you about.”

Sai pulled the large binder to himself, “So that’s it, the portal which draws power from the underworld. Definitely have to get close … it needs to be destroyed before we can do anything else--”

“Knew that much. Took a blade dipped in poison to reveal it,” Iruka whispered when he looked up from his father’s crude drawing with a wry smile, “wouldn’t the same poison return it to normal?”

“I’m not entirely sure, but such emprise. How willing are you to do this sir?”

The now empty tea cup gave nervous hands something to play with. “Damned to an eternity in hell whichever way I turn … rather go down fighting then cowering in a corner.”

“Dr. Umino, nothing is truly invincible,” he said pushing the book away. “Even numen powerful as the Hatake have vulnerabilities. We’ll keep chipping away at its defenses and as you said, the Governor’s meddling may come in handy. You could also try befriending the Hatake--”

“Nope … what else you got?”

“Consider this sir, at their core, yokai have what we’d call, ‘tremendous ego’; flattery works to their detriment. If the Hatake detects your words and actions are sincere, that’s a sure way to erode resistance. Forcing it to examine something akin to human emotion also makes it uncomfortable--”

“Yeah,” he sighed reaching for a biscuit and breaking it in half, “remember reading that somewhere too. Gotta tell ya … don’t relish the idea of kissin’ up to him--”

“If it puts the Hatake off guard long enough to make your move, it’s worth a shot.”

Bearing Sai’s words in mind, he snaps the half biscuit in half once more before answering, “Couldn’t help noticing a particular behavior of his during the party. Maybe we can exploit that as a
"Every little bit helps … go on--"

"Hatake thinks nothing of invading someone else’s space, but he doesn’t like people moving close to him; lesson learned from the last tsuya. He’s also not crazy about being touched without permission; has one of his lackeys runs interference--"

"Well, there you go; that reinforces the fact you’ll have to get close to it, consistently and on purpose--"

"Tetsu said the same thing. I hate it, but I get it; make him think his miasma is changing the way I see him. He'll chalk it up to the erratic nature of human interaction and--"

"Hopefully, it will tolerate such behavior in hopes of achieving swift fulfillment of its goals … whatever they might be."

"Tell me something," he laughed, "why do you keep referring to him as ‘it,’ or ‘the Hatake’?"

Sai looked incredulous, "Sir … it’s a demon. Don’t be deceived, what you see, is not what it truly is."

"You know, I saw it’s true form once before; saw it again last night in that holding cell." His voice dropped to a reverent whisper, "He’s a winged, malodorous, grotesque … yet, somehow, beautiful creature--"

"You’d well to keep the image of its ugliness in mind Dr. Umino. Without provocation or compunction, the Hatake would surely rise up and kill your friends … or you.” He pushed the book aside, ‘I’ll ask but once more. Are you truly willing to lay down your life if it means taking out the Hatake?’"

"Yes,” came out in a rush. “Run along now Sai … go do that voodoo, that you do, so well.”

Notes:

Doyen: the most respected or prominent person in a particular field; the senior member, as in age, rank, or experience, in a group, class or profession.

Interminable: monotonously or annoyingly protracted; unceasing.

Wrest: twist or turn; pull, jerk, or force by a violent twist.

Varlet: attendant or servant.

Caliginosity: mistiness, darkness.

Ineffable: too great or extreme to be expressed or described in words.

Onerous: burdensome, oppressive, or troublesome; causing hardship.

Aggro (British informal): trouble, irritation.
Aquiver: in a state of trepidation or vibrant agitation.

Meet *(archaic)*: fit or suitable for a purpose.

“How now?” *(archaic)*: “What’s the meaning of this?”

Servitor *(archaic)*: one who serves or attends on a superior.

Obstinance: difficult to handle; hard to influence or control.

Liege: concerned with or relating to the relationship between a feudal superior and a vassal; a feudal lord entitled to allegiance and service.

Jamb *(architectural)*: either of the vertical sides of a doorway, arch, window, or other opening or either of two stones or timbers forming the side pieces for the frame of an opening.

Accommodation: anything that supplies a want or need.

Benediction: something that promotes goodness or well-being.

Cuff: a blow with the fist or an open hand.

Assuage: make milder or less severe; relieve, ease or mitigate.

Omniscient: having infinite awareness, understanding and insight.

Omnipotent: (of a deity) having unlimited power; able to do anything.

Expediency: the doing or consideration of what is of selfish use or advantage rather than of what is right or just.

Yamabushi: literally, “*one who prostrates himself on the mountain,*” they were ascetic hermits believed to be endowed with supernatural powers; those who engaged in spiritual and physical disciplines in order to obtain magical power effective against evil spirits. These monks studied not only nature and spiritual texts but a variety of martial arts as a means of improving themselves mentally, spiritually and physically.

Borborygmi: the sound gas makes as it moves through the intestines; can occur when one is hungry or after meals.

Divers (archaic): several, various, an indefinite number more than one; emphasizes multiplicity.

Sanctify (-ied): set a person or thing apart for the use intended by its designer; to set apart to a sacred purpose.

Compunction: a feeling of guilt or moral scruple that prevents or follows the doing of something bad.

“*Do that voodoo, that you, do so well*” came from a song by Cole Porter, released in 1929 entitled, *You Do Something to Me.* More recently, it was uttered by the late Harvey Korman in Mel Brooks’ *Blazing Saddles* (1974), and by the late Harry Morgan (Col. Sherman Potter) in *MASH* (1980).

Geez, I’m old.

Pellucid(-ity): lucid in style, easily understood; clear in meaning.

Scion: descendant of a wealthy, aristocratic or influential family.
Larder: cool area for storing food prior to use. They were commonplace in houses before the widespread use of refrigerators.

Digestive biscuits (digestives): semi-sweet cookies, developed in 1839 by two doctors in Scotland who believed since they contained sodium bicarbonate, they had antacid properties.

Animus: hostility or ill feeling; strong dislike, enmity.

Entity: a thing with distinct and independent existence.

Emprise: an adventurous, daring, or chivalric enterprise; knightly daring or prowess.

Malodorous: smelling very unpleasant.

Sotted: muddled or stupefied, especially with liquor.

Punchy: nervously anxious, irritable from fatigue.
Hear Here: The Loudly Unspoken

Gloomy the clouds of bluish gray cigar smoke hovering above wearied constables and their civilian counterparts adjacent the station house entrance. As Izumo wove his way round them, nary an eye apprehended, nor head turned. While they console and commiserate, smidgens of information leak through compacted groupings, painting gild edged portraits of barbarity. His contact stood alone by the stables. Lean and muscular like his fellows, black leather riding gloves cinched at the wrist, rough rolled blue sleeves of his uniform shirt, exposing tanned forearms. Unlike the others, he seemed a ray of sunshine, a beacon of optimism. Izumo approaches with caution, standing within earshot yet beyond the other man’s reach.

“Morning … didn’t expect to see you here--!”

With a brusque, “Then where’d you expect a constable to be?” Izumo is pushed back on his heels. “And it’s closer to noon than morning, jughead.” Turning from the posted duty roster, the angry voice recalculates and the glower becomes a sheepish grin. “Beg pardon … helluva long night.”

Hazel green eyes latch on to his, drawing Izumo in, all the while nudging him backward. “I, uh, don’t mean to impose, but would you care to join me for a cup of tea … that is,” he dared come closer, “if you aren’t just coming on shift?”

Wavy brown hair in need of a trim ruffles in the breeze, leather gloves disappear into the side pockets of navy jodhpurs when he moves closer. “Folks been awful generous this morning.” That friendly grin turns into a patent leer as he looks him up and down, “This right here, though … best offer I’ve had in a while.” The distance between them shrinks and once more, Izumo scrambles for words.

“Inns across the plaza … wait,” he laughed, “you knew that. I meant to say, since you’re a connoisseur, I’ll defer to you. Anywhere in particular?”

“I gotta little place by the docks; old lady what runs the joint makes better sweets than the bakeries. And as a bonus,” seeped out in a lazily suggestive drawl, “it’s all but deserted this time of day.”

Allowing his mouth opportunity to catch up with his brain, Izumo retreats once more, “Before we go, clean slate and all that, I’ve … something to confess--”

“Much quicker than expected … gotta admire a man who knows what he wants.”

Warm spearmint scented breath washes over him as the officer draws closer by a step, “Um … right, terrible breach of etiquette; try to have this sewn up by the second meeting--”

“And what might that be?”

“Never got a handle on your name,” Izumo’s smile dimmed, “sorry about that,” he said backing up another step and extending a hand.

Met in an iron grip, the officer practically purred, “I don’t mind throwing, if you promise to catch. We square?”

“I, uh … guess so?”

“Excellent, that’s sorted.” Relinquishing his grip he affects a bow, “Mikami Kazuhiko at your service, Kamizuki Izumo.”
“Now I’m rattled. How did you--?”

“When the Inspector was assigning eyes on the three of ya, made it my business to remember that name--”

“I assure you sir … we’re not criminals--!”

“Such the pity, I was looking forward to giving ya a right good rout.” Maintaining a stone face as Izumo’s expressions cycled through bewilderment, panic and spluttering outrage, he finally bid him, “Relax. We place all high level visitors under surveillance during their stay … for their safety and that of the territory.”

“The three of us, high level? Quite the jokester aren’t you?”

“You’ll find I never joke,” he said planting the flat of his hand to the small of Izumo’s back, “tavern’s this way. Your name stuck with me, not one heard round these parts; I’m fascinated--”

“Hiya Fascinated … I’m Flattered.” Izumo covered his mouth a minute too late. “Sorry, default to stupid jokes when I’m nervous.”

“It’s the badge … when it gets up close, folks get annoyed or skittish. So, the story behind your name?”

Izumo turned to face him, effectively breaking contact, “It means, ‘that one who comes out of the cloud.’ As strangers in a new land, my parents believed it would confer blessing and protection on me; so far, so good. Spent most of my childhood in England, and now,” he smiled, spreading wide his arms to ensure more distance between them, ‘Ta-da’! Here I am again. So, strange moon … strange goings on last night, eh?”

“Sure you’re right. For us constables, when a twelve turns into a twenty hour shift … that’s normal. When we stumble into a rich old guy’s conservatory soaked in blood… that makes things interesting.”

“Do tell.”

They hadn’t made it thirty paces from the station house proper before someone called after them. “Oi! Desk sergeant’s havin’ a hissy fit Mikami! Report missing from yer packet or somethin’--”

“Be there in a minute Sakai,” was barked over his shoulder. “Sorry bout that. I’ll look ya up sometime, maybe we can … conversate over a leisurely dinner.”

“Uh … yeah … sure.” Izumo swore he still felt the patrolman’s eyes boring into his back as he beat a hasty retreat across the plaza. To the inn where they spent their first nights he took refuge. Sitting alone by the big bay windows, he nursed a lukewarm cup of tea, and drank deep from free flowing fountains of gossip.

“… was all a big to-do,” he heard one man say. “Old sage kept snatchin’ Morino’s chestnuts out the campfire--”

“Talk of flames,” someone to his right said, “you know my brother been workin’ with the fire brigade for years; he ain’t never seen the likes of that, ever. Uchiha manor ain’t even gotta foundation left no more … bricks, mortar, everything … dust--”

“And all ’em folks burnt to a crisp,” her companion answered, “a fire come from hell I say… only thing what explains it. Us common folk beware … the gods is purgin’ the land--”
“Could be fact, I hear the constables finally busted up that gang of pickpockets, thank the gods, used to hold money in my teeth when I went market day...”

And yet another explained, “Shinji’s on the warpath ... had a huge fall out with the peelers over to the station this morning. Can’t blame him. He coulda pulled the procession if’n his wagons and such hadn’t got stole--”

“Weren’t your grandson workin’ for him last night?”

“Aye; we’ll hear his side on it directly. That boy mooches a breakfast from here every day, bless his heart. Aint seen him yet though, must be havin’ a lie in after workin’ into the wee hours ...”

Just as their conversations turned to the mundane, Izumo spied Iruka coming down the road apiece. Dropping a few coins beside his empty cup, he rises to prevent the other man at the inn’s cafe entrance.

“Wow... color me three shades wrong! Just knew you and your constable pal were off doing your thing. Do I have time to nick in for a cup of tea?”

“You don’t and excuse me for spoiling your alone time,” he grumbled steering Iruka by his elbow.

“What’s with you? Crap ... bad news isn't it?”

“Depends which end of the telescope you’re on--”

“How’s that?”

“Never mind … keep walkin.’ You’re in an uncharacteristically ebullient mood, I take it things went well with Sai?”

“Finding out you’re not insane does that to a person. Funny … think you know somebody--”

Forking fingers through his hair, guilty thoughts obliterate the remainder of Iruka’s words. “Say again?”

“Do pay attention. I said, the backbone of a plan; we’ll flesh it out this evening.”

They continue along the mall in silence, stopping now and again to press their noses against pastry shop windows when not dodging delivery men.

“Why is everyone in such a hurry this morning?”

“Who knows?” Izumo shrugged as he looked down at the path, “Maybe something in the air--”

“About that,” Iruka said yanking him from the path of another reckless pushcart driver, “whatever's in the air seems to be affecting you as well. I need you clear headed for this meeting, so go on … spill.” Finding the cobblestone path far more interesting, Izumo simply shook his head. “Honestly, it’s like pulling hen’s teeth. Did something weird happen between you and your man … cause you made a face when I brought it up before--?”

“It wasn’t weird, and he’s not my man!”

“Okay… thought that was a simple question, why are you shouting?”

“Because,” he jabbed his hands in his pockets, “I did something incredibly stupid, alright?”
“Look who we live with; if that doesn’t make us experts at fixing stupid, I don’t know what does.”

“It’s embarrassing--”

“We said no more secrets. I promise not to laugh,” he crossed his heart, “talk.”

After kicking a clod of dirt to dust, Izumo admitted, “My contact has a name and our meeting went left from the start. The information I gave you? Pieced together from conversations at the station house and the inn--”

“So what? The best intel is gathered that way--”

“And ... your big mouthed friend,” he inhaled a deep breath and blew it out slow, “he was right about that officer all along.”

“You know Tetsu ... he knows things. Still not seeing the problem--”

“Fine! I may have accidentally ... , he might have thought ... that I was, edgin’ up on him or somethin,’ understand now?”

“Yes, and so does everyone else within earshot. Zumo, I’m sure he didn’t think you were flirting with him--”

“Wanna bet?” Glancing around to make sure no one was eavesdropping this time, he whispered, “Said he was gonna look me up … wants to have dinner sometime--”

“Again, let’s take a breath and think this through. Based on what we both heard, it was a hectic night for the constables, yes? Maybe this guy just enjoyed having someone bright and cheerful around to take his mind off everything about last night--”

“Maybe.”

“It’s a workable theory so let’s run with it. First, settle yourself. I doubt he’ll come looking for you, but, should he come calling, just speak plain. Then again,” Iruka rubbed at his chin, “timing is everything--”

“Now what are you on about?”

“I mean, things could take a horrible turn. Who would blame the man for being angry if you wait until after he springs for dinner to dump him?”

A rabbit punch to the shoulder left Iruka grimacing. “Laugh that off wise ass--”

“I’m sorry, okay?”

“No, you aren’t--”

“Fine, I’m not. But if you could’ve seen the look on your face just now … you woulda done the same thing if the situation were reversed--”

“Begone, false friend--!”

“Least you’re laughing, wouldn’t do to have you meet Lady Tsunade with a sour puss--”

“That’s the other thing,” Izumo stopped in his tracks, “I think we oughta leave Hatake’s name out the discussion--”
“Why? It’s only the whole point of the meeting. How are we supposed to tell her about what happened if we don’t mention his involvement?”

“Say you woke up with a rash around your throat and that thing on your chest--”

“What? Zumo, we’re either gonna tell her the truth, or we might as well turn around and go home.”

“Sounds like a plan--”

“Nothing doing. I know you remember the Governor and I used to meet on the regular. We’d pass the time talking about my father’s work and all the while, she not so subtly tried to convince me to make peace with Hatake--”

“Yeah, I remember. That was then.”

He clapped him on the shoulder and smiled, “I got a good feeling about this ... she’ll believe me.”

“And if she doesn’t?”

Recherché

“How many times I needta tell ya? Yeah, I gotta snootful, so what? More than capable of executing the functions of this office and performing my sworn duties; military taught me that much--”

“Not very comforting Inspector--”

“That’s it ... out you go!”

“Nope. Ain’t going nowheres till you prove you can walk a straight line.”

“You’re a gargantuan pain in my ass... ya know that ‘date?’

“It’s my job … I got younger sibling syndrome--”

“Then we should get the hell outta here before I make myself an only child.” As was his habit of late, Ibiki reached into his top desk drawer and scooped up the dog-eared police report from London before leaving. As they maneuver the crowded squad room, Idate remained at his elbow, nattering on about something or another. Finally, out into the cool morning breeze as they stood on the constabulary’s stoop, the mental fog lifted long enough for him to see Umino and Kamizuki coming down the lane toward the plaza. The hell are they doing in town?

“… had a nerve to look at me like I was nuts, ya believe that? Hey,” he poked him, “old man … I’m talkin’ to ya! Biki? You look like a bird dog on point; what’s up?”

“Nothing ... old friends on the edge of the plaza. Reckon I oughta mosey over and say howdy--”

“Mosey …. howdy? Sure you’re okay big fella?”

Ibiki nodded, never turning his gaze from the two men blending in with the crowd. Climbing into the buckboard, Idate paused, “Offer’s still on the table if you wanna come up--”

“Get … fore Tsume comes to collect ya,” he absently shooed him away. “See ya when I see ya.” When he was sure his brother wouldn’t turn back, Ibiki started wading through the plaza; a watchful eye on his targets making their way toward the Complex.

What are these buffoons are up to this time?
The bent and twisted old man slowly rose from his meager table as Jiraiya forced his way into the domicile. “Greetings, good sir. How may I be of assistance?”

The void between them spanned in the course of three breaths. “Lord Sakumo’s writings speak of a detriment to Lord Kakashi. You will guide me to it.”

“Ah yes; the impediment which lies in the bosom of our origins … the Land of Lightning. Alas, Lord Sakumo never provided its precise location, nor defined what manner of thing it was.”

“You dare lie to me? I know you have the maps!” Grabbing hold the man by his throat, Jiraiya lifted him to eye level. “And I also know, the secrets of the ancients are not withheld from your knowledge--”

“My Lord,” he spluttered, “I know of its existence … but I swear, never was its substance made known … I was forbidden to inquire!”

“Silence! When I return this evening, you will produce what I desire … or suffer my wrath!”

Unceremoniously dropped to the floor, the shaman lay in a heap when Jiraiya disappeared in an angry puff of acrid black smoke.

“See,” he sighed as they pressed inside the building, “told you this was a bad idea. We should come back later--”

“Ain’t gonna get none better,” the man behind them supplied, “assessment week.”

“As I’ve no intention of standing around here all morning … Zumo, you trust me?”

“Not when you got that look in your eye--”

“Come along.” Grabbing him by the wrist, they cut a swath through the crowd, heading straight for the reception desk where Iruka tapped the countertop with authority. “Good morning, we're here to see Lady Tsunade.”

“My apologies sir,” the clerk offered with a tight smile, “but this day dawned on a land in mourning. As such, all non-essential meetings with the Governor are cancelled until further notice.”

“I curse our timing and extend condolence, however, after traveling considerable distance, I hope you understand that we refuse dismissal. I’ll thank you to fetch her assistant.”

“But sir--”

“Now, please … thank you.”

Slamming her pencil to the counter she left her post mumbling, “Waste of time; she’s gonna tell ya the same thing!”

“I’ve two points of concern,” Izumo said as the rotund clerk stomped away, “given the circumstances, you realize Lady Tsunade won’t be in the frame of mind to humor us--?”

“Way to stay positive--”
“Guess anxiety in the air is having an effect on you too; Umino Iruka making a scene … sure you’re all right buddy?”

“Never better. It’s the squeaky wheel that gets the grease--”

“Or … it gets replaced--”

“Shush, I know what I’m doing.”

Ibiki chuckled to himself as he peeked round the corner of the welcome area reserved for dignitaries, *They got stones … and they’re about to get crushed.*

Wasn’t long before the clerk emerged from a side office with a haggard looking Shizune in tow.

“Ah, morning, Dr. Umino … Mr. Kamizuki. As I’m sure you already know, the Governor isn’t taking--”

“Is she in the building?”

“Yes sir, but--”

“Wonderful. Lady Tsunade and I have been discussing a specific medical issue for months; it has finally reached a point where she must intervene. You and the clerk informed us her schedule is clear, that means she has time for us--”

“Now see here,” she said as Iruka rounded the counter, “you can’t just barge in and expect her to--!”

“My good woman, what I expect, is for the Governor to meet and hold fast obligations made,” came out slam-bang, “You will conduct us to her office … now!”

The clamorous room fell quiet as those gathered attended their conversation with itching ears.

“If you insist, Dr. Umino,” she hissed emphasis on his title, “right this way.” Once ushered into the outer conference room, the facade of arrogance shattered; a blitz of apologies fall on deaf ears as Iruka pled for a few minutes of the Governor’s time.

“I understand, however, Lady Tsunade gave strict orders not to be disturbed. So unless you can prove this is a bona fide emergency, I’ll have to ask you to leave.”

“Miss Shizune, it isn’t an emergency, but it is imperative we speak with her … our situation is dire.”

Sighing, she cast a final glance between the sincere Umino and sincerely confused Kamizuki.

“Gonna regret this later, but her private office is straight down that hallway. I hereby absolve myself of responsibility for whatever happens once you knock on that door.”

**Recherché**

Through the heavy oaken door, he hears him pacing the room. A breath to reaffirm purpose, another to settle himself. “My Lord … a moment,” he said as the hinges creak upon themselves.

“Jiraiya … impeccable timing. I've a bothersome situation.”

To the center of the room he came, kneeling as Master ascended to his bed. “My Lord?”

“It’s Maito,” he sighed as he sat down, “surly, disobedient...finding new ways of getting himself into mischief. I’ve talked to him Jiraiya, thrashed him and even chastised him; nothing seems to work. Tell me, does a blood red moon negatively affect those of your kind?”
“It’s only known effects are marked increases in our physical strength and libido, which might be part of the problem. One good rut … he’ll be fine. But I too have noticed a churlishness in his manner of late. What sort mischief is he getting up to?”

Master folded his arms over his chest, “Take this morning for example. I went looking for the laboratory key and couldn’t help noticing several books and scrolls in Father’s private library were disturbed. Very unlike Maito to do something like that.”

“Yes … but he is not at fault my Lord; that was my doing and the reason I came to speak with you. If the Hatake are to rule over the Five Great Nations, we must first prepare for war--”

“Correct. Yet another thing that robs me of rest,” he sighed. “With each full moon my army enlarges … full of recreants, no doubt. You’re determining the verity of their allegiance?”

“As we speak Master, vetting is in progress. Now then, back to Lord Sakumo’s writings. I hoped to find information useful to weaken neighboring numina. Naturally,” he said fumbling about in the pouch slung over his chest, “your father had that bit covered.” Rising, he ascends the first step of Master’s bed; bowing low, he presents a scroll upon cupped palms. “I added current troop strengths just this morning.” Upon returning to his original place, he continued, “Lord Sakumo identified strongholds cast over each of the Four Nations. Sloth and gluttony in the Land of Earth, envy and greed in the Land of Wind, and lust reigns over the Land of Water. Pride, is the regime of the Land of Fire. As you know my Lord, strongholds are in fact, weaknesses to each of these numina.” He waited quietly as Master scanned the information provided. “Since I found no conclusive information about the Land of Lightning, I also paid a visit to the shaman of the woods. Enfeebled of mind, he was not much help. Still, you hold in your hands a systematic plan of conquest. With your permission, I will travel to the Land of Lightning--”

“ Denied,” the Master said without looking up, “at least… temporarily--”

“Lord Kakashi … time is of the essence--!”

“Of this, I am aware.”

“And are you also aware that everything I do is in tribute to the memory of my friend … your father?” The slight taken in stride, Master cut his eyes at his servant as he went on, “Each day we defer the gathering of intelligence, we give advantage to our enemies.”

“I believe I said, this journey of yours is postponed; I’ve need of your skills here in Konoha--”

“Emperor Meiji’s intent to unite Japan is forcing our hand; with rapidity must we move--”

“You would speak to me as one ignorant?”

“Never … simply affirming I’ve a better grasp of what should be our priority--”

“I see, this malady of disrespect and rebellion only afflicts the lycanthropic mind--”

“Neither is true of me, Lord Kakashi. Even as I beg forgiveness, you must allow me speak unbounded.”

Master nodded, “You’re advised to pay heed your tone.”

“Thank you. While I anticipate victory, to ensure it, three things are necessary; a supreme commander to strategize, a general to implement said strategy and an army to bring to fruition those plans conceived by their commander--”
“By whose authority are you promoted to the rank of General?”

“Lord Hatake Kama bestowed that honor long ago. I shoulder the mantle again, because neither you nor Maito have ever seen war. Inexperience is a handicap we can ill afford. While you are indeed a brilliant strategist, you still need someone out there in the trenches to lead your army—”

“Point taken. You’ve lived through tumultuous times Jiraiya. I rest assured you’ve learned from mistakes made in the past—”

“Lord Kama, fiercest of all the Hatake, also desired rule over the Five Great Nations and would have, had not an enemy attenuated his strength through that which he held dear. My Lord you’ve made yourself vulnerable to the same sort attack ... for the sake of your father, I will not stand idle watching your desire wither on the vine.”

The shaman used the same word when he spoke to Maito ... interesting. “Then how fortunate am I to have you fighting with, not against us. And at the risk of thrice repeating myself, you will be released to the Land of Lightning after completing the task I have for you. Are we understood?”

Through gritted teeth his servant replied, “As you wish my Lord.”

“Now then, back to Maito ... any recommendations?”

“Tis a delicate balance. Creatures like him, require firm handed guidance and swift correction that he might learn. But since you’ve made a disgusting habit of coddling him, I believe these acts of disobedience are a cry for structure and discipline—”

“You’re wrong ... I’ve been too strict. Allowing Maito off the leash more frequently might help expend pent-up energy. Besides, a good rut never hurt anybody.

Excellent suggestion Jiraiya, you're dismissed, for now.”

Recherché

Are you kiddin’ me?

Ducking behind a pillar, Kotetsu held his breath. The hell’s he doing here? I been tracking this guy all morning and now, here you come?

“There you are,” he heard Genma say. “Thank your Master for saving me a trip; never woulda got the procession squared away if it weren’t for you guys. Pretty resourceful for cloistered monks--”

“Master will be pleased. You’ll pardon me sir ... I’ve several matters to attend, as I’m sure you do.”

“Right, carry on.”

Remaining in place until the sound of hard soled footsteps faded, Kotetsu nearly jumped out of his skin when Michio appeared at his elbow.

“Come quickly sir!”

Recherché

NOTES:

Commiserate (archaic): feel, show or express pity for someone.
Console: alleviate or lessen the grief, sorrow or disappointment of; give solace or comfort.

Gild (archaic): to make red as with blood.

Barbarity: brutal or vicious acts.

Jodhpurs: full-length trousers worn for horseback riding, that are close-fitting below the knee with reinforced patches on the inside of the leg.

Mikami: "something bestowed from above (from one’s superior or a deity).

Kazuhiko: “respectable man, has both wit and virtue.

Rout: find or get by searching or rummaging.

Prevent (archaic): make impossible for someone to do something.

Ebullient: overflowing with fervor, enthusiasm, or excitement; high-spirited.

Mall: a large area, usually lined with trees and shrubbery used as a public walk or promenade.

Condolence: sympathy with another in sorrow.

Slam-bang: with noisy violence.

Peelers (archaic): police officers.

Chastise (archaic): to restrain or to inflict punishment on, as by whipping.

Vetting: thoroughly investigating someone, especially to determine if they are suitable for a job requiring secrecy, loyalty or trustworthiness.

Buckboard: an open, four wheeled, horse drawn carriage with seating attached to a plank stretching between the front and rear axles.

Rut: a periodic recurring state of certain male animals during which behavior associated with the urge to breed is displayed.

Snootful: enough alcoholic drink to make one drunk.

Recreant: unfaithful, traitorous; (archaic): cowardly.

Regime: In politics, a regime is the form of government or set of rules, cultural or social norms that regulate operation of a government or institution and its interactions with society. A system of rules that control something.

Stronghold: a place dominated by a particular group or marked by a particular characteristic. A demonic stronghold represents spiritual powers which keep captive these particular characteristics in the minds of people who accept them as accurate ways of thinking about or doing something.

Lycanthropy, from the Greek (lykanthropia - wolf-man), originally applied to the transformation of persons (witches) into wolves. One capable of assuming the form of a wolf while retaining human intelligence. In Greek mythology, the story of Lycaon supplies one of the earliest examples of a werewolf legend. According to one form of it, Lycaon was transformed into a wolf as a result of eating human flesh; one of those who were present at periodical sacrifice on Mount Lycaon was said to suffer a similar fate. Werewolves, which have their origin in English folklore, are human beings
that have been changed into humanoid wolves whereas lycans are humanoid wolves. Both the lycan and werewolf possess great superhuman powers, agility, speed, regenerative abilities, coordination, and have excellent tracking abilities. Werewolves and lycans have almost the same physical strength. Unlike the werewolf, lycans are said to be smarter. When compared to a werewolf, a lycan is a bit more muscular. While a lycan is said to be religious, a werewolf represents witchcraft. Lycans are more difficult to kill than werewolves. To kill a lycan, one would have to sever the spine from its body. They cannot be killed using silver. On the other hand, a werewolf can be killed with silver objects piercing them in the head or the heart.

Cloistered: kept away from the outside world; sheltered.
Standing before the gateway to the Governor, Izumo cast a final glance over his shoulder. “Didn’t seem that far away when we were sitting back there. You know, we don’t have to do this today—”

“It’s gonna be fine … just let me do all the talking, okay?” The first knock, timid, the second, with the same confidence shown at the front desk. Just as he thought to put more force behind the third attempt, there came the sound of angry footsteps.

With a whoosh, the entryway swings open;
the physical manifestation of a dark and stormy night taking up space between the side jambs.

“Damn it Shizune … said I didn’t want--!

“Iruka?”

“Lady Governor! I mean … Madam Tsunade, um, have we problem… medical--”

“You're trying to tell me something, aren't ya?”

“Yes ma'am,” Izumo translated, ”we apologize for intruding at a difficult time, but we’ve encountered a situation which--”

“Perfect, just what I need this morning--”

“Right ...got it,” he attempts to pull Iruka away, “we won’t trouble you further.”

"You misunderstand." Gone was the glower, her countenance instantly bright, "I meant, I needed distraction ...this is perfect! Bit of a jumble in there, excuse the mess. Misplaced something in the midst a research project ... you know how it is.” They remain frozen in place, gazing past her to the depredated room beyond. “Yes, it looks a war zone, but it's quite safe … I promise.” Despite her reassurances, still they refuse to budge. “Come now,” she said pulling them clear the threshold by the wrists, "this is ridiculous." Easing between them, she stoops and retrieves the heavy tetsubin sitting beside the door. “When did she bring this one? Like it matters ... can I interest you gentlemen in a cup of tea?”

“None for me.” He reaches out at the last second, keeping Iruka from stumbling over a pyramid of discarded cushions, “and I think, Iruka should decline as well--”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

"Just sayin,’ it’s clear you've gone over the limit for this morning--”

“Really, Zumo?”

“Does seem a tad jumpy, doesn't he?”

“Ma’am, I am not jum--”

“I should probably stop drinking too, but it's the only thing keeping my eyes open at the moment--”

“Okay,” he sighed, ”have we finished … whatever this is?”
“Step lively gents,” she nudges them forward, "and Umino, lighten up. Chairs before my desk should be free of papers and such ... go on.”

Still tongue tied, a slightly miffed Iruka manages, “Hatake’s soiree … my fellows and I were there--”

“As if I forgot?” She laughed, stepping around them and setting the kettle on a side table. “Iruka, you were the only dance partner I had who was light on my feet.”

“I, um ... thank you?” He looked to Izumo who shook his head whispering, “The other one.”

“Speaking of the other ... where is--?”

“Numerous errands to attend this morning.” Chuckling at himself for the stutter steps taken around tiny molehills of slick scraps of paper, Izumo quickly recovers, "Imagine he's checking and clearing the traps around the cabin or picking up supplies at the … market--”

“Of course, Hagane, the hunter/gatherer. Well then, it's gonna be like admiring a triptych shy a panel. Please, be seated. What can I do for--?”

“Something extraordinary happened to me last night,” Iruka blurted out, “there was this woman who--”

“So that's your big announcement ...no wonder you're a nervous wreck--"

"Huh?"

"I'm thrilled for you," she gave him a little wink, "met that special someone eh--?"

“She was special all right--”

“Shush, Zumo.”

“Good thing the laws changed,” she nodded for them to take their seats, “I declare, marrying into nobility these days is far less restrictive than it used to be.” She took her seat saying, "Don't worry, I’ll be happy to vouch for your character Iruka--”

“Me … marry? No--!"

“Ma'am, I feel the need to clarify. You see, sometime after meeting this woman, Iruka took ill and collapsed--”

“Oh my goodness … come, let me examine you--”

“Unnecessary.” Her attempt to rise cut short as Izumo continued, “Checked him out before we left the party, again when we got home and first thing this morning--”

“Your findings, Mr. Kamizuki?”

“Exanthem resolved without intervention, no inflammation of the tonsils or adenoids and he wasn’t febrile--”

“Simple allergic reaction it sounds to me. Last night’s buffet featured several unusual delicacies, any one of which could have--”

“I ate nothing during the party, didn’t have time to because--”
“No other symptoms lingered or presented for him this morning Mr. Kamizuki?”

When Izumo shook his head, she turned her focus to the other man, “I’m confused. Iruka, do you have a medical complaint or don’t you?”

“Yes ma’am … sort of. It’s my chest—”

“I see, so the torso is where the skin eruptions appeared?” She again looked to Izumo, “Did he experience shortness of breath ... were there any prolonged coughing spells, with or without sputum-?”

“It’s ... kinda complicated. We pray patience, asking only you withhold judgment until the tale is told.”

Recherché

Since Shizune returned to the desk area minus Umino and Kamizuki quite some time ago, Ibiki assumed it was safe to proceed. Slipping past the clerks, he quietly shut the door of the outer conference room behind him. Heading straight for the cupboard where a pitcher was usually kept he thought, Right, just need a few minutes to get myself and this story together. Alas was the cupboard bare. Figures ... first time I didn’t wanna use it as a chaser. He took to pacing about the room to settle himself. A plausible reason is what I need. Wait a minute! This is an active investigation ... I’m the Chief Inspector; I go where I damn well please, and I will, he thinks quite satisfied with himself, but first, he totters over to an available chair, gotta wait for the damn room to stop spinnin.’

Recherché

“Very well,” she leaned back in the chair, “I’m intrigued. So, this mystery woman that you definitely aren’t marrying, was she in any way responsible for the contact dermatitis on your--?”

“Yes, indirectly and no, there never was a rash on my chest.”

“Hold on a minute. Kamizuki claims you had a skin eruption … somewhere on your body,” she rubbed at her temples, “you’re disputing that now?”

“Again, my apologies. Should have related my half of this saga in the first place.” Iruka cut his eyes at him as Izumo pressed on, “An old woman approached him, they talked for a while and then left the main ballroom together. He returned not ten minutes later, alone. After dancing with you, mingling with the other guests, he then disappeared into the crowd. Soon thereafter, servants told us he’d collapsed and was recovering in a salon. When we got there, Iruka was propped up in a chair, slightly disoriented; he had these strange looking reddish blotches around his throat. We left for home approximately ten minutes later.”

“Thank you Mr. Kamizuki; nothing beats a little clarity.”

Recherché

Head still pounding, stomach contemplating an ugly upheaval, Ibiki had not the strength to raise his eyes when the door creaked open.

“Oh! Didn’t see you come in Inspector.”

“Hadta check on Lady Tsunade,” he lied. “Didn’t wanna sit out there with the general public because … well, you know--”
Of course.” One step closer to his seat, the bloodshot eyes, the heavy bags under his eyes and downward slope of his shoulders said everything he wouldn't. “Are you not feeling well sir?”

“Just overtired ... was a long night.”

“As you say. The Governor is taking a meeting presently ... shouldn’t last much longer. In the meantime, allow me fetch something for your um, lethargy.”

“I’d be much obliged.”

“Blast!” The snap of her fingers when she turned about, was as a hot ice pick through his brain. “Sorry ... just remembered why I came in here in the first place.” Light glinting off the chain dangling from her fingers hurt his eyes. “Would you mind giving this to Lady Tsunade? Carpenters found it between slats of the rostrum.”

“Miss Shizune, you’re a lifesaver--”

“So I’ve been told. Be right back.”

Recherché

“Izumo’s account was indeed succinct, yet woefully incomplete--”

“Told from his perspective, I expected nothing less dear. I trust you’ll fill in the blanks?”

Her smile and open posture, disarming. Once again, he looks to Izumo for the confidence to continue. “Right … though seen of many, I was actually having an encounter with the master of the manor--”

“Please don’t tell me you got into an argument with Lord Hatake?”

“Words were exchanged and yes ... it was a hostile confrontation. But after what he did--”

“By the gods Iruka! You are the most vexatious, hardheaded man I’ve ever--!”

“True, now will you let me finish … please?”

Arms hastily folded beneath her bosom, she sunk back in the chair. “Finish!”

Recherché

The tea and tablets, their work begun, jumbled thoughts fall into alignment as he reacquaints himself with the police report. Gonna wait until they leave; easier to talk sense to her without their constant interruptions. Then again, a spirited debate, striking them down point for point might be to my favor. Alright, he decides, returning his pocket watch to its place, I’ll give ‘em five more minutes.

Recherché

The atmosphere takes on a stifling heat as their intense stare down continues; once more Izumo slips into the role of referee. “Iruka, have a breath... consider to whom you are speaking. Madam Governor, take none offense … consider the level of trust he has in you.”

Tsunade sucked at her teeth and looked away. Clearing his throat, Iruka lowered his voice and continued, “I went with the old woman to find her purse in a cloakroom. When she opened an armoire, something reached out of it and … abducted me--”
He scooched forward in his seat, “What I have to say next is difficult enough. I’ll never get through it if you continually interrupt--!”

“Then, get to the point!”

Mordant was the “Thank you,” which escaped his lips. “She pushed me through the armoire and while I was falling into a black hole, I watched her take on my appearance--”

“Alright ... note to self; never to go off in cloakrooms with strange old women you meet at parties--”

“Skepticism and sarcasm … entertaining and unproductive.”

“Pardon?”

“When me and Tetsu heard this story, we thought he had a screw loose too. However, I can now say with certainty, the ‘Iruka’ you thought you were dancing with, was in fact ... a doppelgänger.”

“Well ... first time for everything I reckon.”

“May as well get your giggles and snorts out now,” Iruka snapped, “just gonna get weirder from here on out.”

The room lay silent for a beat as she rolled her eyes and righted herself in the chair. “Do please go on.”

Mirroring her actions, Iruka looked her square in the eye, “I found myself chained to a wall in a dungeon like place, where I was met by two ... creatures--”

“Creatures you say?”

“I do say. One of them drew blood from the axillary artery with a syringe, and then ... it bit me. I passed out after it seared my flesh with--”

“And we’re stopping again. Iruka, how does this event figure into a confrontation with Lord Hatake?”

“Ma’am ... Lord Hatake was--”

“Leave it,” Izumo whispered, tapping Iruka’s knee with his own. “Before he answers, I need you to know, one half hour elapsed from the time the real Iruka left the ballroom and when the servants found us--”

“And did they say how he came to be unconscious?”

He shook his head, “Found him collapsed in the um, toilet area--”

“Finally,” she heaved a breath, “a medical issue I can work with.” Fingers steeple before her lips; an incline of the head bids Izumo pay heed. “Vasovagal syncope, ever heard of it? Common occurrence in men his age--”

“Quite right ma’am ... triggers for these episodes range from something simple as skipping meals, dehydration, standing for long periods of time, urinating or ... having a bowel movement--”

“I’m impressed, Mr. Kamizuki... well done.”
He dipped his head to hide blushing cheeks. “While I can’t speak to other things which happened outside our presence, Tetsu and I saw the rash across the skin of his throat with our own eyes. My initial examination revealed no puncture wounds or abrasions in that area, so I too assumed an allergic reaction--”

“Ahem. At the risk of interrupting this delightful litany of embarrassment … mind if we get back on track?”

“By all means Iruka. Tell me true. How many alcoholic beverages did you consume before encountering these … creatures?”

“I wasn’t drunk, if that’s what you’re implying.” He looked to his cousin, “Okay, fine, I had one drink; Absinthe based--”

“And, taken on an empty stomach,” Izumo added.

Recherché

The allotted time long since expired, he stood collecting his wits. A bellyful of ginger tea, a mind clear and the netsuke in his pocket, Ibiki pressed onward to the Governor’s office. Standing at the door, fist poised to knock, he falters. Bits and pieces of their muffled conversation drew him close. With ear shamelessly pressed into the wood, he catches the tail end of Iruka’s admission. That explains everything. A huge grin on his lips, he strides away, knowing she would surely chew them out for wasting her time with tales of their drunken escapades.

Recherché

“You can stop helping now, Zumó … thanks. Yes, I was admittedly tipsy, but not completely intoxicated. As to the other thing,” he said reaching into his jacket pocket, “I had an artist friend make a sketch of it.” He carefully unfolded a slip of paper, giving it a final look before sliding it across the desktop. “That, is what’s burned into my flesh.”

With a flick of her finger, the scrap of paper was shot back his way.

“You do know that’s a drawing of the Hatake family crest, right? For heaven sake Iruka … thought you’d abandoned this foolishness?”

Again he cut his eyes at Izumo, who was trying desperately not to say, ‘I told you so.’ Expecting beratement continue, Iruka lifted his head as the Governor abruptly changes course.

“Reckon it makes sense; damn thing was emblazoned on the foyer floor, etched into the glass and silverware, and worn as a badge by all the servants. And, given the known effects of Absinthe, not surprising you’d think it wound up on your chest too--”

“This is neither foolishness, nor a trick of my imagination. I swear before the gods above … that thing, is burned into the flesh over my heart! I’ve no reason to fritter away your time or lie--”

“I’ve heard enough; let me see this … thing--”

“Can’t!”

“What?” Tsunade had this weird look on her face, “You’d have me believe it magically appeared long enough for your friend to sketch it and then ‘POOF,’ it vanished?”

“No ma’am. I described it; he drew it--”
“Iruka … think carefully about what you’re saying. Last chance to--”

“I will not renege what I know to be truth!”

Rocketing forward in her seat, she shouted, “Show me your chest, now!”

Iruka pulls himself taller, “Can’t! I’m the only one who can see it, hence the rendering.”

Slowly leaning back, forearms draped on the bolsters and sinister smirk in place, her voice was calm. “You’re in luck; I love a challenge. You do want me to believe you, correct?”

Izumo shrugged his shoulders, “Go on. Might as well get it over with.”

With a huff, so begins the process and as he dithers about, she cautions, “Don’t let these kind eyes and gentle smile fool you; I won’t hesitate to strip ya down if necessary.” She was rounding the desk as she spoke; in a blink, she stood by his side while he fumbled with the last shirt button. Hard not to flinch away, her breath ghosting over his skin when she leaned in for a closer look.

“All I see are freckles and some very fine brown hairs around the areola.” Her fingers were already moving across his flesh, “Mind if I palpate the area?”

“No like I can stop ya,” he grumbled to the other man’s amusement.

Her methodical, rough handed examination reminded Izumo of Tadashi’s manner; he stifled a chuckle as Iruka ascended to new heights of mortification under her touch.

“You insist something was burned into your flesh, yet I felt nothing unusual.” She looked over their heads to a cabinet on the other end of the room, “Don’t you worry none… I’ve got just the thing. Jacket and shirt, Dr. Umino … kindly remove them.”

Recherché

“I must concede … Jiraiya was right. He left a while ago after accusing me of imposing harsh restrictions on you. He believes my actions were the impetus for your, and I quote, ‘recent churlish’ behavior--”

“My Lord, ‘tis blatant falsehood--!”

“Be still Maito and look upon me.” Anger diminishes, comprehension increases as he’s drawn into the swirling vortex of Master’s left eye. “Now that you understand, I have a task for you. The shaman of the woods has sustained injury; you will tend his wounds and discover the crux of their conversation.”

“Consider it done, Master.”

“Excellant. I hereby grant thee brief respite. From this moment until the tsuya concludes, go, eat your fill … rut, to your heart’s content,” he said as the collar of Maito’s subjection disappeared, “only change not your face … understood?”

“Grant thy servant of your strength.”

Halfway up the stairs and moments from liberty, Maito turned about. To the place of secret he ran, gathering up the vials delivered for his safekeeping.

Recherché
While Iruka sat shivering, Lady Tsunade unlocks the cupboard. Glass bottles clink and jars of clay clank as she roots through its contents. “I’ll be damned,” she said shaking a small jar, “thought sure I had more. Reckon it must needs suffice.” She turned about with an armload of supplies; mortar and pestle, flannels, jars of dried herbs, clays, salts and aromatic oils. “On your feet Iruka … there’s work needs doing.”

At the mention of his name he shifts in the chair, eyes the size of saucers. “What are you going to do to me?”

“Hush now dear. Mr. Kamizuki, fetch the tetsubin … should still be hot enough.”

“The hell,” he grabbed at Izumo’s arm, “is she gonna scald me?”

Instructing Izumo to, “Explain it to the good doctor;” she neatly arranges the supplies before them on the desktop.

“Iruka … the hotter the water, the quicker the activation of the ingredients. If the water isn’t warm enough, Lady Tsunade intends compensation by raising your body temperature.”

“What?”

Chunky grains of multicolored salts clatter against the mortar’s bowl as she presses the pestle into Iruka’s hand. “Make yourself useful. I want these dry ingredients finely ground. There’s a good man, put some muscle into it.” By the time Izumo returns with the tea kettle, she’s emptying a tiny jar of powdered clay into the bowl.

“Don’t think I’ve ever seen that kind before ma’am. What’s it called?”

“Montmorillonite; very effective and extremely difficult to come by these days.”

“Wish I’d thought to make a poultice; could’ve spared ourselves some trouble.”

“Eh, you live and learn. If anything is under the skin’s surface, this stuff should draw it out. Do be careful with this one Iruka. Last thing I need is activated charcoal flying all over my desk.”

Recherché

Stepping foot across the manor’s property line and into the forests beyond, Maito fills his lungs with the fragrance of freedom. Ignoring the pack howls of welcome, he runs through the woods; goal in sight, his Master’s bidding to obey.

Recherché

“A moment of silence,” she begs, when at last the smelly concoction was complete. Covering the bowl with her hands, she bows her head and lifts her voice in prayer. The words unfamiliar, the intent clear.

If this be natural, grant me wisdom to heal. If it be spiritual, grant me purity of heart to rebuke and bind its power over the afflicted.

“Alrighty, good job Iruka … you can sit down now, thank you.” After daubing the mixture and applying a flannel to the area of his chest where he claimed the seal lay, she told them, “It needs binding. On my count, lift your arms while Mr. Kamizuki secures the poultice in place.” Working in tandem, she ties a drape around his waist and Izumo pulls tight the silken wraps.
“Dude, you kinda look like a half finished mummy--”

“Well, I do whatever I can to make you laugh Zumo, but remember ... payback is a--”

“Language,” he sniffed. “Er, ma’am ... how long does it need to stay on?”

“A few minutes only.” Assisting Iruka ease back in the seat, she cautions, “No fidgeting about and don’t touch it--”

“Itches,” he pulled a disgusted face, “starting to burn and ... it stinks!”

“Supposed to … devil’s snare is one of the ingredients; burning sensation means it's working.” Gesturing to the mortar and a flannel, Izumo takes the hint, wiping clean the bowl. Gathering the supplies, she again heads for the cupboard. “You said one of those ... creatures bit you. I’m gonna send you home with blood purifying teas; no sense you going septic on us. Let’s see, Burdock and dandelion root, a smidgen of red clover, ah, sheep sorrel, chaparral and Reishi mushrooms … that oughta do it.”

“Thank you ma’am but, I already--”

“No buts, sit still and be quiet. While we’re waiting, several of your earlier statements warrant review. Tell me more about this ... dungeon.”

Recherché

Pacing back and forth near the sideboard, Ibiki couldn’t stop wondering, *Hell’s taking so long? That’s it … one more glass of water and I’m gonna bust in there!*  

Recherché

Whether the line of questioning or heat generated by the poultice, Iruka sat a perspiring mess as Tsunade went on a search and find mission in her top desk drawer. “Time’s up! Mr. Kamizuki, release the bindings, clean the area and let’s see what we got.” They held their breaths as there in bas-relief against reddened skin was the image of a right facing quadruped on its hind legs. Floating above its head was what appeared to be one half of a braided crown.

“I’ll be damned, it is Hatake’s--!”

"Mr. Kamizuki,” she said coming around the desk, “let’s not jump to conclusions. I know of at least five families who have dogs, coyotes or mountain lions as part of their kamons--”

“Ma’am, that’s obviously a wolf,” Iruka countered, “matches the drawing--!”

“Obvious to you perhaps, to me, it’s an unspecified quadruped.” Once again, her breath blows warm over his skin while she examines every detail with her magnifying glass. “The only thing we’ve conclusively proven is, an image lies beneath the skin’s surface.”

Leaving Izumo to apologize for doubting him, Tsunade walks over to the littered conference table, fetching a small book. “Guess he wasn’t insane as first I thought--”

“No need for name calling--”

“Not you dear,” she sighed, “one of my ancestors. Soon after Konoha became a settlement, landholders took to branding the aboriginals with their family kamon. It was meant to ensure loyalty as well as claiming them as property for tax purposes--”
"Geez, talk about barbaric--?"

"Unfortunately," she said, flipping through a few pages, "it was an accepted practice, Mr. Kamizuki. Hmm… know I skimmed over it this morning--"

"Ma’am … the creature did say I belonged to him--"

"What’s that dear? Ah … here it is! She laid the book and magnifying glass before them. “I think we may have a problem.”

“I disagree," Iruka said pulling on his jacket, "your ancestor provides validation for our--"

“Not quite … the branding used back then was apparent to the naked eye; yours isn’t.”

“But still--”

“Even if we pore through the registry of heralds, we might not be able to identify which family this belongs to--”

“Not exactly an obstacle insurmountable,” Izumo said, “the image is inchoate, but if you make more of the poultice, we can reveal the kamon ‘s entirety.”

She shook her head and sighed, “I used the last bits of the main ingredient just now. And before you ask, the apothecary no longer stocks that item. As I told you, Kampo practitioners were stripped of their licenses a few years back; before the law went into effect, I bought up every jar I could get my hands on--”

“Lady Tsunade, it's a simple drawing clay ... surely you can substitute another--”

“‘There is no substitute, that’s why doctors swore by the stuff. Only available from our trade partners in France ... take weeks for an order to get here. Even then, because it’s on the forbidden list of imported goods, I’d need a letter of approval from the Emperor to possess it.”

“Alright, let’s look on the bright side. Judging from what little I just read, you believe us, right?”

“Sorry Iruka … there is much I have to consider.”

Recherché

Patience finally reached her breaking point.

Swiping the empty glass from the table, Ibiki stalks down the hall to the Governor’s office once more. Wasn’t exactly proud of himself, felt a fool for standing there, using an upturned tumbler to amplify their conversation.

Nevertheless …

“Um … Lady Tsunade, I haven’t been completely honest with you--”

"By the gods … there’s more?"

“Yes ma’am." Taking a deep breath and shooting a glance Izumo’s way he started, “The creature that drew blood, bit me and placed this seal--"

"Yes?"
"It was … Lord Hatake Kakashi."

For a split second was the silence deafening; Tsunade dumb struck, her mind struggling to wrap itself around Iruka's words. At the sound of glass shattering in the hallway, the men turn in their seats; the heat of her gaze now burning a path to the unsecured portal.

Suddenly, the door swings open and Ibiki barrels in:

“Bullshit!”

Recherché

Notes:

Depredated: plundered, pillaged.

Triptych: a work of art, divided into three hinged sections. A set of three associated artistic, literary, or musical works intended to be appreciated together. Tsunade compares the boys to a work of art … isn’t that sweet?

Exanthem: a skin eruption that bursts forth or blooms. Typically used to describe a rash that is widespread over the body, symmetric, and red with macules or papules, but without scales. Exanthems are usually caused by viral or bacterial infections, but they can also be caused by drugs, toxins, or autoimmune diseases. Exanthems caused by viruses or bacteria often are part of systemic illness with fever, malaise, and headache. The skin rash is triggered by the body's reaction to a toxin produced by the infecting organism, or the immune response the body mounts to the organism or damage that the organism makes to the skin.

Buffet: a meal consisting of several dishes from which guests serve themselves.

Syncope: medical term for fainting or passing out.

Vasovagal syncope, also known as neurocardiogenic syncope is a temporary loss of consciousness caused by a neurological reflex which produces either sudden dilation (widening) of the blood vessels in the legs or a very slow heart rate or both. It occurs when something triggers the vasovagal reflex causing widespread dilation of blood vessels which makes a large proportion of the body’s blood volume pool in the legs. As a result, blood pressure suddenly drops, temporarily robbing the brain of oxygen and the person faints. Common triggers include having blood drawn, exposure to a traumatic sight or event, a severe coughing spell, hyperventilation or extremely difficult urination or defecation.

Mordant: biting and caustic in manner.

Berate: scold vehemently or at length. Beratement: the act of berating.

Renege (archaic): deny, disown, renounce.

Palpate: examine a part of the body by touch, especially for medical purposes.

Litany: a prolonged or tedious account.

Falter: start to lose strength or momentum. Move unsteadily or in a way that shows lack of confidence.

Montmorillonite: any of a group of clay minerals and their chemical varieties that swell in water.
Montmorillonite minerals are products of volcanism and hydrothermal activity and are composed of hydrous aluminum silicates in the form of extremely small particles. The Montmorillonite name was actually given to a clay found in the Montmorillon area of France. For external use, montmorillonite has been used to treat contact dermatitis.

Devil’s snare, AKA, jimsonweed, thorn apple, moon flower, or stinkweed, is a foul smelling, annual plant in the nightshade family sometimes used in traditional medicine as an analgesic.

Sheep sorrel is believed to purify the liver and cleanse the blood. Chaparral is another blood purifier.

Crux: decisive or most important point at issue.

Settlement: a place; typically one that hitherto had been uninhabited, where people establish a community.

Aboriginal: inhabiting or existing in a land from the earliest times or from before the arrival of colonists; indigenous.

Inchoate: not yet fully developed.

During the Edo period (1600-1868), communities such as the Burakumin (from which Iruka is descended), could not marry outside of their caste. Burakumin were an outcast group at the bottom of the traditional Japanese social order composed of those with occupations considered impure or tainted by death (such as executioners, undertakers, workers in slaughterhouses, butchers, or tanners), which had severe social stigmas of defilement attached to them. They were never allowed to change caste, unlike others who, depending on special circumstances, could move into a different class. Societal views changed slowly, that’s why Tsunade volunteered to vouch for Iruka’s character.
Distemper Untempered Temper

Chapter Notes

Distemper: deranged condition of mind or body; (archaic): political disorder.
Untempered: not moderated or lessened by anything.
Temper: dilute, qualify or soften by the addition or influence of something else; bring to a proper, suitable, or desirable state by or as by blending or admixture.

Poor little Kinoe; curiosity totally wrecks the cat.

Recherché

Indignation kindles like a wildfire in her belly; its flames swiftly rise, and so too does she. “What’s the meaning of this?”

Coming to halt one step behind Iruka’s chair, with face red and jaw tight, Ibiki snaps, “Will forbearance with these charlatans never cease?”

“You’re out of order!”

“So are you … ma’am!”

Governor and Inspector stand astonied, thrown off kilter by anger’s viciousness. And with this unexpected hostility, Iruka and Izumo sit petrified, afeared to move or breathe. The only outward tell of splintering emotions was a lessening of her rigid posture. Recovery peremptory; uncertainty betrays not her voice.

“I assume you’ve come with news of imminent danger inside the territory. If not, you owe us apology and explanation for this—”

“Me? Hah, that's rich.

Actually, it’s unbelievable! You sat there wasting precious time, lapping up their lies, and egging them on like a besotted glassy eyed patron of kabuki theater, and to what end? Why the hell are you giving them free rein to prey on your fears?”

One glance at Iruka who was busy dodging the wildly gesturing arms above his head, she drew in a heated breath. Puffed up and standing flat footed, Izumo nearly startled off his seat when she started reading Ibiki to filth.

“Them? Pfft … what gall!

Bursting in like a ravenous moon bear after hibernation, disrespected my office. You dared eavesdrop, then threw further insult upon myself and my guests, by interjecting your crude opinion on what was, a private conversation. Moreover, coming before one’s superior smelling all the world like a distillery exploded, denigrates one’s position as an officer of the law; in that, you disrespect
“However I spend my time … and with whom I spend it, is none of your concern.

Do. Not. Ever!

Speak to me in that way.

Understood?”

Time stretches forth flinty fingers, striking sparks of anxiety as it pokes and prods everyone in the room. Uneasy quiet continues sinuous movements, unwinding and coiling itself around the main combatants like reinforced battlements, until the clarion call of reason … Izumo’s voice, scores a clean slice through the tension.

“Milady, Inspector … we accomplish nothing with this type discourse. And why risk saying something in a fit of pique, which can never be retracted?”

Ibiki and Tsunade briefly look to one another, then in unison their eyes descend on this would be peacemaker; pent up vitriol flows as a rushing river,

“Hush Kamizuki!”

“Yeah … shut up ya little pantywaist!”

Iruka immediately throws his arm across the other man’s chest, pressing him against the chair’s back, “Zumo, be still,” he whispers, “not your fight.”

“Gwan,” Ibiki remarks over the noise of his knuckles cracking, “… make a move ‘Zumo.’ I’ll be happy to make ya thankful there’s a real doctor in the house--”

“Really? We threatening civilians now? The hell is wrong with--?”

“These men are pathological liars … and this time,” his head dips slightly when he reaches inside his jacket pocket, “I got proof!”

“What? You have actual proof of something? Speak of a unique happenstance.” Ever so gently, her fingertips alight on the desktop, an icy smirk gracing her lips, “Be not quick to paint me with the idiot brush. I know how to eat the meat and spit out the bones.” From where she stood, the gnashing of Ibiki’s teeth was not only distinct, but oddly satisfying. “Why are you even here … did I send for you?”

Abandoning one pocket in favor of another, his fingers make contact with smooth metal and hardened clay. “Thought you might want this.”

From the heights of annoyance, to the depths of stupefaction, remarkable in their eyes was the abrupt shift in her demeanor; all because of the object swinging from the Inspector’s fingers. From bewilderment’s depths to fear’s screaming heights, trepidation bubbles and churns in the pits of their stomachs. Reduced to silence once more, Izumo and Iruka sit hoping for a miracle to break the spell which captivates their advocate.

It would not be so.

As Ibiki swaggered to the side of her desk, explaining how he came into possession of this wondrous thing, it was evident to all Lady Tsunade heard not a word. “I … I never thought to see this again.”
Cupping her hands as if he were delivering life giving water, she persists in wide eyed wonder.

“Okay … what the hell goes on here?”

Ignoring Izumo’s poke in the ribs and his equally pointed query, Iruka is as mesmerized with the Governor, as she is with the necklace. His eyes follow her slow moving fingers as they trace every line and groove of the netsuke. More redoubtable than her seamless reversal, was the cocky grin supplanting Morino’s tight lipped scowl, as if he’d secured a major victory.

This, Iruka could not abide.

“Inspector, we came to Konoha with singular purpose; to rid the land of evil--”

“Correction … you came to Konoha with a picture book Dr. Umino; chock full of mythical creatures and strange notations,” he turned to face them, “your purpose? To lead me and my men on a series of wild goose chases.”

“We sought you out under the misguided impression our goals aligned … you know,” Izumo reminded him, “protecting the people of Konoha?”

“How! By framing an innocent man?”

“Got news for you Inspector … Hatake is neither innocent … nor a man. A demonic entity is what we’re talking about here!”

“Umino! Shut your filthy mouth!”

For a moment, it looked as if the Inspector might vault himself over the desk; instead, he pulled himself together, bent down ear level with the Governor and said,

“I grow weary of their insane ramblings, how bout you, ma’am?”

The whole of her focus on an uncooperative clasp, she looked not his way, “Do be quiet Ibiki.” He went back a step or two when in the next breath, her voice turned shockingly sharp. “What I won’t tolerate much longer, is this asinine pissing contest!” With the netsuke finally in its rightful place, lying cool against the skin of her neck and chest, she warned them, “Take heed your surroundings. This is not some seedy tavern, but the office of the Governor … it will be respected as such.” After slinking back to stand beside Iruka’s chair, the three of them shamefacedly avoid her gaze. “Listen up hard legs, from this moment forward, we’re going to have an intelligent discussion, without accusations, name calling or raised voices. We clear?”

Recherché

Inordinately pleased with himself, Kinoe looked around a final time. Unusual, he thought, for a room without windows, this was a place of brightness. Centuries old bric-a-brac dotted the shelves, meticulously embroidered pillows adorn plump cushioned chairs; a miscellany of portraits, some with faces familiar and many others not, these hung on pristine imitation leather walls. Over in one corner, the artist’s easel stood reverently holding forth an unfinished picture of the current Lord captured in the days of his youth. Beside it, a vanity filled with ornate perfume bottles and rouges turned a gritty brick color by the passage of time. In the center of the room was a massive four poster canopy bed; its posts, solid mahogany with finials of gold and draperies of organza in rich burgundy hues. He closes the door with a smile and heads off in search of reward for a job well done. Upper and lower bedchambers found empty, he ran up the stairs and down the first floor hallway. He comes to rest outside an office adjacent the salon. His timid backhanded knock, answered with a gruff, “Enter,” he stands content, watching the nib of Master’s pen scratch out words upon thick vellum.
“How long will you remain motionless with eyes wide and mouth agape?”

Catching hold himself, Kinoe titters, “Sorry my Lord, but in the presence of your greatness, one can’t help being awestruck—”

“Verily will you be struck if you don’t quickly state your business!”

“Textbooks,” he said, hitching his thumb at the door, “three boxes of them await in the foyer. Would you prefer I situate them in here or—?”

“I take it memory has abandoned you Kinoe?”

“No, my Lord, it’s just … this room grows smaller each day with work yet begun. And since I know my Master is of a fastidious nature—”

“And,” the pen ceased movement, “he is also ill of temper when his work is needlessly interrupted.”

“Apologies.” He brightens as Master’s pen strikes paper again, “Thought you might want to know, the upstairs suite is ready for occupancy. If my Lord desires, it is ready for inspection.”

Master lifted not his eyes from the papers before him. “Changing bed linens, sweeping carpets and removing coverings from the furnishings … these things constitute a triumph? Let it be known, I’ve no intention of entering that room … ever again.”

Curiosity lures him to a peak precarious; he takes the plunge willingly, the words falling from his mouth without preamble, “And what time should we expect your guest this evening? I mean … shall I prepare a light snack or a full course meal?” When his Lord answered not, Kinoe soldiered on, “Is there anything in particular they might enjoy … special delicacies or wines I should lay in store?”

This time, Master laid down his pen with care, “What say we move on to more important business, and by that I mean …. things which actually concern you? For example, a month ago I had you order specialized equipment and supplies from London. They arrived yesterday and for some unknown reason, they were delivered to the hospital.”

“My Lord, I … I have no idea how that happened—”

“You’re inept … there, that explains it. Fortunately, one of my servants was thinking correctly. When the shipment came in, he had the presence of mind to set it apart from prying eyes. Since you messed it up, you will fetch what is rightfully mine.”

“With pleasure. Oh, that’s right … the books came from the Land of Wind and so too will our visitor. After such a journey they’ll be tired … a light snack it is—”

“Silence!

Two things do I require Kinoe; the supplies and preparation of my frocks for tonight. Are any parts of these instructions unclear?” Kinoe vigorously shook his head. ”Excellent. I require none other of your services as the Yasha will attend my ablutions and dressing. ”

“It will be done as you say my Lord, and again, I beg pardon, but there’s a certain excitement in the air and—”

“I care not what ails you. We will depart for the Temple at 7:00 p.m. sharp.” The lifting of the pen, the dipping of its nib in the inkpot, signal termination of discussion, yet the oblivious servant stands
rooted to the spot.

“Progressive aren’t they?” Deliberate was the turn of his head and slow the fall of a silken eyepatch exposing Master’s swirling left eye; a low growl of admonition, again, completely ignored by the enthralled servant, “Physicians from the Land of Wind … all of them are women!” Even as the floor trembles beneath his feet, Kinoe continues, “I was made to understand that room was your mother’s betrothal suite … could it be,” he gasped, “this guest … is your intended, Master?”

With a gust of wind behind it, the pen did fly, lodging nib first deep inside the wood panel to the right of his head. Not even a second to breathe or react before he was swept off his feet. Caught up in the swirling magatama of Master’s eye, rendered aphonic, he was as a marionette with half its strings missing, his limbs wildly flail, his body hovering before Master’s desk. A plea for mercy unheeded, he’s dashed from one side the room to the other, time and again. Face first into the bookcase, his back colliding with every available sharp corner, slammed to the floor only to be flung the ceiling; his screams of pain, unheard. When at last, Master’s foul humor vent, the servant hangs in mid-air before his Lord, a bloodied mess.

“Oh, how rude of me;
were there other questions …
or more assumptions you wish to put forth?”

The last ounces of strength mustered; the battered varlet slowly shakes his head.

“You’ve made wreckage of my office Kinoe,” he said rising from his seat. “One as fastidious as I … simply cannot work under such conditions.” As he walked away, his servant plunged to the floor like a sack of rotten yams. Standing by the door, his Master turns to say,

“I trust all will be in order when I return?”

“Yes,” he panted, “my Lord.”

Recherché

“... labeled them predators of my fears, yet you were the one breathing out threats and terrorizing--”

“You're right ma’am,” he bowed low, “ashamed of myself.” Rising erect, humble words sail aloft on suspicious air. “Lady Tsunade, Dr. Umino and Mr. Kamizuki … I’m sorry. But, upon overhearing one of our revered nobles accused of a heinous crime, I … I lost control.” He swallowed down a lump in his throat, “It was a trying night for me; took a few shots to calm my nerves this morning, which … obviously had the reverse effect. Still, no excuse for my behavior--”

“Damn right it wasn’t!

By now, it was like watching a fencing bout; their epees verbal, crossing with practiced precision. Each parry encountered swift riposte; every feint met trompement. But this time when the sparring partners retreat to neutral zones and settle into behavior befitting their stations, doubt doubles in Izumo’s mind.

“Riddle me this Inspector … these two young men left Konoha as children, and spent most of their lives in a foreign country; how could they have known about the seals our ancestors used to designate forced servitude?”

He thought for moment, “Well, they are cunning .. musta conducted research,” he said gesturing to
the open books on the little conference table, “like you’re doing.”

“Afraid that’s a swing and a miss,” Izumo chuckled. “Until her borders were forced open to the West by Commodore Perry, few true facts were known of Japan’s history in our part of the world. Even now, what was taken for truth is being debunked every day.”

“Not to mention,” Iruka chimed in, ”we had neither opportunity on the voyage here, nor desire since our arrival, to research such things.”

“Seems I’ve made another error,” was uttered with a shrug of the shoulders. “But, I did hear you say something about ingesting an Absinthe based drink, didn’t I, Dr. Umino?”

“Guess a closed door is no guarantee of privacy these days. How long were you standing out there Inspector?”

“Long enough to pick up and stitch together bits and pieces Mr. Kamizuki.” His heavy hand lands gently on Iruka’s shoulder, accompanied by a soft chuckle, “Absinthe ... it ain’t nothin’ to play with, am I right? Speaking from experience, it’ll have ya seeing things that ain’t there—”

“Now, you’re growing tiresome Ibiki; say what you gotta say!”

“As you wish ma’am. I watched Dr. Umino and Lord Hatake exchange pleasantries in the ballroom. Shortly thereafter, I spent at least an hour playing shogi with the master of the manor in his private salon. I’m certain Lord Hatake is a man of many talents but, being in two places at one time? I think not.” Folding his arms across his chest, he wonders aloud, “Is it possible, this encounter with Lord Hatake and the alleged seal, was, I don’t know … a hallucination?”

Iruka shrugs away, “I assure you, my experience with Hatake was painfully real—”

“I’m sure you thought it was, Dr. Umino.”

“Um, before you embarrass yourself further sir, Lady Tsunade and I saw the seal with our own eyes … pretty sure neither of us were hallucinating—”

“Ah, but you did say Dr. Umino was away from you for a time; that he ‘collapsed’ and came to with a rash around his throat—”

“Your point Inspector?”

“Years of law enforcement ma’am ... you see folk do unimaginable things to throw police off their trail. I remember a case where a man engaged a knife wielding attacker in a back alleyway; killed him in self-defense, or so he claimed. The victim had the complete package, bruised knuckles, a black eye, wounds to his palms, but ... turns out the ‘attacked’ was actually the attacker.”

“So, you’re back to calling us liars—?”

“It’s not you Mr. Kamizuki,” he said looking down at the carpet,” it’s me. See, I gotta skeptical mind that thrives on, ‘what ifs.’ That’s a good thing usually, but I fear this time, it might be leading me astray.” Lifting his head, eyes full of hope trained on Izumo, he said, “Really appreciate a few minutes indulgence … for clarity sake.” Lady Tsunade slowly drums her fingers on the desktop, Iruka folds his arms across his chest while Izumo, drawn in by the Inspector’s ‘soft spoken, have pity on me,’ act, implies consent with a resigned nod.

“Thank you sir. Allow me present what I believe are established facts. One, you and Mr. Hagane drained a few glasses of alcoholic beverages, as did I. Two, the three of you are still very young,
gotta lotta play left in ya … which, unfortunately, I no longer have. Here’s where I need clarity … that period of time when Dr. Umino was unaccounted for. I can’t help thinking you and Hagane put that mark on your unconscious friend, you know … as a goof. Silly … yet ingenious, because it would bolster the rest of your um … tale of wonder--”

"Give it up Ibiki … you’re reaching. I know these young men; they would never do anything purposely or drunkenly to hurt Dr. Umino."

Again the Inspector inclined his head, “I stand corrected; thank you. Reckon it’s time to battle off, drag myself home and straight to bed.” He’d made it halfway to the door before turning about with a snap of his fingers, “One more question--”

“No sir … there will be nothing further … from anybody. The gods only know why I’m surrounded by troublesome men. Listen, the three of you attach weight to what you believe happened the night of the soiree; that’s fine, yet there can only be one truth. But right now, the tether on my patience is threadbare; with one too many things of true import already before me, I can’t render accurate judgment--”

“Message received … should’ve known you’d take their side--”

“I stand on the side of right, Inspector. Does not our law proclaim persons innocent, until proven guilty beyond the shadow of a doubt? Of course it does, therefore, we will meet together one week from today, when cooler heads,” she glanced at Iruka, “and sober judgment,” she eyed Ibiki, “can have seats at the table. At that time you will present whatever proofs you have and I’ll take appropriate steps to bring this matter to conclusion. Sound good?” Each man nods their assent.

“That sorted, it’s gonna be another long night for you and your men Ibiki. I suggest taking rest while there’s opportunity. On your way out, have Shizune mark our meeting date and the time on my schedule, 10:00 a.m. sharp, one week from today.”

“Thank you,” he turns to leave, “until this evening, ma’am … gentlemen.”

Recherché

No matter how hard you try, some things you cannot run from. And, others, once seen, can never be forgotten. This reality sinks in for Maito as he nears his destination. As his jacket falls to the ground, the small jar of salve rattles against the vials. Mayhaps I misinterpreted … saw something not actually there. Tis great loss. Alas, we are none better than common mongrels. Though we bow the head to others, for us, there is only one, true master.

Anguished howls emanate from his core which feel as if they’re ripping his throat asunder as he transforms; his lupine brethren pick up and chorus the alarm all the way through the woods. Taking off in pursuit of quarry, feeling soft earth beneath his paws and fingers of sunlight warming his fur as they pierce sparse tree canopy above him, his mind calms. Propping against a tree, physical hunger slaked, the blood of his prey dripping down his maws still, his heart remains a gaping void. And so, burlap sack filled with items from the forest and the manor, he sprints toward the place where verity lay wounded.

Recherché

The hell? Wolves howling in the daytime? Kotetsu ducks for cover, abandoning field dressing of the hares found in his traps. And it sounds like a pack is in distress … that can’t be good. Hastily burying the entrails, he gathers tonight’s dinner and beats feet to the safety of the cabin.

Recherché
“Why Ibiki has it out for you, I’ve no idea ... but I do know he’s not someone you want as an enemy.”

“I think I know why,” Izumo said. "Simply put, he’s afraid, because we possess a narrative detrimental. Even without concrete proof to back us up, should the common people know one iota of our story, they’d flee the territory and never look back.”

Lady Tsunade leaned back in her seat with a smile. "I don’t doubt that, but you need to understand, Ibiki fears no man. He has greater resources at his fingertips and he won’t hesitate to play dirty; that’s what makes him dangerous.”

“Even so, one would think he’d show us humor, pretend to work alongside us to prevent broadcast of the information we have,” Iruka huffed, "yet it seems he’s steadily pushing us to take our story public.”

“He is pushing you ... into a trap of some sort. Like you Iruka, he's bullheaded. Once Ibiki gets something stuck in his head, he’ll stand by his beliefs come hell or high water.”

“We never had intention to further panic, that's why we limited our communication to you and him. The quieter we can do our work, the better.”

“Well said Zumo. Lady Tsunade, I appreciate the warning but, I’ve nothing to fear. Truth, is my buckler—”

“Facts ... which can be manufactured and manipulated,” she she blew out a tense breath, "these are Ibiki’s stock in trade; these are his shield. Just take my words to heart and be careful, okay?”

“Yes, ma’am, I will.”

“No you won’t, damn it! Why am I wasting my breath, when vanity demands I must needs catch up on lost beauty rest? Right, if there’s nothing further gentlemen?”

Taking their cue, both men rise and politely bow. Iruka was heading for the door when he heard Izumo say, “Ma’am, in case he has some sort of relapse, I’d be more comfortable knowing I had the wherewithal to cope with the situation. Can you spare a few minutes for me to jot down some ingredients? Iruka, mind if I catch you up buddy?”

He turned and shot him a quizzical look, “Yeah, sure; meet you at the inn. For your kind indulgence Lady Tsunade, I'm grateful.”

When the door closes behind him, their smiles fade.

“Spit it out Kamizuki ... did he not tell me something?”

“Everything I know,” he smiled, “you know.”

“One thing I know is, you’re capable of tending to minor medical incidents on your own.”

Leaning forward with elbow propped on the desk and chin cradled in her palm, she demanded he, "Drop the pretense. What’s really going on?”

“Nothing untoward, I promise,” he sat down with a sigh,"just something I find worrisome and couldn’t say in front of Iruka." Twiddling thumbs in his lap kept his head down and voice quiet, “You see, its our finances … they’re strained at the moment. I was wondering if you knew whether the hospital has positions available?”
“Well, ours is primarily a teaching facility. The need for credentialed physicians and accredited instructors is always great--”

“Got it ... so much for that idea.”

“Hang on,” she said, pulling the little book closer, "it's secondary mission is that of a research, development and manufacturing hub for medical instruments. Have you experience in those disciplines?”

“Nope,” he stood and bowed, “thanks anyway--”

"Sit down, Mr. Kamizuki ... I hadn’t finished. Now, as it happens, I know of a small clinic that’s always looking for young men with quick minds and able hands. The work, demanding, the hours long and the conditions, strenuous but, they will house and feed you in addition to providing a monthly stipend. Interested?”

“Am I? It sounds perfect! But … I haven’t worked with patients for some time; might be a little rusty--”

“Shouldn’t be a problem ... their patients are animals.”

His expression went from elation to confusion in a heartbeat. “Are we talking, a sanitarium … mental patients?”

“Course not.” Watching relief wash over him, she said, "The business of this clinic is animal husbandry, veterinary medicine and such like. As the son of Tadashi, I’m sure Iruka has experience compounding medicines and I assume you possess rudimentary surgical skills--?”

“He does, and I do--”

“Come to think of it, there might be a position for Mr. Hagane if he's so inclined. I understand their onsite blacksmith is getting up in age … certain he wouldn't mind having a youthful assistant handle the heavy jobs.”

“Whew! That’s a load off my shoulders. We’ll take it!”

“You young people ... always in such a hurry. For heaven sake, at least go up and look around the place, talk to the owner, find out what--”

“No need. If you say this place is legit, I believe you.”

She rubbed at her temples, “Suit yourself. The Inuzuka clinic lies five miles north of your current location and--”

“Perfect, we’ll check it out first thing tomorrow morning!”

“I’ll provide landmarks for you to follow; wouldn't do to have you guys wandering about. I'll even dispatch a runner with a note of introduction, though I still think you should talk this over with your friends--”

“Trust me, I’ll make them see reason. Um, ma’am? Before I go, there is one more question--”

“Watch it, you sound like Ibiki--”

“Heaven forfend,” he laughed, "but speaking of the Inspector … why did you defend us to him? You could have shut him down with the truth--"
“You mean this little book?” She flicks open the cover, “Nah … in Ibiki’s mind, this doesn’t constitute evidence--”

“Yet it speaks to a truth we couldn’t have known before today. Your ancestor wrote about people who had seals placed on their bodies by demons--”

“Coincidence--”

"Is it? According to him, these seals had purposeful placement, either on the heads or over the heart, depending on which area a demon wished to control--”

“Mr. Kamizuki, these writings reinforce, not refute the notion that we believe in fairy tales.”

“You said it yourself, those branded by the families they served had markings visible to the naked eye; the ones placed by demons were unseen, like the one on Iruka--”

“Unfortunately,” she sighed, “I find myself in an extremely complicated situation. The histories of the Senju and Hatake have been entwined since the territory’s foundation. I will not risk the wrath of my ancestors and his, without proof of nefarious deeds committed by Lord Hatake. I’m trusting you and Iruka to unearth these proofs.”

“In a week? Ma’am, what you’re asking is--”

“The Inspector rightly said, you are men of cunning; I believe that with my whole heart. Now, you must run along dear ... plenty of work ahead, short time for its completion.”

Grumbling a final farewell, the door clicks closed and peaceful quiet returns to her sanctuary. The letter of introduction and recommendation written and dispatched soon after Izumo left, she collects the book on her way out thinking, Wouldn’t hurt to pay the Nara a visit. It's a safe bet they stockpiled Montmorillonite.

Recherché

Under the door of the freshly prepared upstairs suite, a silvery gray mist creeps. It flits about the room; a wrinkle in the duvet smoothed, a hairbrush on the vanity, inched back into proper place. Passing by each of the portraits, motion ceases before the one entitled, Le Danse Macabre which hangs askew. Righted to perfect alignment, the mist resumes forward motion. At the unfinished portrait of Lord Kakashi does it pause, flashes of light emanating from its center as if form were struggling to take on substance. At last, the bright light diminishes, the mist dissipates and the room fills with the fragrance of lotus blossoms.

Notes:

Charlatan: A person falsely claiming to have special knowledge of something.

Astonied (archaic): briefly deprived of the ability to act; dazed, filled with consternation or dismay.

Petrify: benumb or paralyze with astonishment, horror, or other strong emotion.

Peremptory: leaving no opportunity for denial or refusal.

Insult (archaic): behave with insolent triumph; exult contemptuously.
Kabuki: Japanese dance drama; somewhat coarse and unrestrained, its beauty gaudy and extravagant. Derived from the verb *kabuku* which means ‘to lean,’ or ‘be out of the ordinary,’ kabuki can be interpreted as ‘avant-garde,’ or ‘bizarre’ theater. There was constant interplay between the audience members and the cast; actors frequently addressed the crowds; the latter responded with praise or clapped their hands according to a prescribed formula. Kabuki programs typically ran from morning to evening so meals were served at specified time during the performance. **Onnagata**, were male actors who played women’s roles in Kabuki theater. These plays often times contained erotic content and dealt with themes of male homosexuality. Every Kabuki actor was expected to have a natural aptitude with *onnagata* techniques, which is not considered to be the same as or equivalent to cross-dressing or female impersonation.

Besotted: blindly or utterly infatuated.

Denigrate: deny the importance or validity of.

“Read to filth:” thoroughly insult, comprehensively call attention to the flaws of someone.

Battlement: tall protective walls with gaps separated by distinctive stone structures from which to launch projectiles.

Pique (archaic): a state of irritated feelings between persons.

Vitriol: cruel and bitter criticism.

Pantywaist: a weak, effeminate man.

Supplant: take the place of, serve as a substitute for, especially by reason of superior excellence or power.

Stupefaction: overwhelming amazement.

Redoubtable: something that evokes fear.

Trepidation: a feeling of fear or agitation about something that may happen.

“Hard legs:” U.S. Army slang for a man, in reference to his member; often used plurally to denote a sausage fest {When the number of males in an environment overwhelmingly exceeds the amount of females present}.

Japanese leather wallpaper, so called because it was meant to resemble leather (duh). This effect was achieved by placing moist paper on carved wood and beating it with a brush until the design is embossed. After the paper dried, it was painted, gilded (thinly covered with gold leaf), and treated to render it waterproof.

Vellum: a translucent material produced from prepared animal skin (calfskin usually) as opposed to that from goats and thus, a higher quality. It is prepared as a surface for writing (or printing) and used to produce scrolls, single pages of text or books. Generally smooth and durable, though there are variations depending on the preparation and quality of the skin.

Fastidious: excessively scrupulous or sensitive, as in taste, propriety or neatness.

Ablutions: the washing of one’s body or part of it as in a religious rite. In this instance ‘religious’ is taken to mean, *treated or regarded with a devotion and scrupulousness appropriate to worship*.

Betrothal suite: a room or series of interconnected rooms, where one engaged to a member of the
noble spent her days, weeks or months prior to the wedding while becoming acclimated to the workings of the household and family of which they would become part of. Moving into the master bedchamber after the wedding, this suite became a place of retreat or where one slept when the master of the manor was away on extended travels. Upon the death of the master, once more it became a place in which to live out widowhood.

Admonition: a warning not to do something.

Cunning: dexterous or crafty in the use of special resources (such as skill or knowledge); implies a shrewd often instinctive skill in concealing or disguising the real purposes of one’s actions.

Threadbare: (of clothing or soft furniture), becoming thin or tattered with age; (of an argument, excuse or idea), used so often that it is no longer effective.

Maws: the jaws or throat of a voracious animal.

Slake (archaic): become less active, intense, or vigorous; abate.

Buckler: a small round shield held by a handle or worn on the forearm.

Shield: a broad piece of armor carried apart from the body as a defense against swords, lances or arrows.

A tomoye (archaic) is a common Japanese abstract shape, usually used as a necklace, that resembles a comma or the usual form of magatama. Magatama: curved, comma shaped beads which served as decorative jewelry but later functioned as ceremonial or religious objects. In Japanese mythology, Susanoo, god of the sea and storms, received five hundred magatama from Tamanoya no mikoto, the jewel making deity. Susanoo went to heaven and presented them to his sister, the sun goddess Amaterasu, who bit off successive parts of the magatama and blew them away to create other deities.

Danse Macabre (“Dance of Death”): in medieval times it was a literal or pictorial representation of a procession or dance of both living and dead figures expressing the allegorical concept of the all-conquering and equalizing power of death.

Animal husbandry: the science of breeding and caring for farm animals. Veterinary medicine, a branch of medicine dealing with prevention, diagnosis and treatment of disease, disorder and injury in animals. The scope of veterinary medicine is wide, covering all animal species, both domesticated and wild, with a wide range of conditions which can affect different species.

Aphonic: being without sound through injury or illness and incapable of all but whispered speech.

Askew: not in a straight or level position.

Forfend (archaic): avert, keep away, prevent.

Fencing terms: (1) Epee, a sharp-pointed dueling sword, designed for thrusting, used with the end blunted in fencing. (2) Parry: defensive action in which a fencer blocks his opponent’s blade. (3) Riposte: defender’s offensive action immediately after parrying their opponent’s attack. (4) Feint: An offensive movement resembling an attack in all but continuance; intended to draw a reaction from an opponent. This is the ‘intention’, and the reaction is generally a parry, which can then be deceived. (5) Trompement: hitting an opponent at the end of a feint, after a successful deception.

Nefarious: extremely wicked or villainous; offense against divine or moral law.

The lotus flower is a symbol of Buddhism, revered in Japan for its ability to rise from dirty, murky
waters to bloom into a beautiful pure flower. This process symbolizes attaining enlightenment. Its roots can grow up to 1.2 meters long. Renkon, or "lotus root" is an integral part of Japanese cooking. As a seasonal food, it is eaten in the autumn and winter, and served at the New Year as an auspicious food. Showy water plants most commonly called "lotus" belong to one of two species contained within the genus Nelumbo. Nelumbo nucifera, or sacred lotus, is native to South Asia and Australia; it produces large flowers in shades of rose, pink and white. Fragrance of lotus flower is generally described as heady, fruity, or sweet.

Where my history geeks at? Matthew C. Perry, Commodore in the United States Navy played a leading role in the opening of Japan to the West with the Convention of Kanagawa in 1854, through 'gunboat diplomacy.' Perry finally lands at the entrance to Edo (modern day Tokyo) Bay July 8, 1853. Ordering his ships to steam past Japanese lines towards the capital and turn their guns towards the town of Uraga, he refused Japanese demands to leave, or to proceed to Nagasaki, the only Japanese port open to foreigners. He tried to intimidate the Japanese by presenting a white flag and a letter which told them that in case they chose to fight, the Americans would destroy them. Meanwhile, the Japanese government was paralyzed due to illness of shogun Tokugawa Ieyoshi and political indecision about how to handle this threat to the nation's capital. On July 11, the chief senior counselor to the shogunate decided that simply accepting a letter from the Americans would not constitute a violation of Japanese sovereignty. After presenting the letter to attending delegates, Perry departed for Hong Kong, promising to return the following year for the Japanese reply. He returned six months later with ten ships and 1600 men the Convention of Kanagawa was signed March 31, 1854. Perry then visited Hakodate on the northern island of Hokkaido and Shimoda, the two ports which the treaty stipulated would be opened to visits by American ships.
Draped in nature’s resplendent beauty, the babbling runnels, warm breezes which wrap about him, leaving the fragrances of wildflowers and musk in his clothing and hair; their very existence normally inspires tranquility ... today, they make pronounced the irksomeness of his situation. Hours spent alone in the forest did his fury quell, yet is it not completely done away with. Crumpling to his knees, craters left in the yellow clay as he batters his fists into the earth beneath him. Near the point of breaking, an earnest prayer spills forth from the core of his being:

*From the darkness, stretch forth thine hand … imbue anew*  
*your desire, my Lord.*

*Grant your humble servant visitation,*  
*an impartation of thy strength this artifice continue and uphold.*  
*Never our bond broken; anoint mine head with fresh oil, to endure to the end …*  
*to see thy will be done … thine kingdom established.*

In the distance, sounds of alarm jolt him from thoughts melancholy. The noise of a pack in distress, music to his ears, the scent of an overwhelming threat tickling at his nostrils; an opportunity in the offing for distraction of mind and invigoration of the wild beast within, a prayer answered. His fine silk coverings disappear into the wind as he runs toward the southeast; his body cycles through transformation, revealing a being sleek and powerful. The long white hair becomes his covering, the red markings under his eyes become his sigils, a warning to all others that to his authority they must bow.

*All praise and honor to thee I render,*  
*for thou hast made way for frustration find its vent.*

**Recherché**

Receiving not acknowledgement after the first knock, he voices intention when stepping over the threshold. Descending the stairs, variegated scents slap him in the face; fear, crushed herbs and sweat ... consistent responses with a confrontation resulting in injury. The faint noise of scuttling feet cause his ears perk up, yet, the lack of a verbal response twists at his heart. Stooping down, peering over the handrail, the sight which greets his eyes causes his blood come to boil. Wedged into a corner with arms outstretched and terror etched into his features, the shaman sits trembling:

“Stay back!  
You’re not alone …

you’re not alone!”

Perplexed, he stretches out his senses detecting none other than himself and the old man. “It’s alright,” he calls, “it's just me--”

“No ... you’re not alone …
you’re not alone!”

Purposefully does he strike and scratch at the earthen floor below, praying the release of his scent into the room will calm the terrified man. Effort wasted, for the shaman continues the same refrain,

“You’re not alone …

you’re not alone!”

Adrenaline wildly spiking, convinced the old man would do himself more mischief if left in this state, immediately, incomprehensible instinct dictates he flee. Racing up the narrow staircase and out the door, he runs a short distance away. Sharp claws frantically dig through the roots of an ancient elm and the burlap sack drops into a shallow grave; nudging soft earth over the still wriggling prey with his snout, in an instant does he revert to human form. With every step forward, prudence debates wisdom regarding relocation of the shaman to the manor. Notion nixed as he glides down the staircase for the second time only to find the shaman still sitting on the floor, arms still outstretched yet, he seemed less agitated.

“How now old man! Have you come to grips with yourself at last?”

Turning his head to the sound and focusing as best as can, the old man begs, “Come closer for discovery.”

Cautious is his approach, controlled are his movements as he crouches in his natural form before the elder. He found himself leaning into the touch as a wrinkled hand ruffles the guard hairs of his shoulder. Holding himself in check when the old man burrowed his nose in the crook of his neck, the beast relaxes a whit when he hears,

“You are son of Dai … Maito.”

“Yes sir,” he breathes, “that’s right.”

“Beware little one, he is near.”

Thinking to humor or grant a measure of comfort, he makes grand show of scanning the area and scenting the air. “All is well, sir. None but us occupy this space. Up now.” Using the crown of his head to push himself to standing, Maito encourages him to

“Quit yourself like a man and fret not … I will protect you--”

“Alas, you cannot. He was … he is … from the former days; the Dark One--”

“Pshaw! I fear not thine imaginings,” human form his once again he boasts, “endowed with a portion of my Master’s authority and power, I shall vanquish whomsoever oppresses you--”

“Tis not oppression, nay, a welcome unanticipated--”

“I know not what, nor of whom you speak … this, ‘dark one’ is--?”

“Lord Hatake,” he whispers,

“Lord Hatake … Kama.”

Recherché

Questions answered, the scaffold of a plan to utterly destroy Umino erected in his mind, a carefree
Ibiki strolled across the plaza. He breezed into the station house, approved the duty roster for tonight and left orders for Ryota to pick him up an hour before the tsuya. Finally staggering over the threshold of his own home, he was snoring scant seconds after falling face first, fully clothed, onto his mattress.

A precious heirloom in its proper place, a shaky detente reached between Fire and Water Countries, rather, Ibiki and Iruka respectively, Lady Tsunade finally exits the Admin Center with Shizune in tow. It was almost noon by the time she dressed for bed. Tucked in nice and cozy she falls into dreamless sleep the moment her head hits the pillow.

At the Temple, Konoha’s amiable mortician in chief nods to the liveryman, “Yes, this one will do nicely. Festoon it as befitting the Uchiha clan head and his wife ... nothing gaudy mind you. Those bearing the bodies of their family members must be highly polished yet otherwise unadorned.” Crossing another item off his list, he will head north for an evaluation of the sexton’s progress.

Clambering into the buckboard, he joyously complains to its driver, “Oi, the work of an undertaker; thankless, unceasing … oddly rewarding. You know, if this whole monk thing doesn’t work out for you, I’m always looking to take on an apprentice.”

Back at the Hatake compound, after laying out Masters frocks, restoring the office to its original condition and applying salve to cover and heal his wounds, Kinoe hitches up a wagon and heads south to the hospital. Casting a parting glance at the manor he can’t help thinking,

Housing a human under this roof for any length of time … surely the other gaki will go berserk.

I hope Master’s intended is worth the chaos.

Recherché

Maito’s chuckle shakes his body and that of the shaman. “Tis musings jumbled. Or mayhaps, a bump on the head transposed memories old and new. Do you not remember?” Guiding him to sit at the table he reaffirms, “Lord Kama is long dead ... Lord Kakashi reigns in his stead--”

“I know what was then and what is now little one. Do you not know that I have served many generations of Hatake numina and my spirit is forever linked to each one? Their auras unique … I see their colors and remember well to whom they belong. Tis Lord Kama I say … not far away does he lurk.”

The old man’s words, the visions seen through the eye of the Master and his own random thoughts which heretofore failed suppression, everything suddenly clicks in place. Best humor than argue, for I know Lord Kama’s ashes rest in honor before the family shrine. Determined not to believe anything without irrefutable proof, he rests a hand on the elder’s shoulder, “Gather your wits in my absence; I have remedy for what ails you.” Up the stairs and out to the site where the burlap sack lies buried, he does he. Sensing nothing in the immediate area except his captured prey struggling for freedom, jaunty are his strides back to the old man’s home. When he crosses the threshold this time, that same rancid smell of fear hangs in the air as he goes downstairs. The old man’s face is now a twisted and frozen mask of revulsion. Rushing to his side, he draws three hares from the sack carelessly dropped on the table; in one swift motion, their necks broken, heads torn from their bodies and into an empty goblet dribs and driblets the cure. The smell of warm blood as it drains into the cup snaps the elder from stupor. Carcasses swept aside, Maito gently places the cup to the old man’s lips. At first sip, his limbs regain agility; he takes the cup, greedily gulping down its content. Vigor and lucidity rapidly take their rightful places in the shaman’s mind and body much to Maito’s relief.

Wiping at his mouth and sucking the blood from his fingers, the old man’s gratitude overflows. “From the grip of frenzy have you freed me. Caught up in a trance was I, however, Lord Kama’s
presence is as real as if he were standing in this room.”

   It was now or never.

“About that,” Maito says while reaching into the sack and withdrawing a vial “you will discover this for me.”

As the smooth glass cylinder rolled about in the bowl of his hand, breath catches in his throat. Clutching it to his heart, the shaman fearfully whispers, “From whence came this?”

“The one like unto me.”

“You can not destroy ... but how?  Be swift thy feet; return to our Master, for I must speak with him ... immediately!”

“Nay, I will not leave this place till I know why the contents of this vial sets you aquiver.”

The shaman lowered his head, “Would I could share it.  Into the Master’s ears must I communicate-”

“If these vials represent risk to our Lord, you will speak it now!”

Recherché

“Impossible!  The words you speak simply cannot be true,” Sai scratched at the back of his neck, “just the one ... are you sure?” They stand their ground, with tails whipping back and forth as he continues, “In a territory so vast ... surely someone was overlooked.” Lining up in two rows of six, twelve sets of eyes resolutely stare back at him. As one, they stand on their hind legs squeaking profanities while they close in on their summoner. “Okay ... sorry I doubted you.  It's just,” he rolls out their resting place, “I find it hard to believe.  Go on then, show me.”

One by one, his scouts take their places on the scroll; as each one dissolves, they piece together a sketch of his target, as well as a location and a brief biography. “Great,” he mumbles as an ink stained hand slides down his face, “this one is defective, completely unaware of the purpose for which they exist.” Dropping to one knee, the ink brush flies across the surface of a brand new scroll; from it spring two additional scouts. “Our time woefully short so we will attack on multiple fronts. You, track the resource in the south and you ... lead me to the rock.”

Recherché

Having wrapped up conversation with the kindly woman who drew the map for him, Iruka scarcely prevents Izumo’s entrance into the inn’s cafe.

“Well, what’dya find out?”

“Too much and not enough.  Tell you all about it, but first, we need to find a bakery.”

“That’s not a good opening statement.  Is there something wrong?”

“Not exactly.  Lady Tsunade was impressed with our medical knowledge and expertise ... well, mine specifically, so she was telling me about a clinic looking to hire bright young men like me, er ... us.”

The accompanying eye roll, dramatic, but not overmuch elicits a chuckle from both men. “How you daily maintain modesty is an inspiration to us all.  Surely she took your polite declination well.”
“Not exactly. I, uh, gave our word we’d look into it ... tomorrow.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. We’ve tons of work and no time to waste.” He felt the resistance before he saw it. Turning, he realized the tense set of the other man’s jaw brooked no argument, still, “Damn it Zumo! What have you done?”

“You mean, aside from pushing us ten steps forward?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Iruka … do you trust me?”

He thought for a moment, “Afraid to right now,” he huffs, “but, since you already gave our word, we’ll check this place out first thing in the morning. Remainder of the day belongs to serious pursuits, hear me?”

“Loud and clear, Dr. Umino. Now, here’s the good part, the clinic provides room, board and a monthly stipend--”

“Well,” he shrugged, “guess you can’t beat that--”

“I know right? That’s why I told her we’d take the jobs.”

Izumo attempts to continue walking; Iruka would have none of that. Gripping the other man’s wrist, he pulls him close. “Have you taken extended leave of your senses?”

“Probably, but wait, there’s more.” Pulling Iruka along, he smiled and said, “The clinic is only five miles from where we are now--”

“I don’t care if it’s five steps outside the cabin’s front door Zumo, you shouldn’t have--!”

“Five miles from where we are now .. is two miles closer, to where Hatake is.”

Stopping in his tracks and looking him in the eye, Iruka manages an enlightened, “Oh.”

“Exactly.”

Recherché

“I’ve said too much already, now is my life in your hands. Swear you will not let slip our conversation. Swear it!”

Maito takes a seat beside him, “No sir … I cannot. As well you know, no secret stays hidden from the eyes and ears of our Master.”

“Then, till I speak face to face, will you become as one mute ... for my sake?” While Maito attempts consideration, the shaman’s questions come rapid fire. “How many of these have you? Did you or the Master open these containers at any time? Who else is aware you hold them in your keep? Is there--”

“Hold!” Into the sack he reaches again, “There. All I have are in your hands. Neither Master, nor I have touched, much less, opened them; they’ve dwelt in a leaden container inside the vault from the time they were delivered. The one who brought them, the Master and myself ... we three know of their existence.”

“Dependent on your stealth, it will take two … maybe three hours to uncover their purpose and
replicate their contents. Please, for now this secret must remain between us. Do not my activities divulge to the Master.”

“If I am caught out, I promise nothing.”

“My son,” the old man pleads, running his fingers through the hair on Maito’s forearm, “it is why I must be granted audience posthaste … hinder not my doing so. Once these are returned to their place of rest, stick close to our Lord, I beg you.”

Racing through the woods, Maito picks up a familiar scent; ignoring instinct to rise up and slay, instead he retreats to his cave, to calm himself by tending the physical demands of his body; though his thoughts tarry with the old man in his little hovel. Unseen, does he afterwards slip into the manor. His eyes, ears and perception sharp. Finding none lingering in the hallways, he stands before Lord Sakumo’s bedchamber, hand wrapped round the door handle, he sucks in a breath thinking, Better I ask forgiveness later, then seek permission now. This area forbidden, quietly breached, the objects desired, quickly discovered. Yet is the search for the other futile, concentration continuously broken as he casts wary glances over his shoulder. To the ancestors rises his fervent prayer:

My heart is clean before your eyes, my motive is true;

I beg you, keep back my Master …

for this, I must do.

Recherché

On the first floor of the manor, having inspected his office, Lord Hatake walks along the darkened corridor toward the secret passageway to the vaults below. Meanwhile, on the second floor, Maito backs out of the room, the spring bolt quietly easing against box and strike plate. Into a niche, the purloined prize tucked away. Each step down the hallway, every turn which leads to the vault, he vacillates between confessing disobedience purposeful while training his tongue continue clave to the roof of his mouth. By the time the sole of his foot touches the subterranean slate floor, his decision is painfully obvious. Head down, bereft of spirit and lost in thought, Master is upon him in a blink.

“How fares the shaman?”

“My … my Lord!”

“He must be in quite a state for you to exchange liberty before the appointed time. Well, your report?”

“Physical injuries minor … yet is he shaken in the head. He desires an immediate audience my Lord.”

Master raised an eyebrow, “Can’t say I remember the last time he made such request. Come, walk with me.” Too heavy is the weight of his guilt and that of the Master’s eye upon him. Seconds away from cracking, his Lord inquires, “You curtailed liberty for this. Surely it could have waited until later this evening?”

“Nay my Lord. So insistent was he … thought you should be aware as soon as possible.”

“I find it strange; a simple adjuration makes you ill at ease … why?”

Maito hangs his head in convicted silence, “Master … I … the shaman, asked after one other thing which I cannot fulfill.” The lie burns in his throat, scorching his mouth as it pushes past his lips, “He desires deer … from the Nara forests.”
The rich sound of Master’s laughter rebounded off the bricks, “Truly, he is shaken in the head for even I, could not deliver such a thing. Return to him with my word and the largest stag you can find elsewhere. Tomorrow, after sundown will I grace him with my presence.”

Maito heaved a heavy breath as he turned and bowed low. “It shall be done as you say, my Lord.”

**Recherché**

After stopping at every bakery along the mall, they exit the last one with a bagful of goodies. “Thanks to that sad face you pulled, we got six extra.” A salty harrumph was reward for his enthusiasm, none discouraged, Iruka plucks a delicacy from the bag, “Ooh … white lotus seed, there you go.”

Grabbing the tissue wrapped treat with a mumbled, “Thanks,” Izumo adds, “just doesn't make sense-”

“Course it does … they were made special for last night. Mmm… five kernel,” he said after taking a bite of his treat. “We both know sweet bean paste is the most popular and affordable, that’s why every shop was sold out …”

“Yes, I know, but--”

“Don’t worry, Tetsu will be just as happy with one of these--”

“Can we forget about the mooncakes for a minute? I was talking about the Governor.”

“Zumo,” he said around a chewy morsel, “I’m sure they set some aside for her--”

“Enough with the pastries! Iruka … didn’t you think Lady Tsunade’s behavior was a bit … off? I mean, first she humored us, then after you insisted, she uncovered the seal with some sort medical magic … she even brought out information to substantiate our claims--”

“I was right there Zumo--”

“You gonna let me finish my thought?” Iruka took another bite, nodding assent as he did so. “It struck me strange because as soon as the Inspector showed up, all of a sudden, she started questioning our very existence--”

“Well, not exactly. Did it ever occur to you she might not want him to know she believes us?”

“Had me convinced--”

“Be grateful; she bought us time, gave us information to convince Inspector Morino--”

“You actually believe what you’re saying, don’t you? Weren’t you listening when she said once the Inspector makes up his mind about something, nothing short of a miracle will alter his stance?”

“And weren’t you listening when I said the Fates would smile on us because we’re doing what’s right?”

“Yeah, yeah … whatever. My good sir, were you aware,” he lowered his voice, “there’s a connection between the Governor’s family and the Hatake?”

"Of course. I’m just surprised you’re surprised. The Governor's family, the Senju, are connected to all of the founding families in the land; Uchiha, Aburame, Nara, Akimichi and of course, the Hatake. In light of that, doesn't it figure she’s hesitant to show public support for us until we bring back
“No, I’m not surprised … ticked off is what I am--”

“Oh for heaven sake … eat your mooncake and stop being negative. She told us about the registry of heralds; in less than a week we can prove only one family owns that kamon. The archives will provide us with information as to how they identified servants in the old days … again something we can put our hands on in less than a week. Besides, the three of us saw the seal; her eyewitness testimony alone should be enough to satisfy the Inspector--”

“Chance will be a fine thing. How can we be expected to sift through hundreds of years of history ... in a week? Oi, watch your step.”

So caught up in conversation, they scarcely noticed when the gravel lane of the mall turned into a trodden forest path.

“You don’t know Lady Tsunade like I do; have to train yourself to listen between the lines--”

“Too much work. Look, I'm trying to be realistic here and the reality is, we got nothing that physically ties Hatake to the murders--”

“Sai’s working on that--”

“I say again ... we have seven days in which to dig up some flimsy historical facts; the gods only know when or if Sai is gonna show up in that time span. And, if he does, will he have tangible evidence that Hatake is a murderer?”

“Gee, if only somebody considered that before promising we’d take jobs at some off the wall clinic-”

“You know what? That's a done deal, so the less said, the better. Now that I think of it, we have to pack up, coordinate transport and move. How you reckon to manage all that ... in a week?”

The aroma of savory meats floating in the air outside the cabin gave both men pause.

“Oh ye of little faith,” Iruka said as they stepped inside, “we’ll manage in the same way it's possible to eat an entire elephant ... one bite at a time.”

“Huh?” Kotetsu looked up from stirring the stew. “Back up and lemme tell ya chuckleheads something ... you’re outta your gourds if you expect me to trap it, skin it and cook it.”

Recherché

Braced against a rocky crag, Sai catches his breath. From deep inside the cave comes a voice ominous,

“Been expecting you.”

Recherche

Frosty is the air inside his bedchamber. Linens softly crumble in his lap, as his hand glides over a seam in the bed’s wooden frame. With one touch, a small drawer springs open; from it he retrieves an oblong leather case. Fingers tremble as he lines up the small vial with the glass syringe. With a deep breath, the needle punctures the flesh above his stomach, agonizing pain of the thick serum pressing it's way inside his body inspires an ungodly hiss. Eyes suddenly weighed down; he has but
few seconds to return everything to its proper place. Somnolence stealthily overtakes him, and as it
does, the silvery mist reappears in the opposite corner of the room. From it, we hear a voice say,

*Myriad challenges await thee. Rest well, Lord Hatake.*

Notes:

Resplendent: shining brightly; characterized by a glowing splendor. Attractive and impressive
through being richly colorful or sumptuous.

Runnel: small stream or brook; rivulet.

Musk: a strong-smelling reddish-brown substance secreted by male musk deer for scent-marking,
also, an important ingredient in perfumery.

Quell: suppress a feeling, especially an unpleasant one; quiet or allay emotions or anxieties.

Artifice: skillful or artful contrivance.

Sigil (from the Latin word for ‘seal’): an inscribed or painted symbol considered to have magical
power. A type of pictorial signature of a demon or other entity.

The shaman was experiencing something akin to catalepsy, a physical condition, usually associated
with cataleptic schizophrenia, characterized by suspension of sensation, muscular rigidity, fixity of
posture and often, a loss of contact with environment.

Like their lupine brethren, lycan have scent glands between their toes which leave behind
pheromones (chemical markers). Wolves and (my) lycans have two types of hair, long stiff hairs on
the outer coat called ‘guard hairs,’ and an undercoat of soft fur which grows thick in the winter to
insulate their bodies.

Discover (archaic): divulge a secret.

Variegated: various, diverse, diversified.

Tail wagging (in mice) is an expression of annoyance or outright aggression), standing on their hind
legs, ears down and pointed back, is a defensive posture, accompanied by stiff body language.

Pshaw: an expression of contempt or impatience.

Agility: the power of moving quickly and easily; nimbleness.

Prudence: caution with regard to practical matters; ability to govern and discipline oneself in the
management of affairs. Caution or circumspection as to danger or risk.

Wisdom: knowledge of what is true or right coupled with just judgment as to action.

Stupor: a mental condition marked by absence of spontaneous movement, diminished responses to
stimulation and impaired consciousness.

Quit oneself (archaic): behave in a specified way

Delicacy: something delightful or pleasing, especially a choice food considered with regard to its
rarity, costliness or such like.

Burrow: move underneath or press close to something in order to hide oneself or in search of
comfort.

**Bereft:** deprived of or lacking something; robbed of the possession or use of something.

**Clave (archaic):** adhere closely; stick, or cling (usually followed by *to*).

**Tarry:** remain or stay, as in a place.

**Fitness (archaic):** to be seemly, proper or suitable.

**Adjuration:** an earnest request; solemn appeal whereby one person imposes on another the obligation of speaking or acting as if under an oath.

**Somnolence** is the state of sleepiness. In medicine, it refers to an abnormal drowsiness caused by drugs, illness or a sleep disorder.

Mooncakes are known as geppei in Japan (a direct translation of the Chinese name). Associated and eaten in conjunction with the Tsukimi (Mid-Autumn Festival, which Konoha ditched this time round), they are baked pastries molded into round shapes (symbolizing completeness or unity) with elaborate floral designs; usually cut in wedges and enjoyed with tea. Mooncakes envelope a sweet, dense filling, and may contain one or more whole salted egg yolks in their center as the symbol of the full moon. Traditional fillings: **Azuki (red bean)** paste is the most popular, but other sorts of beans, as well as chestnut, are also used. **White lotus paste:** considered by some to be the original and most luxurious filling, this paste commands an even higher premium. Due to its high price, white kidney bean paste is sometimes used as a filler. **Five kernels:** consists of five types of nuts and seeds, coarsely chopped and held together with a malt sugar syrup. Nuts and seeds most commonly used are pumpkin, watermelon, sesame seeds and walnuts, peanuts or almonds. The mixture may also contain candied winter melon.
A brief synopsis of the story can be found here:

https://youtu.be/jTj2aXGft2U

Their presence detected,

no surprise

... it was expected.

Rejection their reception; superiority established in a manner most crude. A rebuff with sinister flourish, he could do nothing aside from looking on in disbelief as their rotund little bodies exploded. When their garbled messages flew back in his face and their inky essences dribbled down moss covered stone, anger set his limbs atremble. In return, indescribable power radiated through centuries old layers of limestone, dolomite and gypsum, daring him proceed. As fear encroaches on stoicism, his other emotions immediately spiral; despair strikes without warning, stymieing ascent. Absorbing his unease, the sentient butte responds with a violent shaking that it might shed itself of him. With hope fading and strength dwindling, the words of his grandfather scream from the recesses of his mind:

Confirm now thine anchor!

Does it not hold fast to the Mighty One within?

Scrabbling up a wide ledge, the cave’s entrance in sight, he inches toward the adit. Kneeling, he sifts through the leather pouch at his waist, drawing forth three objects. The first, a vial containing a dark brown liquid with attached atomizer, next, a small brass oval shaped box filled with iridescent black powder. Lastly, the same ceremonial inkpot and scroll he’d used on the night of his arrival in Konoha. These he reverently laid in the sand before the cave’s mouth. Shaky hands incorporate the words of blessing into sketches of his four guardian lions. They spring into existence with singular mission; retrieval of his lifeless body from the cavern. Sai dips two fingers in the powder while invoking the spirits of his ancestors; sigils drawn on the backs of his hands and across his forehead will confer their wisdom and cunning in battle ... should it come to that. Finally, the calming scent of Jasminum sambac slows his racing heart as a gentle mist from the vial sinks into his clothing.

Ready now.

Day becomes night

the moment he steps foot inside. Palpable darkness slips round him like a well-worn ulster; its weight, a comfort ... its silence, a familiar welcome. Shutting his eyes to these pitch-black environs, he allows the shadows embrace as they take him by the hand and lead him forward. Not far inside, his adumbral ushers abruptly transform into a velveteen straitjacket as the contours of the cave shift and the aperture constricts, forcing him to turn sideways. Arms lashed to his sides, knuckles brushing against surfaces worn smooth by time’s steady passage, an icy breeze chills him to the bone, though the wall at his back is warm and slick with moisture. Once more is progress prohibited, this time by a bulwark of sensations; ever increasing heat draws down physical strength, undulation of the walls before and behind him, extract fractions of mental fortitude. Murmuring voices drip
from the ceiling, taunting, provoking him to turn round. He takes in a breath of stagnant air,

“Begone!
Greater is he within me, than you who are without!”

Shrieks of laughter crash to the floor as he plunges deeper into fathomless gloom.

A twist in the crooked path spelt instant regret.

Every measured breath coats his nares with the smell of burning pitch and lacquers his taste buds with the stench of guano. Soft hairy towers of flesh rise and fall beneath his fingers as the squeaking of roosting bats ring down in his ears.

One false step …

and firmly packed sand no longer crunches under his soles as the floor takes a nosedive. In the span of a surprised breath, he’s knee deep in a quagmire of quicksand. But, instead of being pulled down to his doom, his body hurtles toward another dimension of sight and sound. Deposited onto his derriere on level ground, flickering torch light illuminates a clearing up ahead, one which overflows with flora and fauna of his native land. Passing through a portiere of spider webs, the air about him turns fresh and cool; the sound of babbling brooks and the fragrance of Ivory Silk lilac trees are carried on the wings of multicolored birds as they swoop and dive about him.

Quick assessment of his physical status reveals clothing dry and intact and neither bruises nor scrapes sustained. He stands wondering,

What manner of madness this?

In the distance, the same voice which launched him on this journey cries out:

“Threads of the temporal lie astraddle a razor’s edge. Be swift to my side.”

Obedient curiosity propels him through another antechamber and into an immense, spartanly decorated area where an aged man sat in front of a crackling fire. The old man lifts his head as the intruder nears. “Been quite some time since anyone breached this inner sanctum,” comes across with a tinge of wistfulness as he strokes his beard. “Felicitations!”

“Thank you, but—”

“I marvel at your tenacity,” he said, taking note of the sigils, “or mayhaps something else safely guided you through layers of my illusions?”

“I’ve little time to entertain queries; prithee, lead me to the percipient one … he will know the reason I’ve—”

“You came to eliminate a terror which preys on womenfolk in this territory.” Sai raised an eyebrow as the old man continued, “I am a breathing encyclopedia of Konoha’s history and her last living sage. You sought me out with hope that I am the key to unlock this great mystery. Alas, I am not. Seems your long journey was in vain,” he said reaching inside his robe, “and now … even your life hangs in the balance.”

As he moves closer to where the old man sat, Sai too dips his hand into an inner pocket, feeling about for the hilt of his dagger.
Senescent eyes rise and fall, taking in every whit of this warily befuddled visitor. “I am Asahi, both the rock and a stone of stumbling for lesser men. Behold mine eyes child ... though dimmed by time, yet the light of the gods illumines them still. Now then, loose hold thy knife and recall your lions; nothing but peace and gratitude await you in my humble abode.”

He allows himself to relax as the smiling elder pulls a tortoiseshell snuff box from his obi. Bowing, he said, “I pray the gods that one day, my abilities rise to your level.”

“Laudation is due them tis true, but your prayers are wasted; your abilities already surpass mine. Strange ... I imagined you portly, yet are you lacking in accumulated years. Nevertheless, be no longer afraid … Sai.”

“You ... know my name? How?”

“I am amazed and amused,” he chuckled, “thou art his perfect match. Both of you, deficient in discernment.”

"Sir?"

“My word child,” he leaned in, squinting at Sai’s confused visage, “you have no idea … do you? Well ... I bless the gods for this honor,” he said taking a pinch of snuff. “You see, powers such as yours, simply do not go unnoticed. They are the reason the Yamabushi were receptive and why they readily gave of their blessing. I too sensed your abilities, the moment that crate delivered you to our shores; it was then, I inquired after your name.”

Falling to his knees, Sai’s plea for forgiveness was brushed aside.

“Nonsense … you have rendered obeisance meet for thine elders; it is sufficient. Now, come alongside child, for of clan Hamasaki I have much to impart.”

Recherché

“Heads up old man! This time I truly am not alone.”

The shaman turns from his work, squinching in the direction of the stairs, “Little one? What, in thundernation--?”

“Compliments of our Lord,” he shrugged the stag from his shoulders, “and product of a lie I was forced to tell. Enjoy.” Distracted by the sight and smell of fresh kill, the old man scarcely registers the good news that, “Master consents to an audience, on the morrow after sundown.” He flinched when Maito came up behind him, breath hot against his neck as he spoke, “At great peril was this gathered,” he said handing over a small container, “make haste and conclude your business.”

Cradling the small jar to his chest, the shaman doubled over with laughter. “Of course … how could I have forgotten?”

“What aileth thee now? This murmuring halt ... I forbid you take another leave of your senses--!”

“Fret not, I am sound of mind. But how delicious this detour? Deception hath deceived the deceiver and now is justice justified.”

“Speak not riddles, tell me plain!”

“Calm down little one,” the wizened man said with a chuckle when he turned back, busying himself with weights and measures. “To the intended recipient, a riddle is made manifest. Pay no heed to
my ramblings, for with this … all is perfectly aligned; even deviser could not difference make. Our Lord will be pleased when he learns of your--”

“Whisper not my name in connection with this your chicanery. I made cover for you … you will do likewise.”

“Defense and protection of our Lord are your first priorities, yes? Well, you’ve assured that--”

“Fortuitous outcomes be damned! Master severely rewards willful disobedience. It will matter little how well I played my part, for if you fail

… we shall both taste of his wrath.”

**Recherché**

Blood and bone of the vanquished cling to his fur. His belly is pleasantly tight with the flesh of those defeated; mind clear and body relaxed after numerous couplings, Jiraiya lifts his eyes to the north, a tiny smile tugging at his lips as he thought,

_Won't be long now … my shackles thrown off forever._

_No, won't be long … till I behold my Lord arising in glory and ascending his throne._

_His promise have I kept, his will shall I execute with gladness._

_Yes … won’t be long now._

_But first …_

No sooner did he climb up the ridge of gathering and take on human form, the clearing before him filled with myriad of malcontents; hundreds more spilling from their hiding places in the forests beyond. “I commend each of you; masking your presence from the White Guardian of the Woods is no easy feat. However, something equally fearful looms on the horizon. Though faint, the clamor and hoofbeats of war surely approach the Land of Fire. As five fragmented lands are forced together, conflict is inevitable ... so too is our victory!”

To his delight, a cacophonous war cry shakes the earth beneath him.

“Hear me now,” he roars, “only the strongest shall hold rule and reign over allotments designated by our Lord Hatake.” Amidst hoots and cheers, he calls forth three to stand beside him. “Behold these, and be not envious of their reward, for the same will be yours,” he said walking behind them. In an instant he draws a sword; in a flash, those three had their heads cleanly emancipated from their shoulders. A hush falls over the assemblage as their bodies crumple and disperse into plumes of thick noxious black smoke.

“Be not like these, with hearts divided and loyalties misplaced. This day, make sure your allegiance to Lord Hatake …

or suffer a fate worse than they.”

**Recherché**

Inside the cave, Asahi’s voice dispels the lingering silence. “I take it you have familiarity with Suijin, the kami of Water?”
“Of course … he is the patron of my country sir.” Still kneeling at the old man’s side, Sai lifts his eyes saying, “Generations of my family still serve as attendants at his shrine. In his name was I baptized--”

“I see that as well. His aura is as a halo; shades of blue rest heavily on and dwell deep within you.” Taking another pinch of snuff, Asahi leans back with a sigh, “It was nigh onto three hundred years ago when Suijin appeared to our chief priest in a vision. He warned that ‘Konoha’s resident evil was setting itself to rise and lay waste to our land.’ These words were communicated to our founding families who laid aside their differences, combined their spiritual abilities and stood united against the evil. After a long fought battle, our noble families emerged victorious

... or so we believed.

One hundred years later, the Water deity physically manifested before another chief priest, declaring that ‘our labor had been in vain.’ The evil we thought vanquished merely burrowed itself in the earth; taking root, it slowly spread, twisting around the hearts and minds of those in authority. But before it can resurrect in power again, your patron vowed to prepare a vessel through which to pour out his wrath--!”

“Pardon me, sir. I was taught to believe a kami never wanders far from its earthly throne. How then … or rather, why would Lord Suijin--?”

“Tell me something, which of the elements are most powerful against raging fire?”

“Earth and water, sir.”

“Correct, but while earth can smother flames, if one is lax in its application, it is possible for the fire to reignite. Only water is superior to fire, for it completely extinguishes.”

“Yes, I understand that, but how does it figure into--?”

“You’ll see. Now then … where was I? Right … thirty five years ago, Suijin appeared before our latest chief priest, with a message of hope. Shamefully, the heart of this priest is tainted by an affiliation with the Guardian of the Forest Streams.”

“Oh, I think I understand sir now … water doused the fire. In my country, we too have a kami known as ‘Kappa of the Grey Mist'; it is said to inhabit still waters in woodland areas--”

“Every country has kappa … they are ancient spirits, having many names and favored dwelling places, yet this not our primary concern. Hush now and allow me direct your attention to the one in dire need …the seed of Hamasaki--”

“Wait … do you mean the renown ship builders and cargo transport magnates?”

“There is none other,” he smiled. “This once large clan was long ago driven from the land of Water because they possessed a lethal kekkai genkai; though none of them awakened its potential, yet were they feared. Seeking asylum in the Land of Fire, they worked hard and brought honor to Konoha, establishing our greatness in the eyes of foreign nations. They were premier holders of Red Seal permits, responsible for the institution of import and export with two countries beyond our shores; China and Rotterdam Netherlands. I make you aware of their history as a reminder … extreme care you must exercise, for despite rupture, their name carries great weight.”

“Of course, but I don't see the need for warning--”

“For good reason have we one mouth and two ears child.” Shamed, Sai lowered his head as the old
man continued, “Shortly after Suijin’s last appearance, the current Hamasaki clan head and his wife brought their firstborn to the monks. Pitiful situation; crippled from birth, unable to properly digest food and nightly afflicted by terrifying visions, the child believed large bodies of water sought communion with him. He only found peace when harnessed inside a basket, tethered to the shore and allowed to float in the sea. Distraught, believing their child possessed, his parents held hope our holy men could exorcise the demons tormenting him. For ten months, he lived at the temple, the monks saying powerful prayers over him as they daily bathed him in hyssop and anointed him with blessed oils. In that time, his bones took on strength, his body received nourishment and grew … unfortunately, so too did the power within him. Unaware of its origin, in a final painstaking ritual the monks accessed and locked each of the child’s chakras. The terrifying visions and thoughts of communication with inanimate objects ceased. Returned to his parents, he thrived and though slow of wit, he apprehended the family business, yet had he not desire for it; hence the rupture.”

“One more question, sir--”

“Be still, for the answer is nigh. In this child, the feared kekkai genkai of clan Hamasaki has found its home. And now is this young man possessed of power incredible; power sufficient to eradicate our resident evil once for all. This same power will ultimately destroy him if not directed in the manner intended. Now do you understand?”

“Yes, however--”

“The Water deity promised to send one of his anointed before the evil of this land manifested again. As prophesied, his anointed one would be born in a distant land, as a seventh son of a seventh son. Descended from a line of mystics great who were and still are, attendants at his shrine, the chosen one shall guide Suijin’s vessel into the light of truth.”

“That’s all well and good, but--”

“That minister, the one chosen from centuries past ...

is you, Sai.”

He refused to allow those words sink in, for that would mean he’d lived under pretenses false. “Master Asahi … I’m afraid you mistake me for another. I only traveled to Konoha in response to a relative’s call for assistance.”

The sage stifled a chuckle as he ordered him to, “Pull back your sleeves child … look carefully; the symbols graven in your flesh say otherwise.”

*It cannot be. This prophesy came to its conclusion with the death of my great grandfather … didn’t it?* With his own eyes, truths long held reveal another facet of his calling heretofore unknown. With humility and quiet resignation, he accepts the mantle thrust upon him by order of birth.

“Be of good courage, for though we are called the enlightened, yet see we not all things. The intents and purposes of a kami often remain veiled until the time is right … such, is the humor of a god. Gird thy loins with truth; quit yourself like a man, for the path before both of you is arduous. Wounds left unattended, long fester beneath the surface … heal them you must before his powers unlock.” He laid his hands on Sai’s head, “I pray Suijin, in whose name you were baptized, invigorate and strengthen you. From this moment forward, the wisdom of the ages shall be your guides; they will quicken thy senses for the battle to come.

Go now …
"and prepare well our savior."

Notes:

Rebuff: peremptory refusal of a request; a check to action or progress.

Flourish: brandish dramatically; gesticulate with.

Encroach: advance gradually beyond usual or acceptable limits.

Stoicism: indifference to pleasure or pain; impassiveness.

Stymieing: presenting an obstacle to; standing in the way of.

Sentient: able to perceive or feel things; responsive to or conscious of sense impressions.

Butte: a steep sided hill with a flat top often standing alone in an otherwise flat area.

Scrabbling: scratching or groping around with one’s fingers to find, collect or hold onto something.

Adit: an entrance or passage.

Atomizer: device for reducing a liquid to a fine spray such as the nozzle used to feed oil into a furnace or an enclosed bottle with a fine outlet used to spray perfumes or medicines.

Sigil: painted symbol considered to have magical powers.

Jasminum sambac is an evergreen vine or shrub; a species of jasmine native to a small region in the eastern Himalayas and Bangladesh, it is cultivated in many places, especially across South and Southeast Asia. It’s fragrance is said to be very floral, yet musky and masculine; a sensual, soothing aroma which promotes a sense of harmony.

Palpable: of a feeling or atmosphere so intense as to seem almost tangible; able to be touched or felt.

Ulster: a man’s long, loose overcoat of rough cloth, typically with a belt at the back.

Adumbral: shadowy.

Aperture: opening or open space.

Bulwark: any protection against external danger, injury or annoyance.

Undulate(-ion): move with sinuous or wavelike motion; display a smooth rising and falling or side to side alternation of movement.

Nares: nostrils or the nasal passage.

Lacquer: coat with a resinous varnish which gives a hard, smooth highly polished finish to wood.

Guano: excrement of seabirds or bats, used as fertilizer.

Stagnant: (the atmosphere of a confined area) having no current or flow and often having an unpleasant smell as a consequence.

Quagmire: soft boggy area of land that gives way underfoot.

Quicksand is a bed of soft or loose sand saturated by water. When water trapped in a batch of sand
can’t escape, it creates liquefied soil. And because it can have considerable depth, it will suck down any mass resting on its surface. Patches of quicksand are most likely to occur near riverbanks, lake shorelines, marshes or underground springs. If an excessive amount of water flows through sand, it forces the sand particles apart; this separation of the sand’s particles loosens the ground. The force of the upward water flow opposes the force of gravity making the granules of sand more buoyant.

Antechamber: small room leading to a main one.

Deposited: put or set down something or someone in a specific place, typically unceremoniously.

Portiere: curtain hung in a doorway either to replace the door or for decoration. Derived from the French word for door (porte). Made from heavy materials such as velvet, brocade or plush and fixed on a brass arm it was used to mitigate drafts in the homes of the wealthy during the Victorian era.

Japanese Ivory Silk lilac trees feature showy, reddish-brown bark similar to that of cherry bark. Creamy white blossoms appear in early summer and their fragrance is like that of honey.

Spartanly: marked by simplicity, frugality or avoidance of luxury or comfort.

Inner sanctum: private or secret place to which few other people are admitted; inviolably private place or retreat.

Wistful(-ness): pensive, especially in a melancholy way. A feeling of sadness when thinking about something that is impossible or in the past.

Felicitations: expression of good wishes; the act of expressing acknowledgement as for the achievement or good fortune of another.

Tenacity: the quality or property of holding fast; persistence.

Percipient: a person on whose mind a telepathic impulse or message is held to fall.

Senescent: characteristic of old age. Senescence or biological aging the gradual deterioration of functional characteristics.

Laudation: an act or instance of tribute. Laud: praise, extol or glorify.

Portly (archaic): of a stately or dignified manner.

Visage: a person’s facial expression.

Hamasaki: **Hama** means “beach or seashore”; **-saki** means “cape or peninsula.”

Squinching: screwing up the eyes or face. Contortion of the face indicating a certain mental or emotional state.

Chicanery: dishonest, but attractive talk or behavior used to deceive; deception by artful subterfuge.

Malcontents: those who bear a grudge from a sense of grievance or thwarted ambition; in active opposition to an established order or government.

Loom: to assume form as an impending event.

Halo: an atmosphere or quality of glory, majesty, sanctity or the like.

Hyssop: a small bushy aromatic plant of the mint family, the bitter minty leaves are used in herbal
We all know a cave is a large underground chamber, typically of natural origin in a hillside or cliff, but did you know most caves form in karst? Karst is landscape underlain by limestone and other soluble rock such as dolomite and gypsum which has been eroded by dissolution producing ridges, towers, fissures, sinkholes and other characteristic landforms. The acidic water (derived from these rocks contain a mineral known as calcite) which slowly filters into the earth through cracks and fractures, creating a network of passages until it reaches a zone where the rocks are completely saturated with water. Speleothems (rock formations produced when carbon dioxide in the water escapes into the air allowing the dissolved calcite to reform), droop from the ceilings like icicles (stalactites) or bloom from the floor like mushrooms (stalagmites) and cover the sides like sheets of a waterfall (flowstones).

Suijin, the Shinto god of water in Japan. The term Suijin (literally water people or water deity refers to the heavenly and earthly manifestations of the benevolent Shinto divinity of water. It also refers to a wide variety of mythological and magical creatures found in lakes, ponds, springs and wells, including serpents (snakes and dragons), eels, fish, turtles, and the flesh-eating kappa (kappa are amphibious yokai in folklore). Suijin, is widely revered in Japan, and is often worshiped in temples. The Water Kami is the guardian of the fishing folk, and a patron saint of fertility, motherhood, and easy childbirth. One reason people worship and praise the Water Kami and give offerings to it is to hope for pure and unpolluted water for human consumption, as well as for other uses like agriculture and sanitation.

In Japanese folklore, the Kappa is an amphibious water imp, often accused of assaulting humans in small bodies of water and removing a mythical organ from their victim’s anus. They are usually viewed as mischievous troublemakers or trickster figures, though drowning people and animals, kidnapping children, raping women and at times, eating human flesh have also been attributed to kappa. Not entirely antagonistic to humans, in fact, once befriended, kappa may perform any number of tasks for humans. They are also highly knowledgeable about medicine and legend states they taught the art of bone setting to humans. Kappa are known by various names by region and folklore. They are considered an avatar (manifestation of a deity or released soul in bodily form on earth; an incarnate divine teacher) of the Water Deity (Suijin).

Red Seal ships: armed Japanese merchant sailing ships bound for Southeast Asian ports with red-sealed letters issued by the early Tokugawa shogunate in the first half of the 17th century. Between the 15th and 16th century, the main trading intermediary in Eastern Asia, was the island kingdom of what is now known as Okinawa, which exchanged Japanese products, like silver and swords, and Chinese products for Southeastern sappanwood and deer hides. Their commerce disappeared around 1570, which corresponded with the beginnings of the Red Seal system. In 1635, the Tokugawa Shogunate officially prohibited their citizens from overseas travel, ending the Red-Seal trade.
What You Don't Know Won't Kill Me Pt2

PREPARATION:

From midmorning onward, an unusual warm grey mist hangs over the territory like a tattered curtain. Even the sun donned mourning frocks fashioned of heavy dark clouds as if it too were linking hands in solemnity with Konoha’s mood. By early afternoon, many shops along the mall have closed their doors to business, effectively throwing the remnant of tourists from last night’s moon viewing parties into the avaricious clutches of wily pushcart vendors. Surprisingly, they take not advantage of the situation presented.

Down on the wharves and docks, typical epicenters of controlled chaos and extremely rowdy behavior, opportunities for work came in spits and spurts; ordinarily, that’s a recipe for trouble. Instead, lulls in activity inspire a slew of ‘first ever’ challenges. First, were tests of physical and logistical prowess such as crate hauling and stacking, but with no clear winners, next came a test of strategic skill; shogi tournaments between porters and longshoremen. As stomachs grumble and tempers sour, it was decided, the final test would be one of vocal skill and willpower, namely, a no alcohol allowed, shanty singing showdown. And thus, this unseemly group of thirty odd men, battle off to the local innkeeper seeking impartial judgment. To the victors go the spoils … specifically, bragging rights; the losing team picking up the tab for a lavish buffet and a place for the champions to lay their heads tonight. A boon to the hostelry owners … definitely; a relief for the constables and their civilian counterparts assigned to patrol those areas … most assuredly, but for the owners of the lone tavern on the waterfront … it is a time of unprecedented panic. Anticipating a crush of free spending hard drinking, ennui sodden men, they wisely bought up ales, spirits and vittles from their competitors, hired on extra staff and reconfigured seating arrangements. Now as they watch their assumed profits meander down the street, the only sounds coming from the lone tavern on the waterfront this evening will be those of weeping, wailing and gnashing of teeth.

It seemed that all over town, conversations were conducted in hushed tones; skeleton crews en route to lumber and textile mills, refrained from their usual foolish jesting and coarse laughter without being told; even normally rambunctious schoolchildren let out early were walking the beaten paths to their homes in silence.

Yep, definitely something mighty strange in the air.

Though none could identify from whence it came or where it would journey, neither could they deny its effect. It wasn’t sadness exactly, rather a sense of impending … doom.

By the time lights flicker off in the Admin Center for the day, peace, blessed … eerie peace

shrouds the entire southern portion of the territory.

To the north however, the hillocks are alive with the sound of frightened woodland creatures seeking shelter as the furious roar of a woman scorned rumbles through the weald.

“Outta my way jackass!”

Steamrolling past him, the rebuffed man breathlessly inquires, "Ma’am … you gonna let me … explain … or what?”

No answer comes. The only sound seeming to pierce the stillness is the distant creaking of a tree branch as it sways in the breeze.
“Can hardly stand lookin’ at ya, Kunio … sure as hell can’t stomach no more of your excuses!”

“You know me better … I’d never--”

“Stuff it!”

It was a struggle catching up to the hotheaded woman, but finally he latches onto her forearm pleading, "Tsume … don’t do this!” At his words, her pace quickens. “C’mon, we need each other--”

“Need, you say?” Swinging round, inertia puts their noses on a near collision course, “I say … bullshit! Needed you last night, but ya failed me … ya failed, us!” Shoving him a step opposite, she snaps, “Thanks … for nothing!”

Keen words strike deep, knocking him back another step; by the time he lifts downcast eyes, Tsume had put considerable distance between them. With nothing to lose and being virtually impossible to hate himself more than he already did, indignation started burning a hole in his belly as he stood there slack jawed, watching her retreat.

“Hot damn it woman! Get back here!”

Such an authoritative timbre shot a chill down her spine, freezing her in mid step; fully intent on recovering lost ground, Kunio stops short when she jerkily craned her neck to growl,

“I swear ‘fore the heavens o’er me…

if I turn round,

and don’t see ya running in the other direction …

you will regret it!”

Options weighed in a split second, heedless the warning, he charges ahead. Huge mistake. First thing he sees is a blur of blue sprinting toward him; next thing he feels is a brick wall slamming into his chest, forcibly expelling the air from his lungs. Perspective flips in an instant as Tsume is towering over him shouting,

“Ya had one stinkin’ job Kunio, and ya twisted it up royal! Your laziness means we gotta--”

“Weren’t lazy,” he shouts while scooting backwards, “overwhelmed and undermanned more what it was!” Springing to his feet, he’s inches away from her, “And don’t gimme that look, hear me? That’s truth … and you know it!”

“Oh? Found your balls, have ya? Such gall from a blithering blunderbuss.” Punctuating select words with jabs to his chest she asks, “Who was it … what helped my late husband write the protocols?” He refused to answer and would not look away. "And while I’m reckoning, riddle me this … who is it … what drills our people twice a month, on symptoms to look for?" Standing firm, he chews at his lip as she went on, “I’ll be damned … the answer to both questions is … you!”

"Get to the point woman!"

"Okay. Why the hell did it take this long for you … or anybody else to catch wise?"

“What … ya tetch in the head or sumthin’?” He slaps her hand away, “Or… mayhaps and on purpose, you’re misrememberin’ how stupid crazy it was last night?”
She took a step backward, “To hell your defenses … weren’t no crazier than all ‘em other nights under a full moon!”

Once more she turns, the goal a mere ten yards away. And as she stomps straight for paddock’s end, this time Kunio takes off running ahead of her, ultimately throwing himself between the southernmost fence post and Tsume.

“Go on then … I got shoulders big enough; blame me for every grievous oversight,” he pants, “but, you gotta--!”

“Look, ya arrogant clodpoll,” she yells marching toward him, “I ain’t gotta do nothin’!”

“Quit ya barkin’… if ya was true mad, ya woulda slung fists long time ago--”

“Don’t think I still won’t--!”

“So what ya waitin’ for then? I ain't stupid, ya know,” he said looping his forearms under the top rail of the fence. For a moment, Tsume debates whether a punch in the throat or a swift kick to the groin would shut him up faster. “Ya gots the heavy disappointment on me,” was spat out like so much spoilt meat, "damned if I aint peeved with myself too, 'kay?” Thoughts of violence against him dissipate when he quietly adds, “What good is lookin’ back, ‘tain’t movin’ us nowheres. Face it … coulda and shoulda, didn’t!”

She slows her approach as the bravado of the man she’d known, trusted and relied upon for years started melting away. Suddenly, he was much more than a sweaty, brazen ignoramus blocking access to the help they both desperately needed. Her thoughts still a jumble as she glares into his dark brown eyes, a mishmash of regret and defiance, the bags under them, dampened by frustrated tears.

“Told ya I was sorry … but that ain’t fixin’ the problem. Say what you will, or do your worse … I ain’t movin’ from here till you forgive me!”

She finds that she cannot move now, yet she will not drop the facade. Though, the longer she stands there with hands on hips and a quizzically tilted eyebrow, vestiges of her frustrations do mellow from their rolling boil to a low simmer. “Gwan now ya knucklehead … stand aside.”

“Aint happenin’ Tsume. Either release me, so’s I can get workin' on 'em quarantine pens with a clear conscience or … prepare to fight me!”

One exasperated breath later, her voice takes on an uncharacteristically gentle tone, “Geez almighty … who’s the daft one now? And for pity's sake man, fix your face!” Her eyes are sweeping the landscape for witnesses as she walks closer. “Been busier than the law allows ‘round here lately, I’ll grant ya that; stupid shit happens … to the best of us.”

“Aint happenin’ Tsume. Either release me, so’s I can get workin' on ‘em quarantines pens with a clear conscience or ... prepare to fight me!”

Waiting till he reaches the halfway mark of the paddock, she grabs hold the clapper and vigorously rings the bell till her arm tires. In less than four minutes, a sea of confused and frightened faces is staring back at her as she stands on the bottom fence rail.

“We got six confirmed cases of orf people … y'all know what that means.”
The expected ensemble of groans rising to meet her was unexpectedly muted by a single exclamation from Idate.

“Shit!”

“Exactly,” she said. “No tellin’ how many more is infected—”

“Meaning, now we hafta fetch back all ‘em hairy and wooly bastards–?”

“Shut that shit spewing cakehole of yours boy, hear me? Don’t you know cussin’ afore your momma is a goddamn shame?”

Idate slid to his right, shielding the kid from a certain rap in the mouth. “Tsume, settle down; Kiba, you know better. All ‘em animals need observation and or treatment ... elsewise, we’ll have an epidemic on our hands.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he grumbled, “just wasn’t expectin’ ta do all this extra ... stuff.”

Clapping a firm hand on the boy's shoulder, he assures him with a sigh and a smile, “None of us were, kid. Howsoever, it is what it is and we gotta do, what we gotta do.” Clambering up to stand beside Tsume, he addresses the crowd with a smile, "Right then, many hands maketh light work. Kiba, mind drawing up a list of every farmer and rancher what claimed their sheep and goats since yesterday?”

“You say that like I gotta choice--”

“True,” he leaned down and ruffled Kiba's hair, “you don't. That said, reckon he's gonna need bout three dozen men to help round 'em up ... any volunteers?” He beamed with pride as at least forty men raise their hands. “That’s the spirit! Off you go then ... and thanks. Second thing, if I know Kunio like I think I do, he’s already staking off quarantine areas. Mayhaps I can get fifteen or twenty of ya to find him and lend a hand? Excellent!” As that group trudges off, he looks to Hana softly saying, “I’m counting on you, dearest. Me and Tsume hafta inspect and segregate the remaining livestock. Salves and vaccines need makin’ too; gloves, aprons and kerchiefs also need portionin’ out. You got this, right?” Blowing him a kiss, she and five other women take off for the main house. “Everyone else, get in where you fit in; let’s get this thing done!”

Recherché

Just west of the cemetery, Sai settles into his hiding place for a time of reflection and planning. Thanks to the blessing of the sage and his generous gift of a small pouch of snuff, he quickly slips into a meditative state permitting him observe the activities of all three targets simultaneously.

Meanwhile, Jiraiya senses the shift in atmosphere soon after crossing the threshold. Racing upstairs, he rushes into Lord Sakumo's study; frenzied of mind, he jammed his arm into the tiny space behind the heavy mahogany writing desk. Calm overtakes him the moment his fingertips brush the spine of the little leather bound book. An oil lamp lit by a shaky hand casts flickering yellow light on the bookmarked page. Much ado about nothing, he breathes a sigh of relief as he skims each line, once, twice, thrice. The shaman is indeed the key. Chuckling to himself as he replaced the former master’s journal, he thinks, I really should know better ... the constant shifting between forms always throws me off-kilter for hours afterward. Mayhaps, a bit of rest, a little closing of the eyes prior to meeting my Lord, will suffice.

Recherché
After Kotetsu tramped off to go fishing, leaving his stew to simmer, Iruka and Izumo are still digging through boxes of Tadashi’s notes, hoping to find something … anything, concrete upon which to build.

At the book covered, paper cluttered dinner table, Izumo leans to his right with a yawn, “He’s gonna be back soon you know. Figured a way to tell him yet?”

“Hadn’t given it much thought, to say the truth. Doubt it’ll be a big deal--”

“Iruka … your friend doesn’t adapt well to changes in routine. You did notice how he almost snatched the door off its hinges when he left … and for why? Because he couldn’t find one particular ingredient for the stew--”

“So, he’s a finicky cook,” Iruka said reaching for another notebook, “… creative, temperamental--”

“Definitely mental, that’s sure. Exhibit A, when faced with the substitution of one type mushrooms for another, he pitched a gigantic hissy fit! Hell … he might go on a rampage when we tell him we’re moving--!”

“I won’t have you talking about him like he’s a brute beast Zumo, okay?” After turning another page in a book, he calmed down and said, “Tetsu is capable of understanding reason … he’ll be happy to comply, if you’d just take time to explain--”

“We talking about the same person?”

“Quick,” Iruka dropped his pencil in feigned terror, “ … lock the door … bolt the windows and let us pray heaven help us if he comes back here with an empty creel. No telling what havoc--”

“Alright chuckle buck, laugh while you can. I’m telling you right now, mooncakes won’t save you if he flips out.”

“Well then, prayers up and fingers crossed his penchant for sweets overrule that murderous rage of his.” Laughing, he taps the back of Izumo’s hand, ”I’m sure once he realizes we’re gonna do this thing anyway, he won’t kick up a fuss. But to be on the safe side … you might wanna wait till after he’s eaten dinner before bringing it up.”

Recherché

Back down south, at one end of the quiet town center, the tranquil aroma of Gobocha tea and the soothing voice of her assistant rouse Lady Tsunade from slumber. At the opposite end of the street, Ibiki is rolling out of bed to the sound of someone literally knocking him up… with what sounded like a battering ram. Sweaty, bleary eyed and angry, he snatched open his front door to find a grimacing Ryota on the stoop.

“Good god man … ya look like hell--!”

“You’re gonna turn my head watch commander--”

“Only fair I reckon, since you’re turnin’ my stomach. The hell did you slather over yourself before answering the door?”

“The flattery ends now, and, uh,” he said as Ryota brushes past him, “do come in why don’t ya?”

“You get any sleep at all Ibiki?”
“Nah, I did the comatose thing, you know, passed out? Time is it anyway?”

“Umm … it’s about … quarter past sober your drunk ass up--!”

“You’re in rare form today old man,” he mumbles while Ryota draped the fresh pressed dress uniform on a chair back. “What’s crawled up your butt?”

“Don’t know … air feels funny; something’s afoot, but I can’t figure what the hell it is.” As Ibiki shuffles off to the rear of the house, Ryota shouts after him, “Tripled the beat officers and mounted patrols should be gettin’ in place soon. Mayonaka is all gussied up … waiting outside for--”

“Holy hell! Now I ‘member why I stopped drinkin’ that rotgut in the first place.” Turning his back on the truth telling mirror, he growls, “For god’s sake man, go somewheres, sit down and quit your screechin’ … I’ll be out directly!”

“Weren’t screechin’,” Ryota hisses under his breath as he follows him down the hall anyway, “just tryna get you up to speed; that way you won’t have to ask so many stupid questions later.”

“Lookit … my head already feels like its fixin’ to explode--”

“Still sounds like a personal problem to me,” he said over the sounds of water splashing into the basin. "And I’d forego shaving with a straight razor if I was you … don’t wanna hack off something useful on accident. Anyways, docks won’t see much activity tonight … too early in the week. Civilian deputies oughta be able to handle whatever comes up on their own. Oh and, Raidou and Aoba are at the station, ready for new orders, if any.”

“Nothing’s changed,” he pokes his head out of the washroom, “gotta feelin’ Umino and friends might show up and show out at the tsuya; best do what we can to prevent that.”

“I swear, Ibiki … you gotta one track mind on them fellas. Gonna be hundreds of folk there tonight--”

“Yeah, but them hundreds of other folk got enough sense to be respectful: Umino don’t.”

Recherché

Back at the Governor’s residence, Lady Tsunade drains her second cup and gestures for another, “Honestly, I can’t believe you’re so naïve … it’s a shrewd business move, Shizune.”

“What I can’t believe is that you suspect their motives; surely the desire to extend condolence is commendable.” While straining tea leaves, she insists that, “In the times of our ancestors, the influence of the Uchiha prevented many a war--”

“I don’t give a damn what you or the Emperor thinks, hostility still runs deep between the Five Nations … you’ll see … insurgencies are on the horizon. And pardon me for speaking ill of the dead but … a contributing factor in the present day hostilities between the nations can be directly attributed to … the Uchiha. When it came to business, they were some ruthless sonsabitches. Cut corners, cut throats … all that mattered was their bottom line. Holding deeds and patents for two necessary trade commodities, they seized opportunity to enrich themselves on the backs of the lower classes. They made sure governments derived huge monetary benefits in return, while the workers scarcely earned enough to put food on their tables. Money, Shizune … that’s what prevented large scale war. With the Uchiha gone--”

“Beg pardon milady, these deeds and patents, what were they to … I mean … for?”
“For heaven sake girl! Copper and silver mines of course, as well as the smelting plants! The Uchiha owned at least twenty of ‘em in every nation; they made sure to install management comprised of family members to monthly report lower profits, thereby cheating the governments of taxes due …it was, the ultimate and still is, the longest running scam in history.”

“I had no idea--”

“Obviously,” she murmurs, receiving the delicate teacup from Shizune’s hand. “Because of our ancestors … their greed and complicity, we now live and thrive in a culture of corruption; that won’t change anytime soon.” She takes a sip as Shizune sinks down on the edge of the bed. “As for those puffed up dignitaries postponing their return home in order to ‘extend condolence? Bullshit! That big shindig last night was a means to cement old business partnerships and forge new ones; nothing more. I dare say, if it hadn’t been for Hatake’s soiree, they would’ve never willingly set foot inside this territory. The only reason they’re overstaying their welcome is concern for how much the Uchiha’s demise will affect their personal pocketbooks, not to mention, the treasuries of their countries. So here’s what we’re gonna do … once my hairdresser gets here, you go back to the office and prepare the outer conference room, ‘cause sure as shootin,’ those bastards will want a meeting first thing in the morning. After that, leave a note for the clerks to start looking for original bills of sale for the Uchiha’s vast holdings.”

**Recherché**

Early evening sneaks up on most in the land, yet Jiraiya senses its thin ebon fingers prodding him from repose. Strolling down the front stairs to the vault, he’s surprised, and slightly irritated to find Maito sitting outside Master’s chamber. When they lock eyes at a distance its apparent … the irritation is mutual.

Puffing himself up, he barks, “Stand aside. I have business with our Lord.”

Reluctantly does the younger vacate his spot, only to sulkily stand not five feet away. Knocking once, access granted, Jiraiya thinks no more of Maito’s behavior.

In the meantime, drawing closer and pressing his ear to the door, conversation inside the chamber is indistinct, even to his sensitive ears. Maito hies to his station in time enough to appear as if he’d never moved; judging from the look on Jiraiya’s face as he exits Master’s quarters, the meeting was an unpleasant one. No time to ponder what might have transpired, for seconds later, four of the Yasha descend the rear staircase to usher Master into a time of refreshing. Maito follows the procession at a safe distance.

**Recherché**

Empty of creel and foul of spirit, Kotetsu returns; his friends, careful not to meet his eyes as griping immediately commences. “Something crazy in the air I tell ya!” Creel slung to the floor, he marches toward the kitchen, “Wolves howlin’ in the daytime, fish not takin’ to my homemade bait like normal … what the hell is goin’ on around here?” Dark curses sprinkle the remainder of his monologue as he goes on the hunt for an elusive serving spoon. Izumo shoots a knowing look to Iruka as they hurriedly clear the table while Kotetsu serenades them with a disharmonious symphony of metal pots, ceramic bowls and chopsticks. “And another thing … I got some, maybe, bad news bout the amulets.” Iruka’s quick hands prevent a platter of vegetables from careening off the table. A bowl of rice was haphazardly slung Izumo's way.

“What,” he halted the crockery’s skid, “they refusing to make them?”

“Kinda yeah Zumo … and sorta no.”
"Meaning?"

"Michio ... kid’s all fussed up. Insists the head priest and his cronies are under the sway of the ‘Alabaster Terror,’ or some such. He’s stone convinced they won’t agree to our request."

"Great! Just what we need, another setback."

"Relax ya pedantic petunia; they’ll get made … might take a while is all."

"How long is ‘a while’?"

His mind set on finding hot pads, he couldn’t answer immediately. Finally utilizing the sleeves of his shirt, the heavy stew pot was hefted from the stove and quickly walked into the dining area. Depositing the main course in the table’s center, he was proud to say, “May have outdone myself this time … dig in and listen tight. First off Zumo, I haven't the foggiest of what ‘a while,’ means to Michio. For one thing, they can’t get started on the amulets till this … tsuya thing is over.”

“That much I figured on my own Tetsu.”

“Good thing I wasn’t talkin’ to ya then eh? From what I understood, they gotta scrub the joint down, rearrange Temple furniture or somethin’ like that. Anyway, Michio’s got some friends, you know, rookie monks? They’re gonna make the amulets. Ruka, quit hoggin’ the zenmai.”

“How long is ‘a while’?

Izumo sadly shook his head; no sooner did his spoon dip into the bowl, Kotetsu needed to know, “How’d things go with the Governor?”

Fortunately, Iruka pipes up, “Pretty good, sorta … kinda. She figured a way to make the seal on my chest visible … for a few minutes anyway. Oh, and uh … Inspector Morino happened by her office too--”

“Leastwise he seen it, that’s a plus. I don’t like that guy, you know, but maybe now he’ll stop working against us--”

“He’s not exactly your biggest fan either,” Izumo laughed. “Unfortunately, he didn’t have chance to see it. Nevertheless, Lady Tsunade made us aware of an opportunity to kill--”

“Hatake?”

“Damn you and your one track mind! I was gonna say, ‘kill two birds with one stone.’ Why does everything come down to slaughter and mayhem with you?”

“Man’s gotta have hobbies, Zumo, elsewise he’ll wind up a tight ass, like you.”

“Alright now, none of that,” Iruka said around a mouthful. “Let’s try to maintain peace until after dessert, shall we?”

“Yes, and if you’re a good little hooligan till then, you can have two mooncakes--”

“Mooncakes … for real?”

It was Izumo’s turn to give a dramatic eye roll, “As I tried to say earlier, ya homicidal maniac, Lady
Tsunade made us aware of a clinic that’s looking to hire—"

“So what? I ain’t no doctor—”

“Every day, the medical world breathes a sigh of relief because you aren’t. Listen, this clinic has a blacksmith on its premises who could use some help—”

“The hell kinda clinic has a blacksmith?”

“One that caters to animals, naturally.”

“Well, as you also half-ass said, killin’ animals is what I do best … in terms of providing meat for our table. Pretty sure that ain’t the aim of this clinic.”

“Ding, ding, ding … you’re correct, for once. Did I neglect to mention this clinic is two miles down the road from Hatake’s house?”

A sly grin slides halfway across Kotetsu’s face, “Now you’re talkin’ sense. Close to Hatake and me with access to a forge, whetstones, sandstones and such, it’s perfect … couldn’t hope for anything better. Our compatriots are gonna need weapons anyway—”

“Don’t tell me, you were out in the woods organizing an army of woodland creatures—”

“That’s stupid Zumo. Anybody with a lick of sense knows woodland creatures can’t hold no weapons! I’m talkin’ about Michio and his friends. In addition to working on our amulets, these wannabe monks are just itchin’ to kick some demon butt—”

“Umm … hold up a minute. We’re trying to keep this thing quiet, remember?”

“Ruka, they spend half their days in martial arts training, the other half learning how to say prayers; shame to let all that go to waste. I promise, they won’t say nothing to nobody—”

“Tetsu, they live in a cloistered monastery … how are they supposed to work on our stuff without anybody catching wise? More importantly, how are they gonna sneak out to fight without somebody noticing?”

“Hush up ya pessimistic red spider lily … me and Michio got this. ‘Sides, I already gave him that magic scroll thingy—”

“That simply won’t do. Even if they make the amulets, they still need to be blessed by a priest or monk—”

“Fine, then we let Ruka’s ace handle the religious stuff … he can take ‘em up to them bush folk, they can do the blessings—”

“Bush folk?”

“Yeah, the long beards what live on the mountain—”

“You mean … the Yamabushi?”

“Yams in bushes, whatever … same thing. Just shut up and eat.”

**Recherché**

*Altar area full up with his scent, ossuary chest slightly askew … least that explains the attitude and*
why he was standing guard. Peering from the door to Lord Sakumo’s study, Jiraiya contents himself with the knowledge Maito was too simple minded to make any sort connection. Then again, he thinks, to presume is unwise; won’t hurt none to investigate. Stepping out into the corridor, he watches Maito pace about in a confined area, five doors away from where their Master prepared for the evening. The closer he came to the other, the more offensive the aroma filling his nostrils.

“Oi! What goes on in there?”

“Our Lord expends his energy before the tsuya sir. I too, must prepare,” he makes to walk past him, “please, excuse me.”

“What is that smell?”

“Um … Kinoe, I imagine—”

“No you fool! This reeks of untainted … human virtue. Let us away to the Master … quickly!”

Side by side, they hasten toward the room, throwing their combined weight against the door which refused to budge.

Inside Master’s bedchamber, the same silvery mist which hovered over him downstairs, now emits noxious fumes as it fills the entire room. At the sound of the Yasha’s screams, Master emerges from a side room, arriving in time to watch them vanish into puffs of thick black smoke as the overpowering weight of purity and the heady fragrances of lotus blossoms and jasmine wash over him.

In the blink of an eye, an enraged Lord Hatake transforms into his godly form, his wings stretching from one end of the room to the other as he towers over the tiny misty plume in the center of the space.

“Who dares invade my sanctuary? Show yourself!”

Wisps of smoke quickly obey, taking on form and flesh. Suddenly, a being slight in stature was propelled forward by a beam of blazing light.

“My word. How handsome you are this evening … Lord Hatake.”

As it makes to genuflect before him, Master reverts to human form, falling on his face, as salty liquids cloud his eyes. And right before the mist completely envelopes him, Master was heard to say,

“You … you’re the secret weapon?”

Notes:

Solemnity: a formal or ceremonious observance of an occasion or event.

Avaricious: having or showing an extreme greed for wealth or material gain.

Boon: something to be thankful for; blessing, benefit.
Hostelry (archaic): an inn.

Unseemly: unbecoming or indecorous in appearance, speech or conduct.

Ennui: a feeling of listlessness and dissatisfaction arising from a lack of occupation or excitement.

Scorn: open disrespect for someone or something. “Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned,” is attributed to the British playwright and poet William Congreve who wrote this line in his play entitled, *The Mourning Bride*, 1697.

The name Kunio means, “countryman.”

Breathlessly: in a way that involves gasping for breath, typically due to exertion.

Inertia: resistance of any object to change in its motion, including a change in direction. In other words, an object will stay still or keep moving at the same speed and in a straight line, unless acted upon by an external, unbalanced force.

To *crane the neck* is to stretch one’s neck or head in a particular direction in order to see or hear something better.

Gall: bold impudent behavior.

Blithering: foolish talking.

Blunderbuss: insensitive, blundering person.

Clodpoll: stupid person, blockhead.

‘Tain’t: contraction of ‘it aint.’

Vestige: the last small part of something that existed before.

So's; contraction of ‘so that, in order that,’ or ‘to the extent that.’

Lazaretto: a building or a ship used for detention in quarantine.

Orf is a rash like disease caused by the parapox virus, occurring primarily in sheep and goats; it can also infect humans. Commonly infection is injected by scratches from thistles of both growing and felled plants producing symptoms of pustules and papules on the lips and muzzle. These lesions progress to thick crusts which may bleed. Orf is a zoonotic disease, meaning it can pass from animals to humans. Early in the infection, sores appear as blisters that develop into crusty scabs. Sheep and goats may get sores on their lower legs and teats, especially when ewes or does are nursing infected lambs or kids. Young animals may have difficulty nursing and may require bottle or tube feeding. Nursing ewes or does with lesions on their udders may abandon their lambs, and older animals with oral lesions may also require nutritional support. Except in rare cases, animals recover completely from sore mouth infections within a month.

In the days of the shogun, Japanese merchants mainly exported silver, diamonds, copper, swords and other artifacts while importing Chinese silk, sugar and deer skins.

Zenmai, known as *Osmuna japonica*, is a large deciduous edible fern; they are prepared by boiling in water with either soy sauce, vinegar and sugar.

Gobocha tea is made from the roasted shavings of *gobo* (burdock) root; it has an intense earthy flavor similar to mushroom broth. Highly popular in Japan due to the belief that it offers anti-aging benefits.
Insurgency: rebellion against authority when those taking part in the rebellion are not recognized as belligerents or lawful combatants.


Pessimistic: tending to see the worst aspect of things or to believe the worst will happen.

In Japan, red spider lilies are associated with final goodbyes; legend maintains they grow wherever people part ways for good. In old Buddhist writings, the red spider lily was said to guide the dead through *samsara* (the cycle of rebirth). Often used for funerals, they are commonly used decoratively with no such association.

The Lotus belongs to the *Nelumbo* genus, and has long been associated with purity, rebirth and divinity. Although it often grows in mud, and returns within it at night, it always flowers clean the following day. Each flower color also has its own symbolism; for Buddhist practitioners, a white lotus symbolizes purity, whereas a yellow lotus is associated with spiritual ascension. White lotus also symbolizes spiritual perfection and mental purity.

Jasmine is considered a symbol of affection and eternal love. Jasmine flowers are thought to communicate the idea of true beauty itself and the beauty of motherhood.
As it was before, so it is now. The tsuya is the hub of activity; from it's spokes, several segments of the story will spin, so hang tight, 'cause here we go!

Oh, and Lord Hatake isn't the only one with a secret weapon.

Far too long lost in murky visions from the past,

at last

he summons the strength to ask,

“Why?

The drums of war in the distance echo; the secret weapon long awaited, nay, the key to ultimate victory

as it turns out is but

… a pacifist.

Irronies abounds, forcing me ask again.

Why?”

From the mist came a voice familiar yet foreign. “Lord Hatake, presumption is deceitful. A sure foundation, built on evidence incontrovertible, becomes the mandate for action, which must be taken.”

“Oft in the days of youth, my father spake these words--”

“You, verily, his warning still holds, for if thine enemy perceive me pacifist as well ... tis a victory. Beware ... curled into thy bosom, one lies in wait, determined thine authority usurp--”

“Only the one?”

Dazzling light flashes from the center of the mist and “Be not wise in thine own conceits,” came out as a hiss. “Thine enemy is foremost a celebrated warrior. Possessed of cunning and replete with multiplied allies is he. In his bosom resides the power of three. Having none root within, his loyalty twines round promises duplicitous.”

Master chuckled, “I see your temper remains unchanged. Surely you don't speak of Kinoe or Maito? Both lack the intestinal fortitude and necessary brain power to orchestrate a coup. Thou of all beings shouldest know, I never leave anything to chance. Opposition long anticipated, my battlements stand fortified; even the whiff of insurrection will be snuffed out in an instant.”

“Alas, with truth thou hast none acquaintance; it is familiarity which blindeth thine eyes.
Knowledge that thine enemy seeks to rend asunder and trample down is golden, yet one thing hast thou neglected … that shall be thine undoing. The stubbornness of my Lord Hatake Kakashi, makes clear a path for his enemy to--”

“Be still, harness thy tongue; in your Lord’s affairs meddle not--!”

“I will not be silenced! Thy refusal to leave blood heirs that the great name of Hatake continue, this ... delusional and inordinate desire for power giveth carte blanche access to the throne rightfully yours--”

“Constant doth thou prattle on ... art thou unafraid of the consequences?”

“Truth hath not fear. I am a loyal servant to but one Master, mine own. Therefore, my speech and actions are ever in accord with his will, to direct thee in a path correct--”

“Sending one weak as thou art to upbraid a god? Now I understand why thou appeareth before me an enigma ... your master is a fool!”

“I came to declare what thou wouldst not bear from another. Though it pains my Lord, thou must pay heed--”

“Show thyself, for how am I to trust one who utters dark sayings with shrouded face?”

“Nay my Lord. The one who maketh me his ambassador is strict, ordering mine visage remain hidden until we engage the enemy. Set thy mind instead to discovering the identity and purposes of the dissembler--”

“No … no more of thy words shall I entertain. Begone!”

“The vastness of eternity’s void, even that cannot prevent my Master’s power; thou art the fool for believing thy sharp words can deter my mission. The verity of my Master’s words resonate deep within; they cannot be denied. If thou truly be the last of this great family, prove thyself worthy the name Hatake. Humble yourself to sit at the feet of the wise one. Receive his counsel, apply thine heart to know wisdom--”

“Enough!”

“Indeed, for of thine vainglory am I weary. Behold, outside thy chamber, two exhaust themselves with feverish abandon. Mayhaps thy bombast be comfort to their ears. From thine arrogance, I take my leave.”

In an instant, the source of his own comfort and aggravation, gone.

Stuck in his heart, an unvoiced, “Wait!”

Reaching out, grasping nothing, the room turns frigid as he’s unceremoniously released from the warm embrace of the mist.

It takes not two seconds before Jiraiya and Maito break forth upon him.

“My Lord! A presence disturbing--!”

“All is well, Maito--”

“Thy Yasha defeated, the atmosphere, thick with a cloying stench of purity … my Lord, are you sure you are--?”
“Jiraiya, fret not thyself ... I am unharmed.” Rising from his knees, he instructs, “Attend thy duty assigned. Go ... await my signal.”

“At once my Lord.”

“Maito ... fetch Kinoe that my dressing continue. You are then to initiate surveillance around the Temple. Mark well my target, but do not engage.”

“It shall be as you say Master.”

**Recherché**

Agarwood and sandalwood, the fragrances of lament and worship coupled with the sad refrains of professional mourning women float through the cabin’s windows as Iruka and Izumo settle back into their work.

“I got one more surprise for ya,” Kotetsu called from the kitchen, “it’s a good one, I promise.” Balanced in his hands is a small wooden tray whereon a moderate sized ceramic jug jostles against three mismatched teacups and a chipped plate piled high with mooncakes. Taking note of Izumo’s perpetual forehead crinkle of disapproval, he was quick to say, “I didn’t buy this stuff, alright? Gift from Michio.” While parceling out the items, he made a grand show of impersonating a sommelier; with exaggerated effort, he twists and pops the cork, giving it a sniff he declares, “It is a delicate, yet robust bouquet for a plum wine. June, ah yes, it was a very good month indeed.”

Iruka barely held back a chuckle as Kotetsu fills his cup despite being waved off. “None for me my good man; more work needs doing before I can call it a night. Like to be clear headed for it if you don’t mind.”

“Won’t kill ya to rest your brain a few hours Dr. Killjoy.”

“Begrudgingly ... I must agree with Tetsu. We’re all full as ticks on a fat dog; trying to plow through any more of Tadashi’s journals at this point would be tantamount to buying an express ticket to snore city.”

“Yeah ... what he said. And don’t look to me as a substitute study buddy; you know how I feel about unnecessary readin’ Ruka.”

“As usual Tetsu, your honesty is refreshing ... and extremely unhelpful.”

“Hey, I strive for consistency.”

“Iruka, we have busy days ahead ... might as well relax and have a few laughs while we can.”

“Equally valid points,” he said pushing his cup toward Izumo, “but just let me check one more thing before we plunge headlong into debauchery, please.”

“Can’t this stuff wait till tomorrow?”

“Tetsu, this will only take a minute--”

“That’s what you always say; the next thing ya know, half an hour has passed. Tell you what,” he said pulling the plate of sweets closer as he sat down, “if you finish up with that, before I finish this, I might not ... ooh, white lotus seed, my favorite.”

Izumo turns his attention from the messily munching Kotetsu to Iruka, “You got thirty seconds
before his mouth and brain reengage ... go!"

“I read something about the rankings of yokai earlier, but I can’t remember where I saw it--”

“You talking about that twisted up diagram with the crazy characters?” Iruka nodded as he snagged a mooncake and passed the plate. “I skimmed over that thing and kept going... what, is it major important?”

“Definitely. A strategy maker.”

“Well,” he sighed handing one of the notebooks over to Iruka, “if you had it before dinner, oughta be near the top of this pile.”

So immersed were they in the search, they scarcely paid attention to Kotetsu drumming his fingers on the tabletop; they thought nothing of it when he noisily rose from his chair.

“Give ... damn it! I can’t believe you twits are making me do this!”

“Tetsu, you don’t have to--”

“Just slide one of ‘em books this way and hush Zumo, cause what I’m hearin’ is … the sooner we help him find this thing, the sooner we can start drinkin’.”

“Um, yes,” was the nonplussed response from Iruka, “and with all due haste. I appreciate your help-”

“Whatever.”

“We all know there are three classes of yokai: gaki, the lowest form, Yasha, a huge step up from them, and finally, the most powerful of the lot ... the numina--”

“Been hangin' round you guys long enough to know that Ruka--”

“Course you have, but what you may not know is, Professor Yamada left a set of identifiers for my father so he’d know what to look for in transformed Yasha--”

“Damn shame you didn’t think to read this stuff before the party--”

“Don’t be a wise apple. This isn’t a game, knucklehead!”

“Easy now Zumo, we’re in this together--”

“Then tell him to stop acting so cavalier!”

Kotetsu quirked an eyebrow as he leaned over to loudly whisper, “What ya think Ruka? If I look like a cantilever to him now ... maybe he shouldn’t have anything to drink.”

Iruka buried his head in his hands, “Tetsu, I'm gonna ask Lady Tsunade to check out your hearing. As for you mister man,” he looked up and turned to Izumo, “you’re winding him up ... stop it.”

“I snapped … so, sue me. By now he oughta realize stuff like this is important to know--”

“Well on the off chance he doesn’t, it won’t hurt to explain ... again.”

“Iruka, he’s too young to be this forgetful, so who is winding up whom? He knows every class of yokai can shape shift and he also knows each class of yokai has differing limitations--”
“Yeah, yeah … gaki can assume the forms of simple creatures, like dogs or cats, whereas Yasha assume more complex forms ... like, human beings--”

“See. I told ya--”

“Maybe he didn’t realize that no matter what form they assume, there's always something not quite right. Yamada detailed what to look for--”

“Ruka ... Zumo, I got all that,” he said plopping down in the chair, “but what I don’t got is why the hell we have to know this stuff right this minute?”

“Simple. Yasha are the first line of defense for Hatake. To get to him, we have to go through them.”

“Right,” the light of understanding sparkles in his eyes, “that’s gonna play into our strategy!”

Iruka patted him on the shoulder, “Precisely. Yasha assume forms complementary to their master; in this case, they present themselves as high class, demure women which is contradictory to their true nature as the most aggressive and fiercest fighters in Hatake’s army.”

Izumo looked up from his book, “In that light, what fell out at the soiree makes sense. There were scads of women lining up to dance with Tetsu; he swore it was his animal magnetism that drew them, but I knew better--”

“Pfft … you’re just jealous--”

“Not a chance, witless. Never denied they were drawn to you, but now I know why. Hatake needed to strip us of any advantage, no matter how small and since you were holding a majority of our amulets, I wouldn't be a bit surprised if he ordered them to steal them.”

“It's a distinct possibility Zumo, then again, the culprits may have been human puppets under Hatake’s control. I remember how he laughed me to scorn in that dungeon, saying our amulets were only a threat to low level gaki--”

“Reckon we need Michio to concentrate on making stronger ones then. I’ll get word to him first thing.”

“Deal. Sai is also working on something ... supposed to keep the peons at bay--”

“So it's settled,” Kotetsu said, slamming closed the book before him, “my concern is the other ones around Hatake, specifically that big hulking one. He’s some kinda yokai too, right?”

“No doubt, he’s more of a wolf-like creature. I’ve no idea his classification.”

“Whatsoever it is, I’m sure Tadashi made note of it somewhere. More pressing ... what are we going to do with this newly recruited ragtag army? They’re gonna need access to proper equipment aside from prayers and martial arts. That’s all on you Tetsu.”

“Damned if I don’t gotta do everything round here anyway. No problem ... you guys know demons and such … I know weaponry.”

“Now bear in mind, the right weapon used against the wrong enemy profits nothing. If I remember correctly, Yamada also made mention of specific minerals and elements known to be lethal to yokai; those have to be forged into the weapons, in the right proportions--”

“You don’t say Zumo? Gee, wherever will we find a master sword and bladesmith who understands
that?” Curling his lip in Izumo’s direction, Kotetsu slowly turns his eyes to Iruka, “Believe it or
don’t, I actually been thinking on that; got a few designs floating around in my head--”

“Oh … so that’s what that noise is--”

“Ignoring the droll commentary from the peanut gallery, I figure them yokai things are ancient, so I
gotta go old school on ‘em. Cast bronze daggers … easy to conceal, as are tanto--”

“Excellent,” Iruka said, “here it is, along with the list of elements as well. Let’s see …
molybdenum, whatever that is, borax, manganese, nickel, carbon and … I can hardly make out this
word, but I think it’s ‘chromi-’ something--?”

“Chromite, probably; it’s hard work but that stuff can be extracted from beach sand in a pinch.
Molybdenum might be even harder to come by as its recovered as a byproduct of copper mining--”

“Well if it helps any, when I was looking for the fire brigade awhile back, I ran across an assembly
plant not far from the lumber mills. I’m told it’s where they make cloisonné objects for export.”

“I’ll keep it in mind,” Kotetsu said after devouring his second mooncake. “Gettin’ ahold of copper
shouldn’t be a problem since you said they got a smith on premises at that clinic; it’s used to fashion
horseshoes don’t you know--”

“Wow, I did not know that. Tetsu, I’m impressed; you volunteering to go back to the Temple while
tossing around what for you, are some mighty big words--”

“Yep, told ya, I know stuff too. And if I don’t start drinkin’ soon, the next thing I toss around just
might be you … jackass.”

Recherché

With half an hour left before the tsuya was to begin, every path leading to the Temple was still
packed and jammed; the enclosure itself was at capacity. Ibiki and Ryota were slinking through the
crowd on the lookout for Umino and friends. And in between wringing his hands, and sweating like
he stole something, Genma flitted about greeting and seating dignitaries.

Blocked to other traffic by mounted patrolmen, the carriage bearing the Governor and her
assistant speeds along the only paved back road to the Temple. Outside the small cabin, Aoba and
Raidou settle into their positions for the evening; in the bough of a tree directly across from the
cabin’s front door, Jiraiya looks on from above. The forest floor around the cabin teems with activity
as mice, shrews and voles, keep watch over them all.

Meanwhile, a pensive Lord Hatake and his valet, disembark their carriage; with haste are they
escorted inside the Temple.

Kinoe was directed to stand in the space occupied by other attendants to the elite and Lord Hatake
was ushered to the second row of seats nearest the altar, directly behind where the Governor will sit.
To his right, many of the same dignitaries from the soiree; before him, remnants of the Advisory
Council members stand receiving condolences on behalf of the family. All too soon, came the fanfare
as Lady Senju Tsunade is escorted by the chief priest to the altar where she offers incense and
prayers. All rise when a procession of monks, each bearing a banner with the name of a Uchiha
family member and their servants enter the enclosure. At this point, Lord Hatake spares a glance at
his pocket watch; synchronously, in the treetops above the small cabin in the woods, an incantation
rises as smoke to the skies. Aoba and Raidou crumple to the ground as ones dead.

In the midst of merriment inside the cabin, Iruka rises from the table and heads for the kitchen.
“What a lightweight,” Kotetsu shouts after him, “one drink, and he’s already making tea to ward off a hangover.”

“Tetsu, leave him be … more for us.”

Recherché

Back at the Temple, silently does he blend into the crowd like a wraith; by the rear entrance does he carve out a tiny space for himself. Unnoticed, doth his grief freely pour forth until a familiar face appears before his tear stained eyes.

“Hey ya buddy! What ya doing standing way back here? Granted, you’re hardly dressed for the occasion but still--”

“Wanted to pay my respects, if that’s alright with you ... hadn’t intended on stayin’ long--”

“Didn't think you'd be here at all ... I mean, we still gotta full moon which means heavy nets for ya--”

“Genma, some things are more important than money. And why wouldn’t I be here? She was my aunt for heaven sake … they were my cousins--!”

“Like I didn't know that … but I woulda thunk, you know, on account of ... the whole getting disowned by your family thing--?”

“That’s ancient history--”

“Still a sore spot, eh?”

“It was for the best.”

“Leastwise you’re looking better than last I saw ya--”

“Shh! Prayers are almost finished … I’d appreciate it if you’d leave me hear the rest in peace.”

“Sure thing buddy. Was gonna shuffle off anyway, I’m the Inspector’s chief consultant on how dead folk get that way, so he’s probably looking high and low for me. See ya round?”

Recherché

At the cabin, the teacup slips from Iruka’s hand as he clutches at his chest. Staggering out to the dining area, he finds his friends unresponsive to his plight as they lay slumped back in their seats. He cannot cry out, cannot move to help them, as the pain in his chest intensifies, as it pulls him toward the front door which opens of its own accord. One foot before the other, step by painful step, the cabin far behind him now. From treetop to treetop, swiftly does Jiraiya fly, his eye on Master’s prize. The shrews and voles, whipped into a frenzy, criss cross his path in a desperate attempt to steer him from it. The mice race back to their summoner, sounding the alarm. But it was too late.

The path before him unknown …

phosphorescent stones light Iruka’s way to a fate uncertain.

Recherché

He shows up at the other’s elbow

unexpected
“Inspector! How’s it going? What a turnout, ten times bigger than the one for little Hitomi, eh?”

“Lower your voice Genma, already got a headache--”

"Then I got just the thing," he said reaching inside his jacket, "powders I swiped from the hospital. Whoops," he laughed after taking a sniff of the napkin drawn from his pocket, "probably not that one ... them's embalming powders--"

"Thanks just the same; rather live with the headache, scratch that ... rather just live--"

"Point taken, would look kinda bad if the Coroner did in the Chief Inspector.” He stood beside Ibiki surveying the crowded room, “You know ... I ain't never seen lotta these folks before, you?”

With no clean getaway available, Ibiki sucks in an exasperated breath, “You do realize the Uchiha’s influence extended far beyond Konoha. Several of these people represent the Four Great Nations, others stand on behalf of old and new trading partners from France and--”

“Oh, so these folks is leftovers from that big bash up to the Hatake house last night? Awful nice of ‘em to postpone their trips home outta respect. And ain’t it heartwarmin’ to see the Governor and what’s left of the Advisory Council standin’ proxy for the family? Speakin’ of which, I took note of something real strange. Itachi … you know, the oldest son? Since he weren’t all burnt up like the rest of ‘em, I could see it plain; had this weird thing on his face--”

“They’re called tear troughs. Fugaku had ‘em too--”

“No, not them things … he had this, like a tattoo or something, right between his eyes; didn’t notice it when I examined him at the station house, guess I were more interested in that knife sticking outta his gut. Priorities, yeah?”

Ibiki turned to him with a pained expression, “Genma. Is this really the time or place for that kinda talk?”

“You know me,” he laughed, “gotta bad case of the ‘can’t help-its. ’ So that tattoo thing I was tellin’ ya bout, looked like the character for the word ‘control.’ Just thought it might help with your investigation and all.”

“Fascinating,” he turned away and sighed, “excuse me, would you? I’m actually working--”

“Sure thing, but I ain't seen them fellas since I been here ... you know, that doctor guy with the picture book and his friends?"

Ibiki turned on his heel, “I don’t know what you’re talkin’ bout,” he said beating a hasty retreat.

"If you say so Inspector. Right, I'll pop by your office first thing, so’s we can discuss details of this investigation then.”

Recherché

Sutras said, prayers raised and glad-handing accomplished, Lord Hatake briskly walked away from the Temple rather pleased with himself for having successfully avoided conversation with both the Governor and the Inspector. He now sits before the fireplace in the manor’s salon, his trusted servant sipping cognac at his side.
“So, he did show up after all … interesting.”

“Yes, my Lord, but brief was his stay. I followed him back to town and watched him set sail into the night.”

“I want you to keep an eye on him, just in case the message left in the bow of his boat wasn’t sufficient.”

“The Hyuga girl, Master?”

“Naturally, have you ever known me to do anything without purpose?” While Maito engaged in thoughtful consideration, his master continued, “Long ago, my forefathers sowed seeds of fear and division in the minds of the Hamasaki that their promised one was to be scorned. Proclaiming that his deformities would bring dishonor and ruination, they were to destroy him as he breached the womb. His mother, foolish human that she is, refused to do away with her firstborn, turning him into the hands of the monks who healed him. So, since this bastard insists on living, I elected to exploit the emotional pain of his abandonment for my own amusement. If he remains ignorant of his legacy, we have nothing to fear.”

“Speaking of which … that presence in your chamber this evening, my Lord--”

“Will not be the topic of our conversation.” Master’s glower transforms into a smile as he watches the cognac swirl in the snifter. “Times of busyness lay before us, Maito; I’ve obligations to maintain namely, this human façade and my place in society. While these nip at my heels, looming before me is the realization of a long awaited dream.”

Recherché

As Iruka approaches the manor gates, Jiraiya turns his attention to the south, back the residence of the shaman of the woods, where his destiny awaits discovery. Under the watchful eyes of mounted patrols, the crowds are dispersing, back to their homes they sadly trudge. Ibiki and Ryota have long since ridden back to the station house and parted ways for the evening. And at last, Lady Tsunade kicks off her shoes and undoes her hair in readiness for rest well deserved. But as Genma wearily makes his way back to his shop, he’s met by a runner with news of a recent death.

Recherché

In wonderment does Kinoe stand on the other side of the door. “What are you doing here?” The glazed look in the other man’s eyes tells him everything he needs to know. “I see, not a willing servant then.” His smile is crooked as he bows. “Right this way, sir.”

Downstairs in the vault, the mist gathers beside Lord Hatake’s bed; the secret compartment opened, its contents laid bare.

The evidence before mine eyes is troublesome Master; lend me thy strength to prevent a tragedy befall thine only son.

Recherché

Back in the salon, Maito catches the scent of the intruder and leaps to his feet.

“Do please keep your seat, lest instinct make you appear overeager or worse … impolite.”

“But my Lord, this one has evil intent--!”
“His intent means absolutely nothing. Sit down, allow me refresh your drink and prepare yourself to enjoy the delightfully pathetic antics of this human. I guarantee … he will put on a show.”

His servant’s response stills in his throat at the sound of Kinoe’s voice from the other side of the salon door.

“Beg pardon my Lord.”

A soft knock precedes him. “Dr. Umino Iruka has come to call.” When the door slowly creaked open revealing their stunned and speechless guest, a growl of warning rumbles in Maito’s chest.

“Now, now … contain yourself,” says the Master as he rose from his chair and inclined his head. “Ah, Dr. Umino … so good of you to come.”

The spell broken by his acknowledgement, Iruka quickly found his voice,

“Like I had a choice, Hatake?”

Notes:

Pacifist: one who believes war and violence are unjustifiable.

Incontrovertible: not able to be denied or disputed.

Mandate: give (someone) authority to act in a certain way.

Enigma: a person, thing or situation that is mysterious, puzzling or ambiguous.

Usurp: take a position of power or importance, illegally or by force. (Archaic) - encroach or infringe upon another’s rights.

Carte blanche: complete freedom to act as one wishes or thinks best; full discretionary power or unconditional authority.

Dissembler: one who professes beliefs and opinions they do not hold in order to conceal their true feelings or motives.

Upbraid: criticize severely; find fault with.

Vainglory: inordinate pride in oneself or one’s achievements; boastful vanity.

Bombast: pretentious words.

Agarwood: fragrant, dark resinous wood used in incense, perfume and small carvings. Formed in the heartwood of Aquilaria trees when they become infected with a specific type of mold (Phialophora parasitica). When harvested, the resinous wood is separated from the scentless cream colored wood that surrounds it. That resin is known as the ‘King of Incense,’ its heady scent has historical connections stretching across Buddhism, Taoism, Islam and Christianity. In the past, it was used in medicine as an outstanding painkiller. Agarwood is distilled to make oud oil, which is so ridiculously expensive, it’s called ‘liquid gold.’

Sandalwood, a heavy, fine-grained wood from the genus *Santalum*, is the second most expensive wood in the world. It’s scent is said to carry the soul into the next life. Considered a divine wood, it was used in carving and construction for temples, idols religious statues and spiritual tools. It is still
used in temples today as it is believed to bring people closer to their divine nature.

Tantamount: equivalent in value, force or effect.

Debauchery (archaic): seduction from duty.

Nonplussed: (of a person) surprised and confused so much they are unsure how to act.

Demure: reserved, modest and shy.

Droll: curious or unusual in a way that promotes dry amusement.

Sutra: In Buddhism, a *sutta* or *sutra* is part of canonical scriptures, not terse sayings which embody generalized truth or astute observations. Instead, they share the characteristics of a sermon or eulogy and can be quite lengthy.

Glad-hand: a warm and hearty, but often, insincere greeting or welcome.

Tear troughs: grooves that sit between the lower eyelids and cheeks; usually genetic rather than the result of aging and can appear as early as one’s twenties.

Synchronously: occurring at the same time.

Molybdenum is a ductile, silvery-white metal that is highly resistant to corrosion, used as an alloy with iron in making It has one of the highest melting points of all pure elements. Though it easily forms compounds with other elements, it is not found free in nature. is a micronutrient essential for life, but too much of it is toxic. It is present in dozens of enzymes, most importantly, the enzyme nitrogenase, which allows nitrogen in the atmosphere to be taken up and transformed into compounds that allow humans to synthesize and utilize proteins. And as mentioned earlier, it is recovered as a byproduct of copper mining.

Chromium: a naturally occurring heavy metal found in the earth’s crust; a steely-gray, lustrous, hard and brittle transition metal that is highly resistant to tarnishing. Chromite is a mineral that is an iron chromium oxide. Small amounts of chromite are found in several different types of rock; those large enough for mining are generally found in (1) stratiform deposits (igneous rock like peridotite that slowly crystallized from substructure magma, (2) podiform deposits and (3) beach sands (derived from the weathering of chromite bearing rocks).

A person walking at an average clip can be assumed to walk five miles (the distance between Iruka's cabin and Hatake manor) in roughly one and one half hour.
“Now, now … contain yourself,” says the Master as he rose from his chair and inclined his head. “Ah, Dr. Umino … so good of you to come.”

The spell broken by his acknowledgement, Iruka quickly found his voice,

“Like I had a choice, Hatake?”

His genial host straightened to his full height with a chuckle, “Yes … suppose you didn’t have much say in the matter. Shan’t happen again. Care for a cognac, Dr.--?”

“What did you do to my friends?”

“Straight to the point … what an admirable quality. Let me assure you, they are unharmed. I simply granted them one night of peaceful and dreamless slumber; no need to thank me--”

“Thank you? Why you pompous, nefarious ... ass--!”

“Please,” he said with fingers splayed over his heart and head bowed, “I beg you, be mindful of using foul language in my presence Dr. Umino. My sensibilities are ... extraordinarily delicate.”

With the slightly downcast eyes and chin solemnly dipping to his chest, Iruka almost believed him—until he lifted his head and said, “I invited you into my home that we might enjoy intelligent discourse regarding our future together.” With that, affinity transmogrified into anger in half a blink.

“Excuse me? Uprooted from my residence via tormentous enchantment … that’s your idea of an invitation?”

“Naturally. As a quasi-recluse, I am entitled to certain eccentricities ... society demands as much. Now, tell me something ... have you ever owned a dog?”

Certain he’d heard incorrectly, Iruka looked first to the servant beside him, who appeared similarly mystified. “The hell is he talking about?”

“Pester me not,” Kinoe whispered, "our Lord asked a simple question, answer him peasant!”

Heedless the tension flowing into the room from the salon door, Lord Hatake blithely continues his train of thought, “I have eight dogs. They’re shy around strangers, but they will make your acquaintance at some point. Funny, they were much like you in the beginning, rather spirited creatures--”

“You’d liken me to a pack of dogs?”

The servant to his right drew himself up, looking down his nose, “How dare you speak to our Lord in this manner--!”

“Hold your tongue Kinoe. To be precise, Dr. Umino, my ‘dogs’ are ... hellhounds. Truly amazing how they grew into fiercely loyal and wonderful companions over the years.” He shook his head fondly as he reminisced, "Had a devil of a time training them, until I realized that pain, is an effective motivator. Not long after that discovery, they soon accustomed to and welcomed my collar and leash--”

“Collar ... leash? Wait a minute Hatake,” he cocked his head to the side, “are you insinuating--?”
“That you lack the intuitive intelligence found in a common mongrel?”

Master cut his eyes to Kinoe, his voice taking on an ominously threatening tenor, “I’ll not have you disrespect my guest. Make me repeat myself at your peril.” Suddenly the smile returned, his voice, light and airy, “Instead, let us take a moment to appreciate the fact it is Dr. Umino’s first night with us. We must make allowances as he learns the protocols of house Hatake.”

“Beg pardon my Lord.”

“Granted. Here now is lesson number one, Dr. Umino; the seal on your chest is both collar and leash. The sooner you learn what it feels like to be summoned by your Master, the quicker you will respond in order to avoid the pain.”

“Didn’t have to mark me … coulda just showed up in my room like you did last time--”

“I came to your quarters merely to reclaim that which belonged to me rather, to my father. Let it now be understood … one’s master does not play fetch. As to the seal in your flesh, it is strictly for my convenience and your protection. Hopefully, you’ve learned what summoning feels like and what is the proper response to said summons.” Taking his seat, he lifts the snifter to his nose, saying, “I have no intention of shouting over my shoulder for the entirety of our conversation. Please, come in and have a seat beside me. Be not afraid, I shan’t bite you … again.”

Moments of uncomfortable silence unravel as Iruka refuses to move, Maito demonstrates an unwillingness to surrender his chair and Kinoe’s anxieties spike.

After taking a sip of his drink, Lord Hatake surmises, “Coming from such cramped environs, perhaps the enormity of this room overwhelms my guest. It’s quite cozy here by the fireplace … I promise; Kinoe, escort Dr. Umino to my side please and Maito, fetch another chair. You’ll be just as comfortable seated in the corner over there.”

Maito angrily snatched himself, growling as he briskly moved to stand on the other side of the hearth. Iruka shakes off Kinoe’s grip and strides with purpose, positioning himself directly before where Master sits.

“Why did you bring me here?”

Giving his newest servant the once over, that boyish smile graces his face once more. “Surely you can feign cordiality for a few minutes. It isn’t as if we never knew one another before. If memory serves … we were friendly back then, yes?”

“That was before I understood what you truly are--!”

“I see, and armed with that knowledge, you insist on defying me? Tsk, tsk … rather foolhardy--”

“To say the truth,” Iruka took a step toward him, “I’d rather drive a stake through your heart!”

“Well, chance would be a fine thing,” was met by throaty chuckles from Maito and Kinoe. “Your outrageous notions aside, even demons such as I, know something of human etiquette,” he gestured to the seat beside him once again. “It is extremely ill-mannered to stand over one’s host Dr. Umino, not to mention, threatening displays like this, only serve to rile Maito.”

Sensing the menacing presence at his back, Iruka side steps as he turns and locks eyes with the aggrieved servant. Easing down into the chair he spat,

“What do you want Hatake?”
“Why,” he wiped at his cheek, “to work side by side with you on a project … surely I mentioned it before?”

“And surely you remember me saying I’m not interested!”

“Must have slipped my mind. Nevertheless, you did come all this way … least you could do is hear me out. Kinoe, fetch a snifter for my guest—”

“I want nothing from you!”

“Say that you after you’ve had a drink to calm yourself. I find, the older the cognac … the greater its ability to bring about relaxation. This one was bottled during the time of Napoleon—”

“Like I give a damn! Look, don’t patronize me, just make your point and let me go!”

Kinoe hurriedly places a snifter on the tabletop and scampers off to the other side of the room while Maito railed against this current state of affairs.

“This one grows tiresome! Would that my Lord let me extract the knowledge he seeks in a manner expeditious and … violent.”

“I think not, this one will give me exactly what I want … in due time.” Tapping a finger against his chin, Lord Hatake wondered, “Perhaps we should have offered him plum wine? A palate as unrefined as his would scarcely discern the difference.” He shook his head sadly as he turns to Iruka, “You’ve so much to learn before you can travel in my circles without being an embarrassment. Ah well,” he sighed, “let us begin with something simple. We are now colleagues, and as such, I’ve decided we will address one another by our given names—”

“I’m opposed. That level of familiarity would humanize you, Hatake. I find the thought repulsive.”

“Maito, are you hearing this? He’s declined a privilege not afforded my other servants. Whatever shall I do?”

“Tis ingratitude my Lord,” he glared at Iruka, “thine honor trampled underfoot—”

“Get over yourselves! Any affiliation with demons is a sentence to eternal damnation in hell for me. Rather die knowing I defied you, than live as an abettor to a murderer!”

“Like your father was?”

The lunge at his host, painfully interrupted as razor sharp claws pierce the flesh of his wrists. Lord Hatake raised an eyebrow, “Can’t say I didn’t warn you; he tends to be overprotective.” As his eyes fall to the blood oozing from lacerations beneath Maito’s claws, he whispered, “Release him.” Maito slinks back into the corner, still baring his teeth and growling whilst Lord Hatake turns his head and covers his nose; the scent of Iruka’s blood too enticing.

“Kinoe, tend to him quickly!”

Instantly did regret rain down on Maito’s head once he saw the effect his actions had on his master. Nonetheless, he bolstered himself with the thought, *Whatever it takes to prevent a soul tie forming between them … that I must do.* Bright green light radiates from Kinoe’s palms as Iruka flinches away. As his wounds were cauterized, Iruka hissed, “My father chose to die … a man free … from the insidious influences … of a demon!”

His work done for a patient ungrateful, Kinoe retreats to his corner of the room, bitter Master would
extend mercy to this obstreperous human.

Posthaste does the mien of authority settle upon Lord Hatake. “So glad you find comfort in
believing that Dr. Umino, yet while your father remains cold in his grave ... mine lives on, a nagging,
disembodied spirit—”

“For the last time … why did you bring me here?”

“Yes, the project. Maito if you would, there are some papers in the middle of Kinoe’s desk; bring
them here. Dr. Umino, if all goes well in our collaboration, you will reap worldwide renown and
riches beyond comprehension. That is what you humans ultimately desire, isn’t it?”

“Not true of every human. I’d rather perish a penniless unknown than work alongside the likes of
you! Why can’t you get that through your thick skull Hatake?”

“I find this preoccupation with death ... unseemly. Surely you aren’t considering apprenticeship with
the Coroner once our work is finished are you?” Iruka rolled his eyes, never once rising to the bait.
“A joke only. I’m willing to overlook your rude behavior, but do not further antagonize me.” He
takes another sip as Maito returns to his side. “Back to the work ahead of us, this project will also
permit me the opportunity to realize a dream my ancestors once believed unattainable. In the
process, we will both honor the memories of our fathers—”

“Laying your petrified heart on my father’s grave … that’s how I intend to honor my father’s
memory. I don’t give a shit about your dreams!”

“Pity. The years have turned you into a fatalistic, delusional shell of the bright, optimistic young man
I once knew. Perhaps this will reignite the fire of wonder and discovery in your belly. You see, I
find myself in the uncomfortable position of needing your expertise,” he said handing over four
yellowed sheets of vellum. “What do you make of these?”

Snatching the papers from his hand elicited another growl from Maito which Iruka completely
ignored. Mumbling to himself as he skimmed over the information, both Lord Hatake and Maito
made out a few words like,

“Medical experiment … regeneration of living cells. This elaborate formula is for, a serum of some
sort. And this one, a log of statistics for the test subjects?”

Lowering the papers, he turns back to Lord Hatake, “Whatever this project intended, I must say it
was ambitious … and nigh unto impossible.”

“So, you can understand it?”

“Of course … these are Water Country characters for the most part.” He checked on the pages
again, "This isn’t his handwriting, but my father used the same method of formatting for his notes.
But you already knew that much, since you broke into my room at the inn and rifled through my
belongings—”

“To be fair, I doubt any ‘rifling’ was done ... Maito is meticulous about these things. He went
through your belongings only to confirm my suspicions. You are correct in that I am familiar with
the language of Water Country, but as you can see, there are numerous undecipherable characters
interspersed throughout; one of Yamada’s writing quirks, no doubt. I know, Tadashi taught you to
read these scribblings—”

“Maybe, but I’ve long since forgotten his teachings. Even if I did remember, why the hell would I
help you?”
“Cards on the table and all that ... as colleagues, we mustn’t have secrets between us. However, as your Master, I reserve the right to withhold any information until I deem it necessary for your knowledge.

“You admit knowing I was in possession of my father’s books--”

“Yes, but I was moreso curious as to whether you retained any of Yamada’s works--”

“Another lie! We both know my father destroyed every stick of that research, that’s why he and Lord Sakumo had their final falling out, remember?”

“My word, you are woefully ill-informed Dr. Umino. What you hold in your hands are excerpts of Yamada Kenichi’s original manuscript.” He refilled his glass as that truth sunk in. “Tadashi destroyed a copy of the work he and my father translated together. What a foolish and stubborn man your father. Let us hope you inherited none other of his willfulness.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Dr. Umino,” he chuckled, “you would make a terrible poker player. From the moment you apprehended what was written on those pages, your eyes have tracked from the manuscript, to the fireplace and back to the manuscript. I must insist you perish such thoughts. This work has survived through the years because of my diligence; I simply will not lose it now because of your stupidity.”

“You’re a polyglot,” he said through gritted teeth, “I know for a fact, you can read, write and speak, at least ten different languages. And of the numerous dialects that exist in this world, you’re familiar with hundreds of them heard over a thousand years of living.” Flinging the papers back in Lord Hatake’s face as he stands, Iruka snapped,

“You don’t need me for this.”

A wave of his hand, scarcely prevented Maito from attacking again while the papers gently sail to the ground by his feet. “I’m not that old Dr. Umino, and while I am a cunning linguist and morphology is a hobby, Yamada’s writings surpass my comprehension--”

“Bullshit!”

Again, that one visible eyebrow rises as he sniffs, “I never knew what a filthy mouth you had. This vulgarity simply will not --”

“Stuff it Hatake! I was practically kidnapped from my home, my friends lay under some kinda spell and I’ve befouled myself by sitting in the presence of a sworn enemy. If your ‘delicate sensibilities,’ have been assaulted … I care not for it!”

He turned back, watching him gently sit down his snifter, seeing his shoulders slump, Iruka thought to gloat. Lord Hatake would not have it so.

“I’ve tried to be a gracious host, truly I have. But this failure to understand what is your place, greatly distresses me.”

“What?”

“You see, I am unaccustomed to rejection by humans. So much so, I’ve been known to behave badly … very badly, whenever it does happen--”

“Oh here it comes, the part where I’m supposed to be frightened--”
“What you should be is, aware.” Lord Hatake looks to Maito saying, “I never understood humans, they seem to think the word ‘No,’ indicates finality, as if they were truly in control of something.”

“Awful full of yourself Hatake--”

“With good reason. Lest you forget, Iruka … I am a god.”

“That’s blasphemy!”

“Is it?” Lord Hatake scans the room, “Far as I can tell, the only one guilty of blasphemy, is you. What you must quickly comprehend is, within the universe I’ve created, I am the ultimate authority, the one who determines whether you live … or die--”

“May those be your final words in the ears of righteous and holy gods!”

Both Master and Maito pull faces of disgust. “This is the last time I will caution you about the use of foul language in my presence. Fact of the matter is, you chased me across London, across an ocean and now here in Japan, I finally captured you. You’re mine to do with as I please. Like I said, everything in my universe is under my control; better you get that through your thick skull--”

“You know what? I’ve heard enough!” He turned away again, this time intending to head for the door. “Oh, and Hatake … go screw yourself!”

“No … no, I think I’ll have more fun screwing you … into the ground.”

With another wave of his hand, a bolt of lightning slices through Iruka. Paralyzed, unable to breathe or think, he wilts to the floor much like the papers he’d flung away earlier. Lord Hatake eased back in his seat, sipping at his cognac while Iruka’s body twitched and his face contorted into a hideous mask. “This is what happens when my patience finally reaches its tether. Not very pleasant, is it?”

From his corner of the room, Kinoe claps his hands, laughing his perceived foe to scorn. Now that this mouthy mortal was receiving recompense due, Maito wedged himself into the corner, with a toothy sinister grin and arms folded across his chest.

“You … need … me,” Iruka pitifully gasped.

“I’m amazed … you’re still defiant, with what might be your last breath.” As the stricken man struggles to undo his shirt collar, Lord Hatake casually remarks, “You realize, it is my will which holds you between this world and the next. Do let me know when you’re ready to converse like a rational being, won’t you?” Leaning down, he retrieved Yamada’s works, smoothed them with his hands and gave them back to Maito. “Place them with the others please.”

When his servant returns to his side, he felt compelled to point out, “Master, his eyes are bulging and his lips are turning blue.”

Lord Hatake leans forward in his seat, “So they are. More of a green color I’d say. You don’t think he’s had a change of heart?”

Maito cast a glance Iruka’s way and said with a shrug, “He’s awful thick headed so, probably not. Does look like he’s trying to say something though.”

“You think? Well, in that case,” with a snap of his fingers, Iruka could breathe again. “I believe he wants us to know how anxious he is to get to work. Is that correct, Dr. Umino?”
Still coughing and spluttering, Iruka huffed out a single word,

“Bastard!”

“Oh no … I’ll have you know, I was the product of a legitimate marriage.” Waiting for the color to return to his face, he took another sip of cognac as Iruka claws his way to the chair. “Almost like watching a turtle attempt to right itself from his back. Amusing, but unproductive. Maito, do help him up please.” Before taking another sip he paused, “Where are my manners? Iruka, you look absolutely parched. Care for that drink now?”

Recherché

The shaman looked up from his reading as his front door is kicked open; he finds himself atremble as heavy footfalls pound the stairs, beneath a thunderous voice shouting, “Where is it?”

“Oh, Lord Jiraiya. Patiently have I awaited your return sir, even prepared refreshments to slake your hunger and thirst. Won’t you join me?”

“Give me what I came for lest I pummel you!”

“Won’t be necessary,” he said, pulling a large scroll from the length of his sleeve. “The requested maps, delivered into my hands by Lord Sakumo … after his father’s untimely death.”

Jiraiya was upon him in a breath, snatching the scroll from the old man’s hand and flinging his offerings from the table as he broke the seal.

“As you can see, it has not been touched since that fateful day--”

“Silence!

For your sake, may this lead me true, for if there be any sorcery involved, you shall pay dearly.”

Recherché

"While you’re recovering Dr. Umino, allow me tell you a little story. It may well answer some of those burning questions you’ve yet to vocalize.” Iruka rolled his eyes as he took a tentative sip of the cognac. “Many years ago, there lived a quaint country doctor, a Kampo practitioner who was also a brilliant anatomist; let's call him, Doctor Do Right for now, shall we? At the behest of his brother, he moved his little family from Konoha to London; there they thrived in the midst of a community of foreigners. Doctor Do Right became fast friends with another anatomist and pharmacologist because of their shared passion for altruism; we’ll call this one, Professor Do Wrong. Unfortunately, Professor Do Wrong met an untimely end which shocked the entire community … a home invasion gone wrong. My father, Lord Hatake Sakumo, befriended the bereaved Do Right, urging him to continue the work left behind by his friend and mentor, but the good doctor refused. Time passed and Doctor Do Right was invited to a prestigious medical conference held in Cornwall. It would be the first time in their history an outsider would breach their elite coterie--”

“Is there a point to this Hatake?”

“I appreciate your enthusiasm; your interruptions … not so much. Continuing on, in the course of attending seminars, Doctor Do Right was quite taken by a very comely woman. One thing lead to another and they snuck off to the woman’s estate and … coupling transpired. As luck would have it, the woman’s husband returned from his duties earlier than expected to find them in the throes of passion. What an unfortunate situation for all concerned.”
Iruka knocked back his drink and slammed down the snifter. “Why should I care about two cheating spouses who got exactly what they deserved for adultery?”

“Yes, two nameless adulterers … wouldn’t expect you to care; allow me humanize them for you. The betrayed husband was a servant to Lord Sakumo. A prominent member of the landed gentry and subject of the British Crown, whereas this Doctor Do Right, was a filthy foreigner, who just so happened to be … your father.”

Before the snifter flung to the mantle could shatter, Iruka’s hands were inches away from Lord Hatake’s throat. Despite Maito’s chokehold, he still managed a few easily deflected jabs. “My father would never cheat on his wife!”

“Truth is an ugly beast and guilt, a taskmaster more sadistic than I. Didn’t your father's descent into madness begin shortly after he returned to London, or did I misspeak?” Iruka’s jaw tightened as he turned his eyes toward the hearth. “Locking himself away from his wife and son, obsessing over Yamada’s manuscript in an effort to fulfill a contract with demon … what a sad end for a proud man. From that point onward, even you noticed the change in your parents' relationship, didn’t you?”

Though anger brought his blood to boil, Iruka no longer had the physical strength to attack. Languishing against the beast at his back, his eyes fixed on Hatake, he mumbled, “If what you say is true, what does it matter now? My parents are dead, your words can’t reach, nor hurt them any longer; my father can’t be punished for a crime which I’m sure was committed in self-defense--”

“I see defeat in your eyes, Iruka … at last.” As he raised his glass in salute, he said, “There you are Maito, told you he’d come around to my way of thinking. Since all the fight has gone out of him, allow him the dignity of standing on his own two feet as I continue.” With a huff, the servant steadies a visibly shaken Iruka. “I’ve spoken nothing but truth and unfortunately, there is still much hurt to be had.” Righting the bottle of cognac knocked over in the fray, Lord Hatake mused, “On that terrible day while Lord Sakumo waited in the drawing room, he heard a clamor and rushed to the aid of his servant. In the upstairs bedchamber he discovered a wounded, traumatized Umino Tadashi standing over the bodies of his one-time lover and her husband. Wrapping him in the unstained bed covers, my father brought him into his home. He cleaned him up, promised to keep secret these sordid events from his wife and the police, that his little family be not deported, all this Lord Sakumo did, in exchange for Tadashi continuing Yamada’s research. That same day, our fathers entered into a covenant; that amulet I took from you was a token of the oaths sworn between them. Lord Sakumo dispatched one of his Yasha to um … how shall we say … dispose of the evidence? Together with her gaki, they devoured the bodies of the magistrate, his wife and their ten servants, leaving behind a very bloody crime scene. When the magistrate didn’t appear at his appointed post the next day, constables went to check on him and the rest is how you say … history.” He paused for another sip. “I believe you were in university when this occurred but I know you heard about it. Delegates returned to London with juicy tidbits of salacious gossip that buzzed around for months afterwards--”

“Wrap it up Hatake.”

“Murder. Not something the police close their books on at year’s end. Should the constables in Cornwall catch wind of a viable suspect in that case, they would be willing to travel any distance for a chance to question that person. Inspector Morino already has an established contact in Scotland Yard; I’m sure he wouldn’t mind keeping you locked up until they arrive, or knowing Ibiki like I do, he might just hop on the next thing smokin’ to deliver you to Cornwall himself--”

“You’re insane! Didn’t you just acknowledge that I was in university … 250 miles away at the time
of the crime?"

“I did. What a shame that in the passage of time, paperwork can be lost or changed. I’ve enough puppets in London and Cornwall, who will place you wherever I say.”

Staggering to the chair beside Hatake, Iruka plops down, refills his own snifter, and swallows its contents in one gulp. Perhaps it was the alcohol finally getting to him or maybe, his bravado was staging a triumphant return, Iruka just went with the feeling. Wiping at his mouth with the sleeve of his shirt, he smiled and said, “Your plan to blackmail me has one, serious flaw Hatake. If I get locked up, all work stops on your precious little project.”

“Doubtful. I already have a doppelgänger for you Iruka. While it’s incarcerated, you’ll be at my side day and night ... what joy!”

“That you’d go to these extremes to demonstrate control over my life ... should I be flattered?”

“However you wish to view it, my will … will be done.” Lord Hatake sinks into the leather chair’s back with a smile as he watches the flames dance in the hearth. “Now that we’ve reached an understanding, I’ll let you rest up before we take a tour of the places where you will be working. Doubtless, you will run into medical terminology in Yamada’s notes that may be difficult for you to understand; feel free to seek my assistance with those. For all other matters, Kinoe, will be your assistant—”

“My Lord ... no!”

“Obviously, the rebellion leached from Dr. Umino is contagious. I simply don’t have the strength to contend with that.” With no more than a sideways glance from the Master, Kinoe was lifted off his feet and flung to the other side of the room. Iruka watched in horror as the man flew through the air; he winced imagining what pain Kinoe suffered as his body slammed into a wall. “As I was saying, Iruka, Kinoe is uniquely suited for this task. Not only is he an excellent transcriptionist, he is also well versed in meal preparation for humans; whatever it is you need, he will gladly fetch or do it. Isn't that right Kinoe?”

A muffled, "With pleasure, my Lord," lazily drifted on stagnant air.

Maito winked and grinned at him, "Reckon that was lesson number two for tonight; the sundry ways Master deals with disobedient servants."

Notes:

Nefarious: flagrantly wicked or impious.

Tormentous (archaic): involving or causing torment; having the nature of torture.

Hellhounds: supernatural dogs of folklore, alleged to have mangled black fur, glowing red eyes, super strength and speed, and characteristics of a ghost or phantom. Despite their ferocious appearance, most Hellhounds are more mysterious than hostile. They rarely attack humans unless they are provoked. Abilities: they can outstrip a cheetah in a race and rip down trees with their claws. They are also masters of disguise, able to conjure up cloaks of mist, shapeshift into various forms, or even vanish into thin air. In Japan, a wolf-like demon, called Okuri-inu, is said to follow men and women who travel by night. If the traveler has a worthy heart, the Okuri-inu will protect him from other monsters. If, however, the traveler displays cowardice or clumsiness (usually by tripping or falling), the hound will devour him.
Affinity: spontaneous or natural liking or sympathy for someone or something. Sympathy marked by community of interest.

Transmogrify: to change or alter greatly and often with grotesque or humorous effect.

Quasi-: seemingly; apparently, but not really. A combining word meaning, “resembling,” “having some, but not all the features of.”

Recluse: a person who lives in voluntary seclusion from the public.

Eccentricities: oddities or peculiarities of conduct.

Pharmacologist: a scientist whose work focuses on researching and understanding the chemical processes that take place between living organisms and different substances and compounds. They create, develop and test new medicines.

Peasant: an ignorant, rude or unsophisticated person; a person of low social status.

Tenor: course of thought or meaning that runs through something written or spoken.

Rail (-ed): to utter bitter complaint or vehement denunciation.

Abettor: one who encourages or assists someone to do something wrong, in particular, to commit a crime.

Cauterize(-d): burn the skin or flesh (of a wound) to stop bleeding or prevent the wound from being infected.

Mien: air, bearing or demeanor, as showing character or feeling. Outward manifestation of personality or attitude.

Obstreperous: resisting control or restraint in a difficult manner; unruly. Boisterous, noisy, aggressive and/or defiant.

Polyglot: a person who knows and is able to use several languages; a linguist is a person who has studied the science of language. A linguist can explain the rules, syntax and origin of certain terms from a language, whereas a polyglot may not necessarily be able to analyze a sentence in its parts and describe its syntactic roles.

Linguistic (-ist): study of language, involves analysis of language form, meaning and language in context. A linguist is a person skilled in foreign languages.

Morphology (-ist): the study of words, how they’re formed and their relationship to other words in the same language. Analyzes structure of words and parts of words such as stems, root words, prefixes and suffixes.

Altruism: the belief in or practice of disinterested and selfless concern for the well-being of others.

Coterie: a small group of people with shared interests, especially one that is exclusive of others. Intimate and often exclusive group of persons with a common unifying interest or purpose.

Comely: pleasurably conforming to notions of good appearance, suitability or proportion.

Covenant: a formal, solemn and binding agreement.

Scotland Yard gets its name from the location of the original metropolitan police headquarters which
had a rear entrance on a street named, the Great Scotland Yard. It stood on the site of a medieval palace which housed Scottish royalty when they were in London.
What I Don't Know Won't Kill You Pt 3

Though his breathing and other facilities were returning to their normal levels in gradients, Iruka still wasn’t ready for the grand tour Master had in mind.

*Such is the fragility of humans,* he thought.

“So that you don’t encounter any painful surprises, be aware that Yasha and gaki inhabit various parts of the manor. While the seal on your chest will keep them from harming you, I’ve also established kekkai around certain places inside my home, to keep you from poking your nose where it does not belong. The west wing on both floors and the vaults below are strictly off limits. That said, you are free to roam about the manor at your leisure. You will also have access to my office, whenever I’m working of course ... it's just down the hall.”

“You work?”

“Well, I must somehow earn my keep Iruka. With the changes Emperor Meiji seeks to implement, my skills as an anatomist and linguist are in high demand. The Emperor wants to remove all impediments to the economic, political and cultural development of Japan and what better way to establish ourselves as a modern nation-state than the development of a common form of communication? Not to toot my own horn but, I am a delegate of the Emperor’s special council; our task, to produce a common written and spoken language which will unite us as a people. As it has been since my return from London, my focus is on medical textbooks. Which brings me back to something, how well did you know Yamada Kenichi?”

“I knew of him,” came out huskier than intended. “A close friend of my father, he was the one who introduced him to the mysteries of the occult.”

“Yes, that particular fascination of Yamada’s caught Lord Sakumo’s attention as well. My father leveraged it for his own means.”

“I’d expect nothing less from a demon--”

“Well, we demons do what we must to maintain order. Here's how the thing with Yamada played out. Since he'd previously sought otherworldly assistance for earthly problems, Lord Sakumo allowed him to conjure up and make his servant, one of his own Yasha. Mind you, her primary duty was to ensure Yamada didn’t accidentally uncover secrets which might endanger or expose to scrutiny, the reputations of Konoha’s noble families.”

“What kind of secrets?”

“If I told you, they wouldn’t be secrets anymore.” Iruka cut his eyes at the smug jerk beside him as Lord Hatake went on to say, “Konoha is a village of refugees, built from the ground up as a sanctuary for other refugees. Having fled their home countries, six particular families were drawn to this land because of the abundant spiritual energy it possessed. Here they hoped to perpetuate their lineages of ability users and/or demons, in peace and safety.”

“Yes, yes … I know, the original founders of Konoha were a conglomerate of five families--”

“No, I’m quite sure there were six.” Lord Hatake sat his snifter down that he might count on his fingers, “Let’s see, the Uchiha, Hyuga, Aburame, Akimichi and Senju; the Hatake were resident in the land long before these others came. Each family claimed parcels of property from the aboriginal people and they fought numerous wars to protect said properties from encroachment. After years of
scrimmages, the Senju finally brought the clans into alignment. Allocating bounded estates and granting the clans access to the land’s natural resources, each family had equal opportunity to generate revenue and thereby sustain themselves. We have the Senju to thank for this system of government we currently enjoy—”

“So, what role did the Hatake play in Konoha’s storied history?”

“A mere trifle. Like the others, the Senju had big plans, unfortunately, they did not have deep pockets. The Hatake did. My family agreed to be financiers for most of the land’s developments—”

“Money makes the world round, understood. But what does any of that have to do with Yamada?”

“We’ll get there, until then, I implore your patience kind sir.”

Iruka swallowed down a slug from the snifter and hissed, “Go on.”

“Very well, clan Yamada originated in Water Country, from there they immigrated to Konoha. Yamada Kenichi was one of several pharmacologists who helped establish the reputation of Konoha hospital as a polestar in the healing arts. In his time, people died young after falling victim to illnesses brought to our shores because of trade with foreign nations. Yamada … altruistic soul that he was, worked day and night developing medicines he hoped would fortify our people against these scourges—”

“Yeah,” he sighed, “a national hero, I’m sure ... moving on—”

“He realized the epicenters of these outbreaks were the docks, wharves and of course, the local cathouse, where sailors happily parted with their money and diseases; those cathouse workers in turn, changed the waterfront area into contagion central. Yamada appealed to the hospital administrators who recruited test subjects for his new serum. Under controlled conditions, it was a success; volunteers responded well to the treatments and regained their strength. However, after a few months, they realized the treatments were actually accelerating the aging process and the volunteers died anyway.”

“And yet we still haven’t gotten to the point. Is boring me to death your preferred method of torture Hatake?”

“Iruka, as much as I’d enjoy watching you die a very slow and painful death—”

"Only say the word, my Lord," Maito's eyes were aglow as he spoke, "your wish ... my command."

"I'm certain of that, however, if Dr. Umino can manage to contain himself a moment longer, I can make him understand why he's an integral part of the project.”

Gesturing his host to continue, Iruka heaved a sigh before taking another sip. "As it is with all human endeavor, this whole affair started with noble intent and devolved into a grab for fame and fortune, but I digress. Burial of those bodies would have contaminated the groundwater as they decomposed, burning them would have polluted the air, infecting more people, so Yamada called on his Yasha for assistance. She summoned the gaki under her control to dispose of them and back to the drawing board he went. Three times he reformulated the medicine and three times he failed to prove the merit of his work. When the hospital threatened to cut off funding, Yamada undertook this work on his own. Using his own home and what amounted to a large A-framed chicken coop on his property, he culled the population for suck pints. Their pay ... a roof over their heads, thrice daily rations of rice, vegetables and all the cheap wine they could drink. With this
group of ‘volunteers’ Yamada discovered the new serum not only halted aging on a cellular level, but it proved to rejuvenate existing healthy cells, all the better to fight off disease."

“Huzzah!”

“Not yet. Through his Yasha, Yamada discovered an unexpected side effect of the serum, which is of interest to me. Unfortunately, that is also a topic of discussion for another time. “

“Your little mystery aside Hatake, sounds as if Yamada’s story had a happy ending—”

“And yet, I haven’t finished its telling.” Smiling at Iruka’s grunts of exasperation, he went on, "When he brought these subjects before a medical review board, the physical examinations went along swimmingly; wasn’t until they went to draw blood that they encountered a problem. One by one, the subjects exploded … no, I mean that literally. Blood and guts all over the place. The very walls, dripping with--”

“No need to elaborate!”

“Oh … you’re turning that lovely shade of green again Iruka. How rude of me to forget your squeamish tendencies.”

“If you don’t want this cognac returned into your lap, I suggest you wrap this up quickly!”

“Of course. Needless to say, the hospital was unwilling to allocate funds for more of his research after that display. Additionally, since he circumvented established methods of acquiring test subjects, they revoked all of his licensures on the spot, sending their ruling by runner to the territory’s department of regulation. Knowing he was done for, Yamada again called forth his Yasha, who dined sumptuously on the review board. Later that same evening, he fled the Land of Fire.”

“This cognac’s startin’ to back up on me Hatake--”

“Well, that would be a waste … do try to keep it together Iruka.” Lord Hatake slid his guest’s snifter further away from him and continued, “As his bonded servants, his Yasha and her gaki traveled with him. Yamada ended up in London, fell into the community of Japanese medical professors and their students and because of his skills, he was hired as an instructor at their college. That’s where he met Umino Tadashi.”

“Anatomist by day, occultist and mad scientist by night; this much of the story I’m familiar with. They became fast friends, Yamada died, rather, was killed; my father took over his research reluctantly and went bonkers, then he died too … the end.” He slapped the chair’s armrests and made to rise, “ Been a real hoot catching up Hatake … but I simply must go.”

“You think that wise?” Leaning over he whispered, “Maito so enjoys my storytelling, he might be upset if you don’t allow me continue.” The servant by the fireplace bared his teeth as he approached and Iruka wisely kept his seat. “Besides, I’ve yet to show you the workstations which I personally designed for you.”

Iruka banged his head against the chair back, “For the love of god, hurry it up!”

“Right. Tadashi and Yamada analyzed the old research notes and discovered there were certain chemical components in the wine the subjects chronically drank. These components in turn, accentuated the effects of the medicine, turning it into an unintentional fountain of youth--”

“Let’s cut to the chase. If I can figure out how to isolate and stabilize said components, you’re willing to give me his formula … in exchange for what?”
“Um … my undying gratitude?”

“Try again.”

“You have an analytical mind, I appreciate that because an intelligent and well-spoken servant reflects well on its Master. I care not for the serum’s benefit to humans. Take it as my gift to you, to have and to hold, from this time forth ... with one stipulation. I will not release you until I derive the means to do that which my forefathers could not.”

"About that, how the hell am I to know the results you're looking for?"

"It's called teamwork Iruka. You needn't fear, I will be at your side, every step of the way. Together, we will suss this out."

"What are we doing, Hatake? I mean, you have to give me something. Is there a set time limit to figure this stuff out or what?"

"My apologies. I forget you mortals are shackled to the concept of time; that being the case, I expect results within ... two months. Should be enough. Everything you need has already been assembled-..."

“Even if I were a chemist or a medical doctor, what you require is unrealistic--"

"Four months then. You can even bring along Kamizuki, who if I remember correctly, is actually a physician--"

"Yeah, this whole thing is not happening ... for a myriad of reasons. First--"

"Here in my home, you would live like kings, with servants anticipating your every need and appointments far grander than your current accommodations. If a monthly stipend is what you require, you'd earn more working for me than what anyone would pay for back breaking manual labor elsewhere--""

"Hatake!"

"What? Were we not playing that age old game of, from the sublime to the ridiculous?"

Running his fingers through his hair, Iruka cast an incredulous glance at the man beside him. "Let's talk rationally for a second. As men of science," he held up a finger for silence, “yes, archeology is a science ... we work toward logical endpoints to prove or disprove abstract theory. You can’t very well expect me go into an endeavor without knowing what the other part of this experiment involves."

“This is all you need to know, Yamada’s research involves experimentation on living subjects. You will translate his work and reconfigure the serum. I have numerous servants in the medical field, here and abroad. I’m certain your findings will be met with uproarious approval and applause. For that portion of your work, you will receive the acclaim Yamada didn’t live to see. The other part of his work requires experimentation on creatures such as myself, you know … the undead?” Iruka straightened in his seat. “As my father was to Umino Tadashi, I will be your test subject.”

“What if I make a mistake in my calculations? Will you then kill me... feed me to your Yasha?"

“Iruka, I have no intention of killing you. There are far more delightful methods of torturing you, which of course, I will employ for my own amusement. That aside, even you have an inkling of the promise this work holds. Despite your words to the contrary, I see it in your eyes ... you’re as
curious about this as I am.” Lord Hatake neatly drains his glass, “Come along now, I’m dying for you to see what I’ve prepared. And yes,” he sighed as Iruka gave him the side eye, “heard it soon as I said it.”

With a nod of his head, Maito leads them to a door to the right of the salon’s fireplace. An ancient skeleton key reluctantly turns in the lock.

“Welcome to your workplace.”

The distinctive pungent, oily smell of kerosene as Maito rushed in to light the lamps on the tables, juxtaposed with the sweet aroma of a familiar pipe tobacco which still clung to the fabric wallpaper, these made a startling first impression on the awestruck Iruka. He brushed past Lord Hatake to see Bunsen burners and graduated glass beakers gleaming brightly, as the room is slowly and softly bathed in the warm glow of gas light.

“It’s a laboratory.”

“Why yes it is. Pardon the antiquated lighting … just couldn’t bring myself to change all the features of my father’s original space. However, I did take great pains to incorporate the most modern of scientific equipment directly from London.”

“Must I remind you so soon, Hatake? I’m not a chemist--”

"Then let us all be thankful that I am; wouldn’t do to have you blowing up my home. Once we progress to the point of using this equipment, I will not only supervise, but assist you in this very lab. Over there,” he pointed to another closed door, “is your office, where you and Kinoe will spend most of your time. He will transcribe as you read Yamada’s writings aloud. For two hours each night, you will investigate his work as it relates to the human condition. I will join you for two additional hours as we untangle the other half of his works for my purposes.”

“You’re taking for granted that I don’t already have other pursuits Hatake--”

“All of which are secondary to mine. Point of fact, you needn't seek employment outside these walls.”

“How did you--?”

“Very few things escape the notice of one omnipresent.”

Gobsmacked on several levels, Iruka aimlessly wanders through the space. “I don’t know what to say, other than … I’m not a chemist, so--”

“Third time is a charm and I believe, ‘thank you’ is the response you’re looking for. Don't sell yourself short, I'm well aware you have great skill as a compounder of medicines--”

“What makes you think that?”

“From the time you able to peer over his work table, you watched Tadashi mix herbs, potions and clays to ease the ills of those who sought his help. As you grew, he taught you everything he knew, and you learned well. Yet another reason you’re perfect for what lays ahead. Though I suppose you’ll get used to it at some point, we will have to address that annoying tendency of yours to faint or vomit at the sight of blood.”

“Like you Hatake, I have … delicate sensibilities.”
“Humph … a man of contradictions,” sniffed Maito. “Mayhaps my Lord will let him watch as the Yasha feast—”

“I think not, we wouldn’t want to traumatize him to the point of uselessness. Slow and steady exposure is the best way to handle this sort of thing Maito,” Lord Hatake suddenly shows them his back, “I sense the arrival of your escort. What say you head home Iruka, check on your friends and get a good night’s rest?”

“Aren’t you the least bit concerned I might tell someone what you’re considering; this miracle serum ... the unauthorized acquisition of test subjects—?!”

“The seal has another purpose, insurance against your flapping gums. Not only that, but the moment you pass through the manor’s gates, select secrets will be blocked from your memory.

As I said, we demons do what we must, to maintain order.

Good night Iruka. Pleasant dreams.”

With a snap of the Master's fingers, Iruka reverts to the trance like state in which he arrived and Kinoe gladly escorts him to the front door. Watching him stagger down the driveway and into the forests beyond, he couldn't help thinking,

*Only a matter before of time before Master's impulses get the better of him.*

*Can't come soon enough.*

**Recherché**

On the other side of the salon, the mist has condensed itself into a compressed ball of spinning energy. *A human, to be housed under this roof? Ludicrous and confusion, it seethes. Do you see it my Lord … what madness your son hath wrought? I beg you, please ... let me reveal myself to him, ere he unknowingly make of none effect the plans thou hast set in motion.*

Notes:

Gradient: the degree to which something inclines.

Kekkai, a word of Buddhist origin, commonly used to refer to a protective spiritual or magical force field.

Polestar: something that serves as a guiding principle; something that is the center of attention or attraction.

Altruistic: unselfishly concerned for and devoted to the welfare of others

Omnipresent emphasizes in a lofty or dignified manner, the power (usually divine) of being present everywhere at the same time as though all-enveloping. This is a partially incorrect assertion by Lord Hatake, as in he does have eyes and ears everywhere, but not that he, himself is present everywhere at the same time.

Skeleton key: type of master key in which the serrated edge has been removed that it might open various warded locks. (Warded locks are those which use a set of obstructions or *wards* to prevent it opening unless the correct key is inserted).
The Bunsen burner, created in 1855 by a German chemist (Dr. Robert Bunsen) which made use of coal-gas lines used for street lights at the time. This burner provides not only a source of heat for heating chemicals and starting combustion (duh), but it also was used for sterilizing tools. Bunsen used it to study the light generated by chemical elements when they are heated; he showed that each element has its own unique pattern which is known as the ‘emission spectrum.’ This Bunsen dude also co-discovered the elements cesium (Cs) and rubidium (Rb), adding them to the periodic table of elements, so there.

Scourge: a cause of affliction or calamity.

Contagion: communication of disease by direct or indirect contact.

Suck pint (archaic) for wino; chronic or heavy drinker(s) of cheap wine or other alcohol, vagabonds.

Gobsmacked (informal British): utterly astonished; astounded.

Juxtaposed: placed close together for contrasting effect.

From the sublime to the ridiculous: used when talking about a change from something important to something silly.

Smallpox one of many diseases that wreaked havoc on Japan. Extremely contagious and often deadly, smallpox is caused by one of two virus variants, (Variola minor and Variola major). Methods of transmission: prolonged, face-to-face contact with droplets expressed during coughing or sneezing. Also spread through direct contact with bodily fluids or contaminated objects such as bedding and clothing. Persons infected had no symptoms for anywhere from seven to 17 days after exposure. Once the incubation period was over, the following were symptoms of infection: high fever, chills, severe headaches, back and abdominal pain and vomiting. Symptoms disappeared within 48 hours and then came a rash, starting on the face, spreading to the hands, forearms and the main part of the body. The person was contagious until the rash resolved. The rash developed into abscesses filled with fluid and pus which would break open and scab over. Until the scabs fell off, the person remained contagious. The myth of smallpox demon comes from Japanese culture. In medieval times, people tried to appease or attack the demon since there was no other sources of reliable, effective treatment. It was believed that smallpox demons were afraid of the color red as well as dogs. This led to a tradition where people would display dolls either dressed in red clothing or simply painted red. Some who tried to appease the demons, did so by trying to comfort them. They used a musical instrument (the sanshin) and performed ‘lion dances’ before a patient who wore red clothes. During the ritual, flowers were offered and incense was burned in an attempt to appease the demon.

Cholera, an infectious disease caused by eating food or drinking water contaminated with a bacterium called Vibrio cholerae. Before cholera first reached Japan in 1822, Dutch physicians warned their Japanese colleagues that a new and dangerous epidemic disease had spread through its colony in Batavia (Jakarta), so its first appearance in Kyushu was not entirely a surprise. Despite its geographic limitation, this epidemic left an indelible mark on Japanese medical culture and society, especially in the name mikka korori (literally, “three-day drop-dead”), and the fact that it was a disease that at least some Japanese physicians described as previously unknown. It did not emerge in Japan again until 1858 when American sailors on board the U.S.S. Mississippi brought the disease to Nagasaki. From there, the disease moved eastward across the Japanese archipelago. The next epidemics occurred in 1861 and 1862. In the epidemics of the 1850s and 1860s, many Japanese associated cholera with traditional demons and evil spirits. It was widely believed that the disease was the result of kami (unhappy deities), and could be appeased or warded off through prayer,
amulets, the action of benevolent spirits, or the use of other time-trusted offerings and methods. What is remarkable is that during its first epidemic years in Japan, people thought of the disease both as a foreign invader and an expression of domestic deities gone rogue—in much the same way they thought of epidemic smallpox and measles.

Before the time Japanese civilization began to come together, Japan had a spoken but no written language. As the ruling elites learned more about the brilliance of China through their envoys abroad, they determined to adopt the written form of the Chinese language to help govern the Japanese people; this language was known as Kanbun (literally, Chinese writing). It became the language of the imperial household during the Nara period. Bringing writing to people who had none, kanbun also represented civilization. Later, these Chinese characters were modified to serve as Japanese writing. However, the difficulties of learning such an austere language proved a stumbling block for the common folk, which led to development of alternative forms. Sentence structures were modified to reflect a writing style more closely approximating Japanese grammar. By the Heian period, it was the language of the elite, the cultured and refined. But by 1868 kanbun lost its foothold. Numerous communication difficulties were encountered in the written form because the various spoken dialects bore little resemblance to kanbun.
When Iruka comes to himself, he’s standing on the other side of the cabin’s door; his stomach churning, his head much too heavy for his neck to hold, he stumbles in, sees his friends using their arms as pillows as they contentedly snore ... an empty wine bottle tipped over on its side in the middle of a book cluttered table. A smile, which takes too much effort, slides across dry lips; heavy legs struggle to carry him to the small room housing his bed. It hurts so bad, yet feels so good to finally flop down amidst the familiar scents of home. Shirt buttons prove far too complex for benumbed fingers, the battle abandoned, he falls backward, sinking into the lumpy mattress which envelopes his body like a glove.

**Recherché**

Bathing his face with refracted light, orange flames dance from the hearth through the lens of a diamond cut lead crystal snifter held at eye level as Lord Hatake muses, “One servant broods by the fireplace, refusing to speak or take his place beside me; another gnashes his teeth as he paces along the corridor. Both afeared my newest servant is poised to take their places.”

“I do not like the idea of this human becoming a fixture, Master.”

"Are you speaking a truth Maito, or is it fear this mortal will consume most of the hours we normally spend together?"

The servant hangs his head, “Both my Lord. What concerns me is the effect his presence will have on others in this household ... up to and including ... you.”

“My basic needs supplied, I am content and in control of my instincts and desires. Please, do not work yourself into a froth,” he chuckled, “more than a servant, you are my friend, my sounding board ... my champion. Nothing or no one, will ever stand between us.”

“Master honors me with his words, yet his actions toward that human frighten me. You played the fool in his presence, allowing him to speak to you with remarkable haughtiness--"

“Correction. I made allowances because I understand the workings of the mortal mind; their emotions, however, are a bafflement. I’ve appealed to his inbred need to know or learn something new, all the while, making him think I’m slightly insane, these combined will draw him to my side more effectively than the seal itself. But enough of that. There has been a disruption in the energy flowing from the shaman of the woods. Go to, see how he fares.”

“Yes, my Lord.”

Out the front door and into the forests, he runs at breakneck speed toward the shaman’s hovel. Beams of a yellow moon anchored in a cloudy indigo sky light his way.

Lord Hatake finishes off the last of his drink as he stands. To the vault he will go, to pace over the slabs of stone surrounding his bed. He first thinks to summon Kinoe, in the hopes his body will provide a release from the thoughts screaming inside his head; that idea quickly rejected, as he abandons the quiet of this place and takes the back stairs to his office.

*Promised not to kill him; words uttered in haste, now, how I ache with regret. This need, which can only be relieved and resolved by a human ... I cannot abide! Yet, till destiny bring forth it's reward, I have none other choice. Wretched man, accursed creature that I am ...can nothing spare me this*
As is the servant, so too is his Master. Both requiring answers which can only be supplied by asking difficult questions. One will find what he seeks outside himself, the other must plumb the dark recesses of his own soul.

Recherché

The hours silently inch forward as the hand of the divine erases the night darkened sky, leaving behind a light blue canvas, it's lower half smeared with tinges of yellow, pink and lilac. Gentle breezes ruffle tree limbs, awaking the birds that roost in their safekeep. In gratitude they trill, chirp and whisper welcome to the beginning of a brand new day.

The realization that dawn is upon them strikes Aoba and Raidou with the force of a sledgehammer. Up they leap from separate places of rest, both of them, bewildered and terrified. Checking themselves and one another for injuries, the first thought they share is:

What the hell are we gonna tell Ibiki?

Recherché

Tap, tap tap.

Tap, tap.

Ever so slightly, his eyelids flutter open at the sound; it takes but a millisecond for those same heavy lids to resolutely slam shut. His ears prick up as the infernal tapping intensifies though a hypoactive limbic system convinces all networks that there is no cause for alarm.

Tap, tap.

Thinking the clapper on his alarm clock is either broken or bent, he lifts his head to get a better look at the nightstand, forcing his irritated eyes to focus on the 'thing’ sitting there. His alcohol fogged brain sluggishly draws up from it's vast catalogues, the scientific name, *Idea leuconoe*, its family, *Nymphalidae* and its phylum, *anthropoda*, yet it draws a blank on one vital issue. What was an Ohgomadara butterfly doing here? To which his sobering white matter responds, “Opening and closing its wings. As it does, they strike the water glass on the nightstand producing the noise that awakened us.”

“You're so far from home. How did you ... never mind … shoo!”

Recherché

Knowing they failed to carry out their duties, yet not understanding why, Aoba and Raidou creep into the cabin to find two of the men asleep at the table. From what they assume is a bedroom down the hall, they hear another man talking. Sneaking out, they make an uneasy pact to tell Ibiki that to their knowledge, nothing happened the night before, meaning they saw no one enter or leave the cabin; a partial truth, but one they could stick to and hopefully defend if pressed. This sits well with Raidou ... Aoba has his doubts. One thing they do agree on, getting back to town quickly before Ibiki thinks to send a search party for them.
After collapsing once more, that tapping noise becomes downright demanding. This time, Iruka bolts upright, shooting a blast of breath at the annoying insect to dislodge it from its post. This determined critter is unfazed as Iruka leans closer. Only then does he realize the pattern of stripes on its wings were in actuality, printed characters; two words on one wing, two on the other:

*Progress Report.*

*Must meet.*

No sooner do his feet hit the floor, the butterfly disappears. *Figures,* he mumbled while padding out to the dining room area where Izumo and Kotetsu are still conked out on the table. When the noise of priming the pump by the sink doesn't wake them, Iruka thinks it a good idea to make a nice pot of porridge to fortify them for the day; as he reaches into the cupboard for the rice, he ends up spilling it all over the countertop when the kitchen window abruptly slides up and he hears,

"The meeting with the Hatake, how did it go?"

"Damn it Sai! Scared me half to death--!"

"Sorry. Thought sure you saw me standing there, I even rapped on the window before opening it."

"It's alright," he breathed. "What are you doing here … and how did you know I talked with Hatake?"

Giving the frazzled man the once over, he screws up his face, "My scouts keep the three of you under constant surveillance. Don't you remember, sir?"

"Of course," he said scraping the rice back into the container, "but still--"

"Oi! What the hell, Ruka!"

"Tetsu… you alright?"

"No, damn it, I'm hungover! Geez, I got such a crink in my neck and uh … my back! Why'd ya let us stay out here all night?"

"Because you tend to wake up with fists swinging. I wanted no part of that."

"Leave him alone Tetsu. Whatever our aches and pains, serves us right for drinking the entire bottle of whatever the hell that stuff was," Izumo said attempting to stand. "Nevertheless, a new day awaits! Let's get a move on, shall we?"

"How dare you be this cheery … can't you see I'm hurtin' over here?"

"Yes, well," Iruka interrupted, "good news everyone! I got a message from Sai this morning; he has a progress report … wants to meet up."

"All the more reason to get ourselves together. Go on then, Tetsu, splash some water on your face, wash your pits and change your clothes; it'll make you feel better."

"Tell me what to do," he growls while standing and stretching, "you're not the boss of me Zumo!"

Still bickering, they shuffle off to their respective rooms and Iruka walks back to where Sai is standing. "I don't remember everything that went down last night, but one thing I know for sure … Hatake is insane."
“I’m sure that’s what he wants you to think sir. You know as well as I, demons are master manipulators of a human’s thought processes and emotions. I believe the Hatake wants something more, tangible--”

“He does, but he’s also genuinely tetched in the head.” Sai made a face of disagreement but allowed Iruka to continue, “Remember I told you how Tadashi and Lord Sakumo worked on a research project together? For years I thought my father destroyed their work, but somehow Hatake retained the original manuscript. Now he wants my help to translate this stuff.”

“Perfect! Agreeing to lend a hand is a step in the right direction--”

“Not like I’m doing this of my own volition! His mark compels me--”

“Understood, in this regard you are servant to the Hatake. Why not use this to your advantage to do as we discussed?”

“Don’t wanna … I hate the thought of being at his beck and call; he tried to kill me you know--”

“The fact you stand before me hale and hearty proves it has plans for your continued existence. Be grateful, Dr. Umino. When next are you to meet with the Hatake?”

“Weren’t you listening?” Grumpily folding his arms across his chest, he bit off the words, "I’m at the mercy of his whims."

“I assume you’ve already discussed this with your friends … what do they think of your arrangement?”

Iruka couldn’t meet his eyes. “Haven’t had time to mention it, but I will tell them this morning on the way to the clinic. Promise you won’t say anything to them before I do.”

“As you wish. You aren’t ill, are you sir?”

“No and this clinic bit is a long story I can’t possibly finish before they return.”

“That’s a relief, because the other reason I’m here is, I need an introduction to your friend, the head administrator of the land. You know, blonde woman, average height, huge breasts and--”

“Sai, please don’t describe the Governor in such crude terms--”

“Did I misspeak … are not those her most obvious attributes?”

“Yes, but sometimes, it’s impolite to state the obvious. Why do you need an introduction anyway, and why today, specifically? Not that I wouldn’t be happy to do it, but we have other plans for--”

“Ruka? You in there talkin’ to yourself again?”

“If only you’d come into the kitchen Tetsu, you’d see that I’m having a conversation with Sai--”

“Excuse the hell outta me then,” he said stepping into the space. “So, where is he?”

‘Don’t be silly,” he said turning back to the window, “I … he … he was here a minute ago--!”

“Okay, if you insist.”

From the other room they heard Izumo say, “Always a pleasure, but I wasn’t expecting to see you this early. Come on in … can I get you a cup of tea or something?”
As they peer out of the kitchen, Iruka nudges Kotetsu in the ribs, “See, I told ya.”

“Thank you, no, Mr. Zumo. Dr. Umino and I were just leaving.”

“Really? Iruka … have you forgotten about our other obligations?”

“Certainly not, it’s just, Sai wants to meet the Governor this morning and as I tried to tell him—”

“Nope,” he turned back to Sai, “we can’t possibly do it today, old man—”

“But, I have a specific objective to accomplish in the downtown area this morning Mr. Zumo. Thought it best to kill two birds with the same stone because after today, I will not be available to—”

“Aha! I know what that means,” slid from Kotetsu’s mouth with an accompanying leer, “who is she?”

He peeked around Izumo saying, “The woman who runs this territory. I believe she lives in the administrative building, blonde woman with,” he looked to Iruka before making a gesture with his hands indicating her bounteous charms.

“Sai, don’t be vulgar—”

“But sir, I didn’t say—”

“Either address her as Lady Tsunade or Governor Senju, understood?”

“Yes, sir, noted.”

“Kinda old for ya ain’t she?”

“With advanced age, there is a wisdom born of practical experience, Mr. Tetsu. That is why I must see her. I was made to understand a formal introduction is first required before she will give me what I need.”

“And you say I’m forward Ruka; this little punk’s got me beat. Love to help ya out there kid, but like Zumo and Ruka said, we got stuff to do. No time in the schedule to help ya chase your crush around her desk—”

“This chasing and crushing … are they also requirements to—?”

“Mr. Tetsu is merely trying to understand the urgency fueling your request Sai.”

“Oh, got it. Dr. Umino told me the Hatake fears this woman. If I can ascertain the reasons for its fear, it will hasten formulation of a plan to eliminate the Hatake.”

“Why the hell didn’t you say that in the first place, numbnuts?”

“Tetsu, please. Reckon we can spare you at least one half hour, but then, we must be off. Is that alright with everybody?”

“A half an hour is more than enough, thank you Dr. Umino.”

“Well, count me out. All that hanging about in an office stuff, ain’t for me. While you three are munching finger sandwiches and swillin’ tea, I can be doin’ something productive, like resetting my traps. Right, now sit down and shut up the lot of ya! Gwan, Ruka outta my way … let a man what knows how to cook rustle up some edible grub!”
Recherché

Having dragged herself from the comfort of her cozy bed less than fifteen minutes ago, Shizune heads toward the inn around the corner from the Admin Center. Knowing many of these dignitaries already had tickets in hand for early departing ships and that Lady Tsunade would have a fit if everything wasn’t in readiness, did nothing to lessen her stress. Orders placed for delivery of strong tea and light meals, in her haste to open the building she turned the corner and ran smack into a sullen looking pair of constables. “Beg pardon, Mr. Yamashiro, Mr. Namiashi.” With a polite bow, she excuses herself, scarcely acknowledging their muttered assents.

By the time Lady Tsunade arrived in the office not ten minutes later, Shizune is standing quite tall and proud; crisis averted. With the dignitaries enjoying pleasant conversation over refreshments, she dashes out again, this time to the Registry of Heralds. Satisfied the clerk will make the required records available, she exits the building with a smile. Loud voices across the plaza, her attention once more drawn to the same two constables, who now stand just outside the station house. *There’s something you don’t see everyday,* she thinks, *Aoba and Raidou, at each other’s throats. That can only mean something terrible has happened.*  *Crap!*

Recherché

The mist gathers in a corner of Lord Hatake’s office as Jiraiya enters; his request to travel to the Land of Lightning, once more denied. It follows Lord Kakashi along the corridor as he returns to the vault. Looking on intently as he once again injects himself with this unknown substance and crawls between the sheets, the mist disperses the moment it hears a familiar voice thundering through the mortar:

*There is no time to waste.*

*Strip from his mind that which you desire and then*

*… kill him!*

Recherché

“No, that simply will not happen,” Lady Tsunade asserts, “even as I speak, our lawyers are transferring temporary ownership of the Uchiha mines and smelting plants to the oversight of the territory. Our recorder of deeds is already sifting through the archives to locate descendants of the original owners. If by chance we find those with proper rights, I’m certain they will agree to maintain the status quo; providing any applicable taxes owed are paid of course, they will be the recipients of your government’s monthly stipends. If, however, we find none with familial rights, then control of those properties automatically and permanently default to Konoha’s government.”

Recherché

Their reports logged in with the watch commander, Aoba and Raidou sit with their backs to each other in the quiet waiting area. Across the street, Genma sweeps out the shop, all the better to keep an eye on Ryota and Ibiki who have met together in the plaza and are now headed for the constabulary.

Recherché

Having returned to it’s station of observation, the mist approaches the bed upon which Lord Hatake fitfully tosses and turns. Reaching out, it’s cool fingers brush the hair from his face.
Would that I could offer more substantive comfort to my Lord to still Kama’s voice.

For now, this must suffice.

Notes:

Benumbed: deprived of sensation.

Limbic system: is like a net, which connects and controls the actions of various brain structures. What does it do? Supports a variety of functions such as emotion, behavior, motivation, long term memory and the sense of smell (everybody knows certain smells can trigger memories right?). Yeah, so what? The limbic system influences the endocrine and autonomic nervous systems as well, affecting certain behaviors necessary for survival such as feeding, reproduction, care for our young and of course, the fight or flight response.

White matter: tissue in the brain composed of nerve fibers called axons which connect nerve cells; they are covered by myelin (fatty tissue which gives the white matter its color. Myelin speeds up signals between the cells helping them to quickly send and receive messages.

Haughty: arrogantly superior and disdainful.

Ohgomadara butterflies are native to the island of Okinawa.

Status quo: existing state of affairs, especially regarding social or political issues.

Hypoactive: less than normally active.

So often we see them referred to on a first name basis, please allow me introduce Aoba Yamashiro and Raidou Namiashi.
**Can the Circle Be Unbroken?**

Chapter Notes

*Can the Circle Be Unbroken* was a popular Christian hymn written in 1907 by Ada Habershon with music by Charles Gabriel. It has since fallen into the public domain. A reworked version written by A.P. Carter and released in 1935, was intended as a funeral hymn. The song’s lyrics concern the death, funeral and mourning for the narrator’s mother.

This chapter and the one following constitute a massive information dump to begin closing the unbroken circle. Please check out the bold notes at the end of the story.

As they tromp dew covered forest paths, assurances are made and warnings given. Sai promises the Yamabushi will bless the new amulets as they become available, not only that, he will also devise a holding place to keep them safe from Lord Hatake’s detection. Iruka once again cautions him to keep a civil tongue in his head when he speaks with the Governor. “She does not suffer fools,” he sternly stressed, “we might not be able to protect you from her temper, should you say something … stupid.”

“My words will be few, Dr. Umino. I merely wish to observe her.”

A funny thing happened on the way to the town square. As they stroll along the mall, shopkeepers and pushcart vendors stop whatever they were doing to place their hands together in a prayer like gesture and give a slight bow in their direction. Puzzled, Iruka and Izumo politely return the gesture; Sai does not. Consternation turns up a click when they encounter yet another wondrous sight; near the entrance of the Admin Complex, twelve footmen stand beside four shiny black carriages. And things get curiouser and curiouser once they’re caught between the double doors of the Complex entrance. As the monks file out after morning prayers, each one of them makes the same gesture of reverence to Sai. No time to ask why, since one of the clerks began boisterously herding them inside. Fortunately, the crowd of common folk before and behind them was sparse. But not long after signing in and taking their seats in the waiting room, a cortège of fancily dressed men exit the outer conference room. And there at the elbow of the Governor, Shizune flashed them one of those, ‘I can’t help you right now,’ kinda smiles as she passes by.

“Crap! I know that look,” Izumo said, “gonna be longer than a half an hour before she’s ready to receive us.” Iruka grumpily concurs, settling back into his chair with a sigh. Seated between them, Sai slips into a posture of meditation; eyes closed, back straight and upturned palms cradled in his lap. It’s only a few seconds later when Shizune returns minus the Governor; like everyone else, she first acknowledges the seemingly unaware Sai with that, hands pressed together and bow thing before whispering, “Dr. Umino and Mr. Kamizuki, your timing is perfect … for a change. Lady Tsunade has a forty minute gap in her schedule. I’ll get you in there, but for the god’s sake, be concise, because her next meeting is with Inspector Morino.”

**Recherché**

Across the street at the station house, Ibiki compares Aoba and Raidou’s reports as they fidget in
their seats before his desk. “What’s with you two this morning? You’re quiet as clams.”

“You know how it is,” Raidou laughed it off, “we’ve been partners so long… tend to pick up each other’s mood. He’s gettin’ old and pulling these all-nighters turn him into the tired hungry and ornery bag o’ bones you see before you.” Aoba shot him a dirty look.

“Yeah,” Ibiki’s eyes darted between them, “reckon I knew that.” While scratching his signature on their case reports he casually mentions, “I hear tell Gekko Hayate is whompin’ up vittles for off going patrolmen over to the canteen. One helluva swordsman that guy, and a damn fine cook I’m told. Gwan, feed your partner and then the both of ya get some shuteye. On your way out, tell Ryota I need to see him.” They practically trip over themselves in their haste to leave. Once the door slams shut behind them, Ibiki thought, Tired and hungry ... my ass! More like two schoolboys copying homework off the smart kid. No matter, I'll get to the bottom of it cause sure as I'm sitting here, Aoba will crack before Raidou does.

Recherché

Inside the small space, the scene greeting his eyes was no more a disaster area than usual. The commingled scents of new wine and that of the chief counselor were still very strong, yet the shaman appeared unharmed. “What happened here?”

Sheepishly grinning, he turns toward the familiar voice, “Tis nothing but a clumsy old man who upset his table and then, was too lazy to clean up after himself. It is your presence I find disturbing … have the hours slipped past without my knowledge? Surely our Lord doth not approach--!”

“Calm down. Master sensed a disruption in your aura … he sent me to investigate why.”

“And I sense, a heavy burden upon your shoulders. Come, tell me, what it is that aileth thee.”

Weaving his way through the debris, Maito kneels before him. “What is a … soul tie?”

Taken aback, but only for a moment, the shaman’s face suddenly lights up, “Is it true little one? A forever mate, handpicked by the Master? Oh what honor bestowed upon me! Of course, I will use the same incantation spoken over your sire and dam--”

“This early in the day and you speak as one besotted? How long were you at that new wine, old man?’”

“Pshaw! Is it such a rarity that I am overjoyed? Gaze upon me and you will see, I am neither drunk nor insane.”

“Then is your merriment unfounded ... you have leapt to conclusion without clarification. A ‘soul tie’ is what I am charged to prevent betwixt our Lord and his chosen. How am I to put an end to something I do not understand?”

“Well… if our Lord has selected a bride at last, you simply cannot stand in his way.”

Maito inhaled deeply as he leaned close, “Hear now the words I speak, not those your imaginings conjure! I said nothing of a bride. On the worst hand, our Lord has welcomed his chosen quarry ... a human, to live in the manor. This ... Umino Iruka will be our guest for a stretch of time yet undetermined, which I think unwise--”

“Umino you say? Aha! I see the root of your distress. He it was who brought down the mighty Lord Sakumo--”
“No, you don’t see. The Umino you speak of is but maggot food, his corpse rots in a grave on the other side of the world. His son has come to Konoha, foolish in his intent to kill our Lord. It is he, our Lord will shelter under his wing, and his roof.”

“Yet wisdom decrees, tis far better to keep one’s enemy close.” A crepey hand landed softly on his shoulder, “Fear not, in the history of house Hatake, not once did it suffer ruination because a human was lodged in its midst … remember Lady Mari?”

“Yes, but even then, coexistence was not peaceful.”

“Verily, our Lord will maintain order in his household, of this you can be sure. Now, in answer to your question, a soul tie is an emotional bond, usually formed when a human male and female tangle and enjoin themselves together upon the marriage bed. This sort bond can also be conferred upon those of your kind, lycan, whose masters pair them off for the purposes of breeding; emotions play no role in these couplings, yet the bond is no less powerful.”

“And are such unions, the only way these ties are formed?”

“Typically,” the shaman nodded and Maito let out a heavy breath.

“I worried for naught, for this shall never be.”

“Certainly that is not the only thing bothering you, is it?”

Maito looked down at the mess on the floor. “I was spared direct interaction with him, but it is his fault our Lord must now rely on the son of Umino. Tell me everything you know of the human called, Yamada Kenichi. Hold nothing from me.”

“Hmm … from what I recall, he was a vexatious servant to the previous Lord Hatake. One moment,” he pled as he rose and slowly made his way to a cabinet on the other side of the room. From it he drew an obsidian orb. “If I am to hold nothing back, I must first slip under cover of Lord Sakumo’s aura.”

Recherché

By the time she slips back into her office through a rear entrance, Lady Tsunade is worn to a frazzle. The days allotted in which to put definitive truth to the assurances given those bothersome representatives, painfully short. Then there was Iruka, patiently waiting to see her and the gods only knew what fresh hell he’d come to share. Finally, an ornate scroll situated center most her desk presented one more headache; it was a decree from the Emperor’s palace. Konoha was under consideration to become either the capital of a united Japan or the Emperor’s winter residence. “You’ve got to be kidding!” She reread the damn thing five more times, hoping, wishing, praying that she’d somehow misinterpreted its message.

Having just returned from the Registry of Heralds, Shizune dumps the records on her own desk and doubles back to the lobby to collect Izumo and Iruka. When the other man followed behind and Dr. Umino did not object, she thought no more of it.

“Lady Tsunade?” Her knock goes unanswered. Pushing the office door ajar, she pokes her head in. “Dr. Umino would like a few moments of your time, ma’am.”

A detached, “Yeah sure,” flew back in her face. “It’s not a party until my anxiety kicks into overdrive, so let ‘em in … damn it!” Iruka eased around the retreating Shizune to see the Governor, elbows propped on the paper strewn desk and palms bolstering her forehead.
"Ma'am? I promise, this will only take a moment. Just wanted to introduce you to someone."

She waves him in refusing to look up. When Izumo steps in with a sprightly greeting, still, she will not raise her head. The moment Sai steps over the threshold, however, there comes a visible quickening. Instantly does she rise, extending to him the same reverent welcome as had become commonplace this morning.

"To what do I owe this honor that you bring a seer from Water Country to my office?"

Izumo glances over his shoulder before looking back to her in wonderment. "How on earth did you know that Lady Tsunade?"

"His clothing of course; those robes are only worn by attendants at the Temple of the Water Kami, Suijin. Gotta hand it to you Iruka, bringing in the big guns was a smart move." Sai receives her slight bow with an incline of his head. "So, what's the plan gentlemen?" After taking the seats offered in front of her desk, Iruka and Izumo bring her up to speed on the latest developments; Sai sits transfixed, his eyes focused on the rise and fall of her chest.

"... that's the only viable entrance to his lair. After that we will--"

"Iruka, the hell's wrong with your little monk friend? Hasn't said a word since he got here. Is he in a trance or something?"

"Don't think so. Sai, you alright buddy?"

"Huh? Um, yes sir."

"Well, do you mind young man?"

At last, he lifts his eyes to meet hers. "Beg pardon, I've just never seen anything like that before--"

"My god! How long have you been on that mountain?" Looking down at her bosom, she adds with snark, "They're modified sweat glands, mammary glands if you wanna be technical about it; breasts, if the vernacular helps ya ... okay?"

"Those I've seen but," he gestures at her torso, "the thing above them appears to be ... glowing--"

"That's ridiculous! This is a netsuke made of clay suspended from a gold chain; far as I know, light doesn't emanate from it--"

"We should probably be going," Izumo hurriedly said as Sai was hustled from his chair by Iruka and bust rushed from the office before he could say anything else. "I apologize for any disrespect and assure you, he uh ... meant no harm. Again, we thank you for your time, ma'am."

Once outside the building, Iruka turns disappointed eyes to him. "Way to go Sai, now she thinks you're a pervert."

"Well, I am equally disturbed sir, since my workload just increased tenfold."

"Huh?"

"She has absolutely no idea of the power resident within, nor of the one keeping that information from her knowledge. Looks like another apology is due my scouts, ah well, I'll be in touch," he said walking toward the wharf.

Iruka stared after him mumbling, "Offense too great. Never be taken seriously now."
"Hey, not your fault Sai is strange, I mean ... unorthodox. But there's no sense standing around and making ourselves a target for the Inspector either. Come on," he laughed clapping Iruka on the shoulder, "let's see what devilment Tetsu has gotten himself into in our absence."

**Recherché**

Upstairs in the former Lord's study, the maps are spread on the desk as Jiraiya paces about. Thanks to Sakumo's penchant for record keeping, he's convinced the treasure he seeks is well within his reach. *Yet am I trapped, a glorified babysitter for a human.*

In town, shortly after the wagon bearing the body of old man Watanabe pulls away from his front door, Genma saunters back inside the shop to start tidying up.

"Oi, Shiranui!"

He spun around, dagger in hand. "Damn it man! Cat's paws ... that's what ya got. Er ya tryna be the death of me, Hamasaki?"

"Nah. Payin' ya back for spooking me last night," he laughed. "So, uh, how was it for you?"

"Well ... you know, what can I tell ya? Was at it at least six hours straight, yep," he said, slipping the dagger into its hiding place, "continually amazed by my own stamina. Looks like you had a good go yourself."

"I tell ya Genma, at one point I was prayin' for dawn to break. My back hurts, hands and throat ... stripped raw; in the end ... made a lot of folk happy, that's all what matters."

"Yeah ... glad ya got some good use outta that weird full moon."

"Busted a coupla nets, but the holds is filled to the brim. Just felt I oughta stop by ... thank you for putting everything together. I chose the right course; rather remember her the way she was." His chin dipped to his chest, "I take it my family was there?"

"Right up front, 'sides the Governor and some of 'em other high muckety mucks."

"Of course. I'm off ... gotta grab a few winks before starting over again tonight. See ya round, eh?"

He thought to close and bolt the door behind the young man, but after a quick survey he reckoned, "You dust devils will be here when the young man, but after a quick survey he reckoned, "You dust devils will be here when I get back. I need to catch him up before the day gets goin' good." Grabbing his hat off the hook by the door, Genma strikes out for the constabulary. The delicious aromas coming from the canteen were all the encouragement he needed to stick his head in for a look around. *That'll do, he thinks, I'll have 'em make a plate for Ibiki and hand deliver it; oughta put him in the right frame of mind or least keep him quiet whilst I break down this newest lead.*

Meanwhile, up at the Inuzuka clinic, quarantine pens are filled to overflowing, supplies for vaccines are running low and tempers run hot and short. "Ain't no time to run into town," Tsume tells Hana, "reckon we'll hafta reach out to the Nara again."

**Recherché**

Rolling the orb between his palms, the shaman's voice sounded far removed from the space he and Maito occupied. "From the Land of Whirlpools came clan Yamada."

"You sure about that? Master said they came from Water Country--"
"Quite sure. Water Country was their point of origin; from there they moved to the Land of Whirlpools, left during the diaspora and finally settled in the Land of Fire. That tiny village was considered insignificant to the Hatake since there was no ruling numen and the ability users there posed no threat to us. Through his Yasha, Lord Sakumo was made aware of Yamada’s research--"

"My Lord spoke of this, the Yasha agreed to be Yamada’s servant in exchange for food. She would seduce healthy human males for him to experiment on, and he would sacrifice one of his colleagues to be her sustenance."

"Correct," he smiled down on him. "Our previous Lord planned to make him a servant, but that opportunity was abandoned after Yamada went into exile. Sending a trusted servant to London after him meant Lord Sakumo could keep tabs on the research, while ensuring there would be no obstacles to his progress."

"I remember Lady Mari being very distressed about this turn of events."

"Tut, tut little one, you are confused. Lady Mari perished long before then--"

"No, I'm quite sure you are wrong!"

"Always did have difficulty distinguishing time, didn't you? In this regard, lycan resemble their canid kin, having no clear concept of the past or the present. Rest assured, as Lord Sakumo's aura is my guide, I say nothing which is not truth." Casting up a doubtful glance Maito urged him to continue. "The loss of his wife Mari on the night of the Great Hunt and Lord Kakashi’s subsequent murderous rampage, these prompted our previous Master to pull up stakes and move to London. Thanks to Jiraiya laying the groundwork, Lord Sakumo was hired as one of the surgical instructors at the school for Japanese students soon after his arrival."

"That part I do remember well. Lord Sakumo was given the largest and grandest home in the community; they even provided a country retreat for him in Cornwall. Those were the days. I grew close to my father, learned the ways and customs of lycanthrope--"

"Indeed, but the conditions in which the former Master labored were abhorrent. Not only was he tasked to translate their English medical texts into Japanese, he worked through the night as a surgical instructor; then again, that was his preference."

"Not as if an immortal required sleep."

"True enough. Yamada admired Lord Sakumo’s skill as an anatomist and they enjoyed a professional working relationship as well as a superficial friendship. At some point, Yamada introduced his best friend, Umino Tadashi to Sakumo-dono. Finding himself in dire need of finances to continue his research, Yamada was forced into a business relationship with the former Lord, who gladly became both his benefactor and not so silent partner. One thing I never understood was, even after he revealed his true nature to Yamada, he never claimed him as a servant. Perhaps he didn’t see the need, because in his mind they were inextricably linked by his money and the Yasha. I do know, Yamada neglected to tell Tadashi what sort beings Lord Sakumo and the Yasha were. Reckon he hated himself for being reduced to slave labor for a demon, and he may have also feared upsetting Tadashi’s religious beliefs. No matter, from that point onward, their relationship was rocky at best; Yamada never fully trusted the previous Lord. That’s why he taught Tadashi to read the long forgotten language of the Land of Whirlpools, in case something were to happen to him--"

"Did Lord Sakumo know this to be fact?"
"He did, yet what recourse had he? All records of the Land of Whirlpools were destroyed during the Great War. Those who escaped the island took with them its language and customs, not to mention, its ancient abilities of renown."

"I must inform my Lord of this at once!"

"You will do nothing of the kind, for Lord Sakumo has already made provision. In his time he will reveal all in the ears and heart of his son. For fear of the former Master's wrath, you will not transmit this information in any way, shape or form. Swear it!"

Recherché

“Hey uh … Mister … can I help ya?”

Sai ignores him.

“Look here fella, you can’t just step aboard a boat without permission; that’s trespassin.’ Oi!”

“Careful now … he might be off his rocker or deef,” said another crew member. “I’ll fetch a patrolman, just make sure he don’t damage nothing while I’m gone.”

“Oi, Cap’n … loony comin’ right at ya!”

The other man pauses in the midst of securing his oiled silk jacket. “What’s that?”

Sai boldly walks up to his target, greeting him with a bear hug. After a few uncomfortable seconds, he releases the somewhat stupefied man and exits the boat.

“You know that guy sir?”

“Nah. Never seen him before in my life … sure he’s harmless. Lotsa folks been doing that this morning, offering condolence in their own ways. No worries, soon as our second in command gets back, we need to have a meeting to discuss—”

“Cap’n? What’s the matter, lose your train of thought? Cap’n?”

Members of the stunned crew rush to the man’s aid as he collapses in a heap on the deck. They bundle him up and take him home, where he quickly revives and slips past the ones who determined to keep watch over him. Wandering into the woods, he climbs up a hidden ridge. There he will remain. On an opposing ridge in the distance, Sai mimics the stance of the fisherman; sitting cross legged, forearms resting on his thighs, head lifted to the heavens and eyes shut.

Recherché

Notes:

Tromp: walk heavily, trudge or trample.

Consternation: feelings of anxiety, typically of something unexpected.

Cortege: a person’s entourage or retinue; a train of attendants as of a distinguished person; a group following or attending an important person.

Besotted (archaic): intoxicated.

Crepey: having a wrinkled surface.
Pshaw: used to express irritation, disapproval, contempt or disbelief.

The *Art of War*, an ancient military written work which systematically dealt with the subject of, you guessed it, warfare, attributed to the Chinese military strategist, Sun Tzu from which we get the quote, “Keep your friends close and your enemies closer.” Or better yet, know your enemy and know yourself and you will always be victorious.

Obsidian: a naturally occurring dark in color (black, usually), volcanic glass found in lava flows after rapid cooling. It is mineral-like, but not a true mineral. It is also believed to be a *truth enhancing* stone which blocks psychic attacks by absorbing negative energies from the environment.

Ornery: ugly and unpleasant in disposition or temper.

Worn to a frazzle: a condition of fatigue or nervous exhaustion.

Sprightly: animated or vivacious.

Quicken: to give or restore vitality to; stir up, rouse, or stimulate.

Snark: attitude or expression of mocking irreverence or sarcasm.

Sweat glands are exocrine glands which excrete their product *onto* an epithelial surface via a duct. Two types of sweat glands, apocrine and eccrine. Eccrine (which are distributed all over the body, except the lips, ear canal, glans penis, labia minora and clitoris), produce a clear secretion we call, sweat (duh) as a means to cool the body. Apocrine sweat glands are found in the armpit, areola, perineum (between the anus and genitals), the ear and the eyelids. They secrete sweat *into* the piliary canal of hair follicles. When puberty arrives, these glands secrete a thicker substance which provides food for bacteria on the skin; the bacteria’s decomposition of the sweat makes one ... funky. Modified sweat glands are ceruminous glands, which produce ear wax, mammary glands which produce milk and ciliary glands in the eyelids which secrete a type of fat that keeps our eyeballs from dehydrating.

Vernacular: language spoken by the ordinary people in a particular country or region.

Netsuke: miniature sculptures invented in 17th century Japan.

Bum rush: forcible and swift ejection from a place.

Deef: an archaic/obsolete word for deaf.

Oiled silk: silk made waterproof by painting it with boiled linseed oil and leaving the garment to dry in between applications.

Diaspora: dispersion of any people from their original homeland.

Lycanthrope: a monster able to change appearance from human to wolf and back again. Many of these creatures are born, others are made as a result of a spell cast by a witch or warlock.

**What’s with all this bowing to Sai business?** His manner of dress signifies that he is a Buddhist monk or an individual who has dedicated his entire life to the pursuit of spiritual affairs. The people are simply paying tribute to the Buddha within the person, not the person themselves; it is why Sai is typically not demonstrative about receiving their acknowledgements.

**Land of Whirlpools Facts:** located on an island off the coast of the Land of Fire. Uzushiogakure (*Hidden Eddy Village*/*Village Hidden by Whirling Tides*), it was a shinobi village; it's ninja known
for their fuinjutsu to the point that it led to its destruction in war. Those who survived the destruction were scattered to the four winds. The people from this village lived very long lives which gave the village the nickname, “The village of Longevity.” The village had ties to the Land of Fire due to its proximity and the ruling clan Uzumaki’s blood ties to the Senju. The Uzumaki clan taught the first Hokage a sealing technique that transformed the deserts of Konoha into lush forests. During the Third Great War, the villages of Kumo and Iwa combined to destroy the village.

The Land of Whirlpools My Fiction: the land was populated by ability users who lived in harmony using their powers for the benefit of the nation. All well and good until a new leader arose; because the land had abundant natural resources (coal, various metals and cotton), shifts in political powers in the nations around them resulted in declining trade because other nations feared this tiny island because of their skill with sealing jutsu; people blamed the loss of life and prosperity (ships carrying cargo of coal sinking or catching fire) on the Whirlpool village, believing they wanted to decimate their lands and take over. The leaders of the village were forced to either expel all ability users or kill them before other nations would do business with them. For years, the leaders resisted, but when a new ruling party came into power in the land of Whirlpools, genocide was believed to be the only way the land could survive. Of course, this fear was fueled by numina hoping these powerful ability users would flee to the lands they ruled over. Instead, those who left settled into the newly found Konoha. This defection led to a declaration of war and the villages of Kumo an Iwa combined to destroy the village of Whirlpools. This also led to years of hostility with and fighting against the Land of Fire. The village of Kumo became Kumogakure, (Village Hidden by Clouds/Hidden Cloud Village) in the Land of Lightning. The village of Iwa became Iwagakure (Hidden Stone Village/Village Hidden by Rocks) in the Land of Earth. These are the first two villages Kama sought to destroy and bring under subjection to him. Gaki from these lands defected to Konoha having been promised they would be given portions of their former villages to rule over; intelligence regarding military strength of the mortals was instead gathered and they (the gaki) were destroyed.

Maito’s iteration of this timeline was recorded in chapter 21.

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