**Glass Trinity**

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Mature</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning</td>
<td>Graphic Depictions Of Violence, Major Character Death</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>F/M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom</td>
<td>Naruto</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship</td>
<td>Uchiha Madara/Uzumaki Mito, Senju Hashirama/Uzumaki Mito</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character</td>
<td>Uzumaki Mito, Uchiha Madara, Senju Hashirama, Senju Tobirama, Senju Touka, Uchiha Izuna, Sarutobi Sasuke</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Tags</td>
<td>Warring States Period (Naruto), Biju Hunters, Narutoverse prequel, the original three-man team we all deserved, Konoha Founders, alternatively the rise and fall of one madara uchiha and the people he couldn't bring down with him, NOT a love triangle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stats</td>
<td>Published: 2014-10-03 Updated: 2016-11-15 Chapters: 15/? Words: 149451</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Glass Trinity**

by [Renaerys](http://archiveofourown.org)

**Summary**

They built their kingdom from earth and fire and blood, upon fragile pillars of glass.
Chapter Notes

This is a prequel to Naruto, meaning we all know where this story will end. But I always wondered how the Konoha Founders became the characters we saw resurrected in the Fourth War, and what decisions led them to that place. This story is my attempt to paint that picture as one version of how things could have been. The characters here will not be entirely the same characters we see in the Fourth War because they were not born being who they ended up becoming. Life is a journey for all humans, including fictional ones. So please keep that in mind as you read and think something is OOC. The natural consequence of life and growing up is experience, and experience affects people in profound, wonderful, and sometimes very terrible ways. It changes them, and here it will change the Founders into the characters we saw at the end of their lives in canon. Slowly, and over many chapters.

Please be aware that I wrote through chapter 3 before we saw Hashirama’s canon flashback, so some small details will not line up with canon. I’ve tried to resolve those inconsistencies in later chapters, but I won’t go back and change anything since there’s no real point in confusing anyone. I have incorporated canon events as they came to light over the course of the manga. Additionally, I have incorporated many references to feudal Japan into this fic, both history and myth, to flesh out the Founder’s Era setting a bit. It is not my goal to write a bulletproof historical account here, so I will be changing things around wherever necessary to fit this story. However, any references you recognize are probably intentional, and I’ll do my best to be faithful to the source material insofar as it is possible and interesting.

Part I

Salt drew stubborn tears that melted into the ocean and swept out to sea to become one with the endless blue. To see the pink and red and yellow coral formations, she would have to brave the corrosive salt and ignore the pruning at her fingertips that told her she’d been at this a little too long. But Mito Uzumaki had never been one to let such deterrents get the better of her. She smiled through her undulating red hair as a puffer fish she’d gotten too close to inflated to five times its size and tried to jettison away from her on too-tiny fins. Bubbles rose and clouded her view as she burst out laughing. She would have to surface for air.

Through dripping, red tangles and salt-kissed skin, she saw him. Mito would never forget that very first time she ever laid eyes on him, so deceptively small and unimposing at the time. But the eyes betrayed him. There was fire and blood in those eyes.

“Who are you?” he demanded.

Mito brought a hand to her face to push the red mop from her eyes. “I’m Mito.”
He stood on the shore, the waves lapping lightly at his sandaled feet. He wore mismatched armor made of splotchy, studded leather that spoke of low birth and a hard life. But the scarlet of his eyes made him look more like a devilish warrior exorcised from the depths of hell than some lowborn soldier. Mito bent her knees to keep her chakra-powered balance atop the uneven water as a gentle wave passed underfoot.

“Mito,” he repeated. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“This isn’t your beach.”

He frowned like it was his beach, and she was intruding. “Women these days don’t know their place.”

Mito clenched a bony fist. How dare he talk to her like that? He obviously didn’t know who she was, not that she looked like much dressed like this and sopping wet. At twelve years old, Mito was no woman, to be sure, but she was definitely a lady, thank you very much.

“And men these days forget their manners,” she said.

The smirk faded as he scrutinized her like one would a coded message. For a moment, Mito thought perhaps she’d said too much. That sword he carried looked sharp...

“Bold words,” he said, as if ‘bold’ and ‘Mito’ were mutually exclusive.

“Who do you think you are, coming out here and picking a fight?” Mito said, careful to keep any hostility out of her tone. She didn’t know who this person was, and in the world they lived in, the wrong words could be one’s last.

“I don’t fight girls,” he continued. “But you’re...playing too close to our camp. I won’t be responsible if something happens to you and your family raises a complaint.”

Mito was about inform him that she’d been training during what precious little free time she had from her political duties for her clan’s current mission—she wasn’t some child who wasted time playing—when another presence interrupted them.

“Brother!” a young voice called, drawing both of their attentions.

A boy visibly younger than Mito burst onto the beach and drew up next to her would-be foe. He, too, was clad in battered, hand-me-down armor despite his young age. In this world death, did not play favorites, and little boys and girls were a luxury barely afforded to the wealthy few.

“Izuna, I told you to wait for me back at camp,” the unnamed boy addressed his little brother.

“The general wants to speak to you. It sounded important.”

The boy ruffled his brother’s hair, an odd gesture, out of place. The simple intimacy of it contrasted with his battle worn attire and previous borderline animosity toward her. She found herself smiling at the sight despite herself.

“Who’s she?” the younger boy whispered in an effort to be discreet.

The older boy turned back to Mito, and cold crimson met stormy green once more. She held herself proudly, as if this were a small defiance in itself. Even clad only in a soaked fisher girl’s dress and barefoot, she did not want to appear weak and frail before this boy. She couldn’t explain it, really, but the way he held himself, the way he regarded her... To show weakness would have been an
He took in the sight of her for a moment, observing how she balanced on the surface of the water with the aid of chakra. She was trained in the ninja arts to some meager extent. He didn’t know who she was—probably just some fisherman’s daughter of an irrelevant seaside clan—and she was no threat. Most people he encountered were trained in chakra manipulation in some rudimentary capacity, at least. In this world, only the strong survived.

Mito’s eyes widened when the searing red of his eyes melted to charcoal grey. He looked younger all of a sudden, and she found herself wondering if they were of an age. With a final tilt of his head in her direction, as if in parting, he turned to leave with Izuna.

“Wait!” she called out.

Why she had called out, Mito would never know. She ran across the waves toward the two of them as the unnamed boy turned once more to regard her with barely concealed annoyance. Izuna just watched her with a wrinkled nose that spoke of his confusion.

Mito drew up to them, still dripping chilled sea water as she peered up at the boy with winter in his eyes. “What’s your name?”

He didn’t answer, but Izuna did. “Madara’s my big brother,” he said, as if this were some great accomplishment rather than a chance of kinship.

“Madara,” Mito repeated.

“Madara Uchiha,” he corrected her, as if ‘Madara’ alone was not enough for him.

“Brother, the general said to hurry,” Izuna said, tugging on Madara’s hand.

Madara nodded to his younger brother and started to walk away. At the edge of the woods where the rocky shore gave way to green forest, he turned one last time to regard her, but he said nothing. Madara and Izuna disappeared then, and Mito was alone on the beach. The sky was overcast, and she figured it would storm later.

“Madara Uchiha,” she repeated his name. It had a smooth ring to it, like polished ebony.

She decided to return to her father’s quarters earlier than planned. Offensive or no, Mito did not want to wait around for any other Uchiha shinobi to come sniffing around and try to kill her.

The next time she saw him he was waiting for her.

“I told you to stay away from here,” he said, although he didn’t sound angry; just cold and indifferent, like he couldn’t really care one way or the other.

“And I told you, this isn’t your beach,” Mito reminded him as she approached with caution.

He was seated on a boulder sharpening a dagger with a whetstone. The scraping sound was oddly comforting to Mito’s ears, rhythmic like the lull of the waves. Madara held up the weapon, and it gleamed in the morning sunlight.

“Now who’s picking a fight?” he said as he examined his blade.
“I only come here to work on my sealing techniques when I’m not busy.” To prove her point, she picked up a small, white seashell and held it out for him to see.

Madara watched her with unreadable, dark eyes. “Fūinjutsu?”

Mito cracked a smile at what could have been construed as mild interest in his voice. To prove her point, she motioned to the dagger he held. “I’ll show you.”

Madara looked like the last thing he wanted to do was hand over his weapon, but decided she was no threat anyway. She was just some fisherman’s daughter, after all. “Don’t cut yourself.”

Mito accepted the short blade by the hilt. “I’ll give it back when I’m finished.”

Madara opened his mouth to say something to that, but Mito ignored him and performed a round of practiced hand seals. Swirling, black calligraphy danced across the dagger in one hand as the small seashell glowed blue in her other hand. The dagger melted before their eyes until only the black markings were left, as though they had absorbed the dagger’s shape and power. They floated off of Mito’s palm and were sucked inside the seashell. After only a moment, the shell lost its ethereal glow.

“Here,” Mito said, holding out the shell for him to take. “You can have it back now.”

Madara blinked at the offered shell before looking back at her with a look that said, ‘seriously?’ He took the shell.

“Who are you?” he asked as he examined the shell.

Mito got the feeling that there was a right answer to this question. He glared at the shell as though trying to divine the secret of her technique, and he did not seem like the type often left guessing. Shinobi versed in sealing techniques were fairly rare.

“I’m Mito,” she said, smiling. “The girl on the beach. Who are you?”

He looked up at her, Sharingan gleaming. Something in the way he looked at her made her feel exposed, like she could not hide from him no matter how far she ran.

“I’m the boy who could’ve killed you.”

Years and years later, when Mito looked back on these precious moments in time before everything crashed and broke and went up in flames, she would know the truth of his words. Madara would always be the boy who could have killed her.

But he didn’t.

“Keep your wrist steady.”

Mito tried concentrating on doing just that, but she knew this was a fruitless effort. Her mind was elsewhere as she thought about the earlier conversation with the feudal lord, Harukage Nagao.

“Father,” she said, pausing from her calligraphy, “will the feudal lord really set aside the land you requested?”

Harukage Nagao commanded a vast stretch of land in this part of the world from the edge of the
sea and stretching hundreds of miles inland. He had a large army of samurai warriors to defend and patrol the land, and to collect taxes from anyone who happened to be living within his borders. Of course, he had only claimed this land a mere three decades ago when he invaded with his army from the far west. The people previously settled here woke up one morning to find that all of a sudden they had a liege lord to whom they owed taxes and able-bodied sons if they expected to continue living and working on the land.

Mito didn’t like the idea of such an unwarranted invasion against common folk without the means to properly defend themselves, but this was reality. The strong conquered the weak, and those who fought back were met with violence and death. That is, unless the would-be conquered had the firepower to resist.

“Yes, Mito,” came her father’s reply. “He understands that the benefit of creating a sedentary settlement populated by a shinobi clan would be to his benefit in the long run. The world is changing. The shinobi way of life will soon become ubiquitous at the expense of traditional samurai.”

Ensui Uzumaki scraped his brush across Mito’s ink block and traced over the sweeping lines she’d made on her scroll. Up, down, loop to the left, down again.

“But something like this hasn’t been done before. Shinobi don’t stay in one place,” Mito said as she studied her father’s steady brush strokes.

“Just because there is no precedent does not make something inherently wrong. And in exchange for land, Lord Harukage has the right to call upon our shinobi for their services when necessary.”

“For a fee,” Mito added. She had personally reminded her father to make the case for compensation. He had always been a little too generous with their buyers, if the whispers among the soldiers were to be believed.

Ensui nodded. “Yes, for a fee. But a reasonable fee. It will be the start of a new era. Shinobi have known only the nomadic life of wanderers, constantly searching for new prospects, better pay, and fresh blood. Our kind have never had the means to sustain life without working for and relying upon others for our very livelihood. It works well enough for the larger clans, but our small numbers are our weakness. With this, we will till our own land and build our own houses. We can sell our wares in addition to our services. Uzushiogakure will be a safe haven for our family’s farmers and merchants, as well as a home base for our shinobi forces. We will be truly self-sufficient, beholden to none.”

_None but the feudal lord, you mean._ But Mito kept this perilous thought to herself. Her father was a man of patience and reason, but even he had his limits. And he did not tolerate whining of any kind, ever.

“But this village will put us on the map. Enemy clans will be able to invade, and we’ll have nowhere to hide,” Mito said as she swept her brush across the scroll, this time much more satisfied with the smoothness of her strokes.

“That’s why we must seek a positive alliance with the feudal lord and his vassals. The sun may evaporate a single drop of rain, but it stands no chance against a mighty ocean.”

Mito frowned at her calligraphy. Usually, she found the art to be relaxing, but today she felt that her time might be better spent in the library. The Uzumaki clan was notoriously adept at fūinjutsu, and Mito had found that she had a flair for it at an early age. Their clan was small, but they knew their trade well.
“It makes sense, Father. I’d like a place to call ‘home’ for once. I think it’ll make everyone happy to settle down. But I still worry about other shinobi and what they might do.”

Ensui smiled knowingly at his only daughter. Truly, she was precocious beyond her mere twelve years. She had to be—as the daughter of the regent clan leader, her future development as a woman was of supreme importance. Ensui predicted that he would have a fine selection of potential husbands for her, which was more than any father could ask for a highborn daughter. She would play an integral part in the future Uzushiogakure’s political and military advancement.

Still, he lamented at times that she had not been born male. With her extraordinary gift for their clan’s fūinjutsu and her sharp, analytical mind, she could have made an excellent strategist and political leader. Ensui could only hope that her sons would inherit her admirable qualities. This alone was reason enough to allow Mito to study and train with the soldier women of their clan, for now.

“The Uzumaki clan has long prided itself on its neutrality. We’re not warmongers and never will be. Our sealing techniques are not usually meant for death and destruction on the battlefield. And you know that shinobi rarely act without commission. The chances of an unprovoked, hostile attack from another family against us are low.”

Mito set down her brush and surveyed the scroll before her without really seeing it. Her thoughts brought her back to her time spent at the rocky beach where she’d encountered that Uchiha boy.

“The Uchiha clan could wipe us out,” she said quietly. “My history books praise their valor and cunning in war and their bloodline limit.”

“The Uchiha clan is relatively small. Their Sharingan is formidable, true enough, but they have no reason to consider us their enemy. We don’t typically accept missions that would pit us against them.”

“I met one the other day,” Mito found herself saying. She’d neglected to tell her father about Madara and Izuna not because she was afraid of his reaction, but because the political affairs with the feudal lord and the negotiations that stretched into the wee hours of the morning for the past few days had made her all but forget about the encounter.

“An Uchiha?” her father said, sounding surprised. “I did hear that some are stationed here on a mission for Lord Harukage. Still, they don’t have a habit of socializing with non-Uchiha unless the matter is a business concern.”

“He was just a boy, maybe my age. He had his little brother with him. He looked like a lowborn soldier.”

Ensui sighed. “The Uchiha are a clan who structure themselves around a rigid social and military hierarchy with little room for advancement. Their class and station depend almost entirely upon their birth. Civilians and those who fail to activate the Sharingan are disallowed to bear the Uchiha clan name. It’s an unforgiving system, but it’s effective. There’s a reason they are among the strongest shinobi clans on the continent.”

Mito raised a hand to her lips and and tapped as she thought about that. “Birth doesn’t necessarily determine strength or skill.”

“That’s true, but the Uchiha are an old, proud family. Tradition is as natural to them as death. These things don’t change.”
That thought was unsettling. In the Uzumaki clan, as in most ninja families, birth was an important indicator of status and future potential. As the daughter of the regent clan head, she was held to certain expectations. But the Uzumaki also believed that the nature of shinobi was to work hard and rise above the previous generation. Even a lowly serf could fight shoulder to shoulder with the son of a noble if he had the talent and the training. If what her father said was true, then Izuna and Madara would forever be at the bottom looking up through the glass ceiling.

She wasn’t personally bothered by this; she didn’t even know them. But Madara’s blood red eyes spoke of a power roiling beneath the surface just waiting to be unleashed. Those were not the eyes of a commoner. She wondered if he knew that, too.

“Come, my daughter,” Ensui said, standing. “You need to dress for tonight’s feast. The feudal lord will be honoring us, and I expect you to set an example for the other women.”

Mito caught herself before making a face. Her father meant well and she was proud that he trusted her enough to represent the Uzumaki clan at important political events, but she’d never felt comfortable with the undertone of these things. At twelve, it wasn’t something she needed to concern herself with too much; most men did not look at children. But one day, they would look. One day she would be a woman, a true lady of the Uzumaki clan. A prize to be won.

It was her duty as a woman, and it tore her up inside.

“Yes, Father,” she said.

The elegant kimono was a beautiful cream color fastened about her waist with a thick, forest green obi. Prickly holly leaves and blood red berries the same shade as Mito’s hair decorated the bodice in winding patterns, and tiny blue birds danced across the fabric as if frozen in mid-flight. The garment was exquisite, something fit for royalty, but Mito felt awkward under the weight of it. She was a spindly girl with no curves and too many angles. Her cousins always poked fun at her for being too skinny no matter how much she ate, hurtful words that cut deeper than any kunai. It wasn’t her fault she was so scrawny. The kimono hid her body well, though, and only her cherubic face betrayed her extreme youth.

“Please hold still, my lady,” her elderly handmaiden said as she attempted to brush the tangles out of Mito’s short hair.

“Ow,” Mito said, biting her lip. She wondered if the attendant had ripped out a chunk of hair and left a bald spot. The thought made her want to laugh despite the pain. A princess with a bald spot? The feudal lord would have a fit!

“There we are,” the handmaiden said as the brush ran smoothly through her chin-length locks. “Let’s pin it back a bit so we can see that pretty face of yours.”

Mito wanted to protest that she could care less about what her face looked like, but she refrained. Her father would want her to look nice on an important occasion, and she was not one to disappoint him. Resigned, she allowed the elderly handmaiden to secure her bangs with three yellow bone clips. The rest was too short to style in any way, so it was left hanging just past her ears.

“There, all done! Would you like to look in the mirror?”

“No, thank you. I’m sure it looks fine,” Mito said. “Please tell my lord father that I’m ready.”
The handmaiden bowed low and excused herself. An hour later, Mito found herself being led to the great banquet hall in the feudal lord’s looming castle. She hadn’t been in here before, but decorum reminded her to keep her face serene and composed even though on the inside she was amazed at the lavish setup. Long tables stretched from one end of the great room to the other, leaving only a red-carpeted, stone walkway down the center about two bodies wide. As Mito walked down it, she tried to concentrate on not tripping over her feet on the uneven floor while keeping her posture straight. Shinobi, lesser leal lords, and their various retainers and vassals already sat at the long tables. They rose as the whole procession, comprised of Harukage and his guests, made their way past.

Ensui, dressed in his full combat armor and gleaming silver and red like a tree ornament, walked just ahead of Mito with a small boy next to him. As his deceased elder brother’s only living child, the boy was next in line to lead the clan. But he was only four years old and unfit to lead anyone for many years, so leadership had passed to Ensui as regent for the time being.

Several high-ranking shinobi passed behind them—Ensui’s personal guard—followed by Mito and her own guard.

“You look very nice tonight, my lady. Like a princess.”

The man whose arm she held—Satto, the general of Ensui’s shinobi forces—smiled warmly at her. He was an older man, a little older than her father, but he had crow’s feet from smiling too much. Mito liked that about him. The Uzumaki were not known as an all-out combative clan, but even fūinjutsu had its violent side. This man headed the offensive forces in the rare cases in which the Uzumaki clan clashed with another hired clan.

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“Thank you, General,” Mito replied. Unlike the handmaidens and other members of her clan who felt it necessary to comment on her looks and attire out of obligation, she knew the General meant it as a genuine compliment. After all, he was always pestering her about how bony she was. If she wanted to be a fierce warrior, and she did, she would have to beef up a bit. The General, unlike her father, wanted to train her as a full-fledged kunoichi. It was his persuasive efforts that had prevailed upon her father to allow her to train as a kunoichi. A talent such as Mito’s ought not to be wasted, and any hightborn shinobi lordling would be proud to have such a strong, intelligent, beautiful wife on his arm one day to bear him strapping sons. At least, this was what Satto had told Ensui, and it was exactly what Ensui had wanted to hear.

Satto smiled again and walked her forward. They passed by nameless faces for what seemed like far longer than it probably was. Mito kept her eyes glued ahead. It would be a long night, and the last thing she wanted was a distraction to let her mind wander from the important, though tiresome, ritual of dining with the person on whom the future of her clan depended. She would have to be on her best behavior. Finally arriving at the dais at the end of the great hall, Mito took a seat on a cushion behind a low table. She left her shoes at the foot of the dais and folded her legs beneath her. Grey-green eyes stared into the distance as the feudal lord began to speak.

“Welcome, my honored guests. It is my great pleasure to feast you all tonight. I would like to take this moment to acknowledge Ensui Uzumaki, my guest of honor for the evening. We have come to a mutually beneficial agreement, and I am thrilled to announce that construction of this great country’s first permanent shinobi settlement will begin on the morrow.” Turning to her father, Harukage made a swishing sound under the heavily-layered silk and samite he wore to toast to the agreement. His trimmed beard, streaked with grey, did little to cover the double chin he was growing.

“Thank you, Lord Harukage, but it is I who should be expressing my deepest gratitude to you. I am
confident that this is the start of a long and prosperous relationship between us,” Ensui said.

“Ah yes, very prosperous indeed. I’m sure our mutual benefits will continue far into the future, especially with such a comely young lady for your daughter,” he said, turning to Mito then. “Mito Uzumaki.”

The crowd of guests took this as their cue to sit down and await the night’s meals and festivities. Mito smiled and allowed Harukage to kiss her hand, ignoring the dampness of his swollen lips, but on the inside she wished she could throw her wine in his face. It was always the same story with these noble types. The men used every means to outwit and manipulate each other, while feasts and balls and tournaments sparkled so brightly that they blinded everyone from the operations happening under the table. Today, two men might dine and be merry; tomorrow, they may hire shinobi forces to pillage each other’s strongholds and make off with unwed daughters. The entire system was a farce, but Ensui had drilled into her from a young age that the system could not be beaten; it could only be navigated. And so, Mito vowed that she would learn to navigate it better than the vilest lords around.

“May I pour you more wine, my lord?” Mito said, indicating Harukage’s half-empty goblet.

He seemed quite pleased by this prospect, as Mito knew he would be. “Such an obedient child,” he said, grasping his goblet with fleshy fingers and extending it. “Mm, yes, you’ll make some great lord an excellent wife one day. I must say, I envy the man!”

Mito pulled the heavy sleeve of her kimono back a bit so as not to splash any wine on it and filled his cup, smiling graciously. He took a drink and all but forgot about her, which was just fine with Mito. She was not sure she could keep up the act in front of him for much longer. The food picked that time to arrive, and she could not have been more grateful for the reprieve.

Sometime just before dessert was brought out and while Ensui occupied Harukage’s attention with talk of infrastructure, Mito let her eyes wander a bit. The long tables were filled with people, mostly men from the looks of it. The serving girls and boys bustled about between tables retrieving dirty dishes and replacing them with new ones, refilling wine cups, and avoiding grabby hands against their rears. Some succeeded, most did not. Mito sometimes wished she were a man instead of a woman, but at least she had the best shot going for her as a woman of high birth. If any man tried to grope her the way they did those poor serving girls, he would have a small army to answer to.

There were no familiar faces to be seen in the crowd. She thought about Madara and his little brother and wondered if they were somewhere amongst the crowd below. There were Uchiha shinobi dining here now—their red and white fan insignia was hard to overlook—but Mito knew this was no place for lowly soldiers. She gave up her search. It was times like these she wished she had a sibling of her own.

After nearly four hours of feasting, drinking, dancing, and general merry-making, Mito detected that the banquet was coming to an end. There would certainly be more drinking and dancing well into the night, but the formalities were coming to a close, and she would soon be dismissed.

“Mito, why don’t you retire early?” her father’s voice called to her.

Mito turned and met his eyes. He’d had a bit to drink, but not too much. Her father had always been a cautious and prudent man. She smiled.

“Yes, thank you, Father. Please excuse me,” she said as a handmaiden moved to help her stand.
Mito wanted nothing more than to curl up in bed and stretch out the kinks in her legs after long hours of sitting and looking elegant. She felt like an act in a circus show. It was queer how people insisted on formalities, yet complained of them constantly. Why have them in the first place?

She smoothed the front of her rich kimono as she made her way to a door behind the dais. The feudal lord had at least had the foresight to set up a back exit so as not to force the noble ladies to navigate the drunken crowd of guests on their way out. She slipped away and stole back to her chambers.

When she was finally alone in her temporary room, Mito undressed and left the kimono in a messy heap for the handmaidens to retrieve later. She pulled on her pajamas and retrieved a thick tome from the closet. It was a comprehensive text about the properties of various seals and how to place them, everything from simple, inanimate objects to more complex, living organisms. The tome had been passed down through her family for generations, with each inheritor adding to it in his own style of handwriting. Mito loved the personalized history of it; she felt like she’d inherited the spirit of her ancestors’ strength to get her through even the harshest of trials. She’d read it through five times already, but she hadn’t quite memorized all the nuanced techniques. More importantly, she needed to drill herself on the theory behind the sealings until it was second nature. It was a necessary step before she could hope to create her own complex seals for anything and everything under the sun.

Smiling, Mito opened the book to the earmarked page and immersed herself in a world more enthralling than opulent feasts and drunken warlords.

“You lied.”

Mito nearly jumped out of her skin at the sound of someone’s voice behind her. She spun around and came face to face with a boy she secretly hoped she would meet here again.

“Madara.”

His eyes were their normal, charcoal color, but he looked a bit haggard, as if he’d been fighting recently. Once again, he wore his full set of worn, leather armor over a navy blue gi.

“You’re not who you said you were,” he pressed.

They were back at the beach where she’d first met him, but this time her fisher’s dress was dry and her hair was not quite the rat’s nest it usually was when she was left to her own devices. Seawater tickled her toes as a gentle wave lapped at the shore.

“I’m Mito, just like I told you,” she said.

“Mito Uzumaki, the Princess of the Uzumaki clan.” He took a moment to look her up and down. “You were dressed as befits your station last night.”

Mito’s eyes widened. “You were there? I looked, but I didn’t see you.”

“You looked for me?”

Mito bit the inside of her cheek, embarrassed. “Um, just a little bit. I figured you wouldn’t be there since it was a formal dinner.”
Madara gazed out to sea, and after a protracted silence he said, “Ah, I’m just a lowborn soldier. But I won’t be like this forever.”

A sea breeze blew his spiky black hair, and Mito wondered why she hadn’t really noticed it before. He was close to her age, she was sure of it, but the high cheekbones and firmly-set jaw line gave him an air of nobility that transcended his birth. It was no wonder she’d thought him older than her with his Sharingan activated. There was something unmistakably regal about his profile, aquiline and granite, that contrasted starkly with his rank and dress.

“I’m sorry I didn’t give my clan name,” she said. “I didn’t think it was important.”

“A man’s name is his identity; it’s everything.”

“I’m not a man.”

He turned to look at her then. “No, you’re not, but you’re the daughter of a regent clan lord. Although...you could learn to dress more like one.” He eyed her ratty, roughspun dress, but there was no contempt in his tone, merely casual observation.

Something about him intrigued her. He looked her in the eye as he spoke to her, the way her father or the General did. Most people kept their eyes downcast out of respect, but he held no such reservations. And even after he’d revealed that he knew who she really was, he didn’t look at her any differently than he had before. There was confidence there, but there was no disdain. She felt a bit more like a person in his eyes rather than a china doll.

“What do you mean that you won’t be like this forever?” she asked.

“One day, I’ll lead the Uchiha clan. Together, Izuna and I will reinvent them,” Madara said.

“Oh... My father told me that the Uchiha clan has a social hierarchy that makes upward mobility pretty much impossible. Is that really true?”

Madara set his jaw. “Yeah, but I’ll be the one to change that.”

“Traditions are meant to last. It’s kind of the point.”

If he was angry, he didn’t let on. In fact, he seemed empowered by her words. “I’m stronger than some dusty old tradition, and I’ll keep getting stronger. The Uchiha respect power and nothing else. Izuna and I will take control from those corrupt nobles, and they won’t be able to stop us. Nothing’s impossible for an Uchiha.”

Mito smiled a genuine smile. His words made her want to believe that somewhere in this wretched, war-torn world of political schemes and petty border disputes and arranged marriages, there was a higher, noble ideal worth fighting for. That it was achievable. If Madara could do it, then maybe she could, too.

“I believe you,” she said.

At the sight of her smile, he did look a bit put off. “It’s not a question of faith. I’ll accomplish my goal because I’m good enough.”

“It’s that kind of attitude that inspires faith in others.”

He stayed silent for a moment and they stared at each other, she in the bedraggled fisher dress looking like a castaway, and he in his second-hand boiled leather. Just two children brought
together by a whim of fate, children who weren’t children at all.

“Come find me when you’ve accomplished your goal,” Mito said before her courage left her. “I’d like to congratulate you.”

He looked surprised, even more so than when she’d sealed his knife in the seashell. A crashing wave sent sea spray into their faces, and he turned to gaze out over the distant horizon once more.

“Ah. Until then, Princess.”
Chapter Notes

This chapter starts off some time before the events of Chapter 1 and gradually catches up.

A six-year-old boy with dark hair and eyes full of hatred glared hard and long at the three taller boys snickering down at him. He was the only thing standing between the bullies and his defenseless five-year-old brother. From an early age, Madara had learned that the Uchiha responded only to power and force. The strong trampled the weak with little remorse. If anything, the weak deserved punishment by virtue of being an embarrassment to the clan. For an Uchiha, the options were to succeed or die trying; there was no middle ground.

“Run and cry to your mama like a little girl,” one of the older boys taunted.

“Leave my brother alone,” Madara said with more steel in his voice than any child should ever be allowed to possess.

“What are you gonna do about it?” said another boy.

“I’m warning you,” Madara said as he felt Izuna tug on the frayed hem of his shirt.


The older boys heard him. “I don’t think so, not until you two runts learn your place. You’re no true Uchiha.”

The other two boys guffawed at their friend’s words. “Yeah, he’s just some dead soldier’s bastard with no talent and a whore for a mother—”

The boy did not finish his sentence. Madara lunged at him with lightning precision and shoved him to the ground before he could stop to think about what he was doing. One moment the boy was running his mouth, and the next he had a kunai embedded to the hilt in his chest. Madara’s eyes burned red like the blood spurting from the wounded boy’s lesion—he’d severed the Aorta. Somewhere behind him, Izuna whimpered at the grisly sight.

“I’m more Uchiha than you’ll ever be,” Madara hissed as the bully convulsed beneath him, choking on his last breaths and dying from exsanguination in a matter of seconds.

“Sh-Sharingan,” one of the remaining boys gasped. “He’s got the Sharingan!”

“Kaito!” the third boy shouted as he fell to his knees and stared in desperation at his fallen friend.

“I’ll kill you, too, if you ever hurt Izuna again,” Madara said, pushing himself off the ground. Now that he had a view of the body, he had to clench his bloody fists to keep them from shaking. He tried not to think about the smell of raw meat or the sticky feeling between his fingers, but it was hard not to.

“Let’s get outta here, Hikaku!” the first boy said.
The kneeling boy—Hikaku—looked like he wanted to fight Madara to avenge his dead friend, but Madara glared at him through the red haze of the strongest doujutsu in existence. Hikaku swallowed, knowing he was no match for the younger boy; he hadn’t activated his own Sharingan yet despite being a year older than Madara.

“Just leave, and I’ll forget about this,” Madara said with calm he didn’t feel.

Hikaku got to his feet and backed away, but then stopped and hesitated. He looked between the very dead Kaito and Madara hiding stricken Izuna behind him. “It won’t happen again,” he said shakily.

Madara blinked at the older boy but said nothing, not trusting his voice to remain steady. He didn’t stop Hikaku and his friend when they scampered off. Izuna’s soft tugging on his shirt helped fizzle his anger somewhat, and the Sharingan faded. Secretly relieved that his opponents had decided to back off, Madara looked down at his short younger brother with dark eyes, hoping he didn’t appear as shaken as he felt.

“Red,” Izuna said through his unshed tears. “You got the red eyes!”

Madara smiled faintly. It would not do to scold him for crying when no one was around to see it but him. It would be their little secret. “I’ve been practicing. You should, too, if you wanna catch up.”

Izuna nodded and wiped the excess tears away. “I wanna be just like you!”

Madara looked back at Kaito’s body bleeding out in the yard. He knew he wouldn’t be punished for the kill—the Uchiha were mired in death and violence and blood from the day they were born. If anything, he would be commended for activating the Sharingan at an unprecedented age. But this was his first kill, and he felt a bit put off by how easy it had been. About how his hands, sticky with Kaito’s blood, still shook.

*A one-hit kill.*

Kaito’s flesh had opened up like butter under a dinner knife. It was just as the training master had told him. He went for a major artery and hit his target with little effort given the element of surprise, though somehow it felt different to do it for real than practicing against a stuffed dummy. Bile rose in Madara’s throat as he stared at Kaito’s body, nothing more than a sack of meat now, and he had to look away before he felt sick. But he would not let Izuna pick up on his inner thoughts. He had a responsibility as the eldest to set an example for the boy, and he would make sure to present a strong front before him.

“Let’s go home. Mother’ll be waiting with dinner.”

Shiori was a kind woman. She was one of the few people Madara had ever known in his life who had genuinely wished to help him without asking for anything in return. She sacrificed everything for her two young sons because they were all she had.

“Take those off. I’ll need to wash them,” she told Madara when she saw his clothing covered in Kaito’s blood.

She never asked how it got there or why. She just washed his shirt with her weathered hands and smiled at him.
“Mama, Brother got the red eyes!” Izuna cheered from his spot at the wooden kitchen table, waving at Madara.

Shiori stopped serving the boiled potatoes. At length she said, “Madara, is this true? Did you awaken the Sharingan?”

Madara set down his water glass. “Yeah.”

Shiori gaped at her son for a moment before covering her mouth with her hands. She then stood, went to the cupboard, and extracted a brown paper package.

“I was saving this for your birthday, but this is a more appropriate occasion,” she said, returning to the table.

She unwrapped the parcel to reveal a meager assortment of sweets. Izuna lit up and tried to grab at them, but his stubby arms were too short to reach across the table. Madara was shocked that their mother had managed to procure something like this. Sweets were exceedingly hard to come by and discouraged among the soldiers’ ranks for encouraging sloth and overindulgence. He could not help the involuntary watering in his mouth at the sight of them.

“I saved up enough to buy them,” Shiori said, noticing her two sons’ covetous expressions. “Awakening the Sharingan at such a young age...” she continued, watching Madara with open admiration. “You’re a true Uchiha now.”

This snapped Madara out of his daze. “An Uchiha,” he repeated.

Shiori nodded. “Now that you’ve awakened your father’s bloodline limit, you can bear the Uchiha name and become an active member of the clan. And Izuna will join you when he awakens his.”

“Yeah!” Izuna clapped his hands together, pleased at the prospect. Shiori handed him a sweet, and he stuffed it in his mouth. “We’re gonna be Uchiha!” he cheered through a full mouth.

“You’ll be one, too, Mother,” Madara said, reaching for a sugary treat. He bit into it and savored the caramel flavor. He’d always loved sweet things.

Shiori smiled sadly at her eldest son. “Only shinobi who’ve awakened the bloodline limit can bear the clan name. I’m no shinobi.”

“Father was.”

“Yes, your father was a good man and a better shinobi.” *But he wasn’t my husband.*

Madara did not have to guess at the words left unsaid. Official clan marriages were only allowed by arrangement, and only then between accomplished shinobi and clan nobles. Madara and Izuna’s father was a lowborn soldier, and their mother was a civilian woman. As far as the clan’s rules were concerned, Madara and Izuna were bastards with tainted blood and a birthright unworthy even of a pair of diseased rodents. In a situation where tradition reigned unopposed, there seemed to be little hope for the brothers.

But Shiori had always said differently. “You boys can be anything you want to be and more. All you have to do is work hard, and you’ll rise through the ranks.”

“It’s not that easy,” Madara countered. “There’s rules.”

Shiori’s dreamy gaze sobered, and her lips thinned in a severe line. “Rules can be broken,” she
snapped. “You two wouldn’t be here if your father and I had followed the rules.”

Izuna munched on another sweet, his big, black eyes drifting between his quiet older brother and their mother. He sucked on his fingers, and they glistened with sticky sugar.

“You’ve already done the impossible, Madara,” Shiori continued a little more gently. “Now that you’re a true Uchiha, the nobles will have to recognize your talent. And once you make it to the top, you can make your own rules. Think of the possibilities. You can rejuvenate this tired old clan. Together, you and Izuna can do anything you set your minds to. So I won’t hear another word about rules, am I understood?”

Madara watched her with a degree of awe only a child can grasp, the last vestiges of his innocence that hadn’t been flayed away under the lash of the Uchiha training regimen. “Why do you believe in us so much?”

Shiori smiled in that special way when she was thinking of Madara’s father, or at times like these, when her sons pleased her. “It’s not a question of faith. I know you’ll succeed because you’re my sons. You’re good enough.”

Shiori died three years later of heart disease. The Uchiha had never been skilled healers; they preferred to duke it out and die a warrior’s death on the battlefield than waste away in a sick bed. The infirm were better left for dead, anyway—their needs only burdened the rest of the clan by sapping precious money and resources. Why sustain a life that is worthless?

Izuna cried that day. He was hardly eight at the time and had awoken his own Sharingan some time ago, yet still he bawled like a baby. Madara did not scold him.

“This is the last time you’ll ever cry, Izuna,” he said instead. “From this day forward, we’re men. It’s time to start acting like one.”

Izuna nodded, trying in vain to wipe the tears and snot from his face as thunder boomed overhead. The two of them had stayed behind with Shiori at the previous base camp in between missions. She had grown too ill to travel, and Madara knew that the time had come for her to be put out of her misery. He’d told his captain that he would be the one to end it, given Shiori’s lack of a husband. She glowed with pride when he slid the kunai across her throat, thanking him for the clean and honorable death. He would never forget the sight of her smile just before her blood trickled over his fingers, so warm.

Izuna had watched and refrained from crying in front of their mother. Now, as the two of them stood next to the dying funeral pyre, the first drops of rain began to fall. The storm picked up and soon the Uchiha brothers were drenched to the bone through their hand-me-down armor and tattered gi. It had been Izuna’s idea to light a pyre for her. Only trueborn Uchiha were allowed to be cremated, but Izuna had insisted that Shiori had more Uchiha spirit than the snobbish, highborn ladies of the clan, an opinion with which Madara agreed.

The rain fell, and they watched through blood red eyes as the small pyre smoked and hissed.

“This is the last time you cry too, Brother,” Izuna said. “My eyes can see your tears through the rain.”

Madara let out a sharp breath, observing as it fogged in the chill brought on by the early spring storm. The tears were all but invisible as they mixed with the rain, but they felt hot against his
cheeks.

“Yeah,” he said softly. “This is the last time.”

After another moment, the brothers turned to leave. They had a long journey ahead of them if they were going to catch up to the rest of the nomadic clan and outrun the worst of the storm.

“Izuna,” Madara said after they’d made it a few miles in silence. “Promise me something.”

“Anything, Brother.”

Madara hesitated for a second before continuing. “Promise me that you and I are one—on the battlefield, in the council meetings, always. Promise me that we’ll take this clan together. Can I count on you?”

Izuna smiled grimly, looking much older than his eight years. “I’ll always fight with you, until the day I die.”

Madara pressed his lips into a thin line, thinking of the impossible uphill battle that lay before them in the years to come should they survive the harsh reality of being born Uchiha.

“You’ll survive, my sons, because you’re strong. Together, you’re invincible.”

He could almost hear the echo of his mother’s dying words as they clung to him with soft, shadow claws through the soaked clothing on his back. He and Izuna would survive, and together they would reinvent the Uchiha clan.

Together, they were invincible.

Hashirama Senju crouched behind a crumbling palisade surrounding the imposing castle, dark eyes narrowed in concentration as he scanned his surroundings. Next to him, his younger brother crept closer to report the findings from his sensory scan.

“They pushed us back at the bridge,” Tobirama whispered through gritted teeth. “Father’s throwing his best Douton at them, but any more power and the whole castle will fall.”

Hashirama sighed. “Ten men. Ten men are holding off the entire Senju clan.”

Tobirama peeked over the top of the stone barricade, taking in the sight of their father’s second-in-command barking orders. Screaming could be heard from across the drawbridge. The smell of burning kerosene reached the brothers, followed by shrieks of pain that drove a spike of dread through Hashirama’s heart.

“Shit,” Tobirama swore. “They’re using the murder holes.”

Tobirama was on his feet and running toward the thick of battle before he finished his sentence. Hashirama wasn’t quick enough to stop him, and thus was forced to give chase. Tobirama had always been somewhat rash in these situations.

“Suiton: Suishōha!”

A great wave of water rose up from the castle’s moat and sped toward the entrance of the castle. A great roar resounded with the impact of water on stone and metal. It turned black as it mixed with
the boiling oil, morphing into a viscous serum that quickly lost momentum as it became more and more tainted. Tobirama released a frustrated growl.

“Tobirama! Hashirama!”

The brothers turned at the sound of their father’s raspy voice. Flanked by two bodyguards, he jogged toward them, his salt-and-pepper hair billowing behind him in a thick ponytail.

“I told you to stay out of this,” he barked, pulling them both back by the collars.

“But those bastards are winning!” Tobirama hissed, his body tense with defiance.

Ikema Senju forced his two sons to the ground in a crouching position to better shield them. “Listen to me,” he said in a low timbre that brooked no room for argument. “I agreed to let you two accompany me on the condition that you’d remain out of sight.”

“But Father—” Tobirama protested.

“I will not see my remaining sons dead before me!”

Hashirama stared up at their father, whose olive complexion, dark features, and strong jaw he shared, almost a mirror image. In his fourteen years of life, he’d never seen the man so furious. Ikema Senju was a mild-tempered man who preferred to fight his battles with words rather than weapons. But today was not a day for words; they’d tried that approach already. The feudal lord who’d hired them wasn’t interested in negotiating anymore. Osaka Castle was to be his at all costs.

“Am I clear? Stay out of the way, or I’ll roast you myself,” Ikema said, tightening his grip on their collars.

Tobirama looked about ready to protest again, but Hashirama beat him to it. “Yes, Father.”

Angry, red eyes fixed Hashirama with a look that said ‘traitor’. Despite their kinship, the brothers were as different as night and day. Where Hashirama was dark of complexion, Tobirama was pale, taking after their late mother. Hashirama had a mouth made for smiling, while Tobirama’s tongue was as sharp as the sword at his hip. Hashirama willed his younger brother to stay silent for once. Somehow, his thoughts were heard. Ikema released his sons and commanded his bodyguards to move. They obeyed without question. With one final look back at his sons, the leader of the great Senju clan took off toward the besieged castle.

Tobirama looked torn. “We have to do something.”

His spiky, white hair was drenched with water from his earlier attack. Hashirama looked between his younger brother and the entrance to the castle where their father had disappeared. As the eldest, he felt obligated to look out for his brother and set an example, but deep down he felt conflicted. He wanted to obey their father as any son should, but at the same time he feared the worst. They were up against a legendary alliance of shinobi, the best from a number of different clans.

“Hashirama!”

The boys turned to see Tōka, their cousin, running to meet them. She was fair-skinned and tall with piercing, green eyes and the trademark Senju chestnut hair, long and straight and tied back out of her face. At sixteen, she was directly involved in the fighting as part of a squadron, unlike the brothers. In contrast to most highborn women her age, she was born to wield a sword, not a sewing needle. Her skill with genjutsu, while extraordinary, was of little use at the moment while the Senju forces were stuck outside the castle.
“Tōka,” Hashirama said. “How bad is it?”

“There are only ten of them, but they know this castle well. It’s tough to predict their movements from the outside since they all employ unique battle tactics.”

“Sanada’s Ten Heroes,” Hashirama said, awed. “They’re really something.”

Tobirama kneeled down and touched the cobblestone road leading to the castle, eyes closed. After a moment’s concentration, he gasped in shock.

“What’s happening?” Hashirama said.

Tobirama clenched his jaw and stared in the direction of the castle gates. “It’s—”

A deafening explosion went off in that moment, robbing the three Senju of their hearing and forcing them to fall to the ground for cover. Hashirama’s head spun, the ringing in his ears making him dizzy. Sound returned to him slowly, as though someone was gradually raising the volume. Shouts could be heard, as well as frantic footsteps running away from the direction of the castle. Alarmed, Hashirama looked around to see what was the matter.

Their forces were retreating.

“Oh god, it can’t be,” Tobirama said, voice shaking.

“What happened,” Hashirama demanded, whirling on his brother.

“Lord Ikema,” Tōka said, face pallid as she feared the worst.

Hashirama didn’t need her to elaborate to draw his own conclusion. Time seemed to slow down as reality sank its merciless fangs in.

Father...

Hashirama prided himself on listening to others before ever speaking up and making a decision for himself. His father had always drilled into him the importance of seeking guidance and counsel from others no matter their rank.

“You can always learn something from other people, even the stupid ones. At the very least, you can learn not to be like them.”

But right now Hashirama didn’t want to listen to anyone. He didn’t want to exercise caution or take a vote. He didn’t want to run away like a coward while others fought the battle his father meant to win. He didn’t want to let things end like this.

“I’m going in. Tobi, cover me.”

He didn’t wait for an answer. He just took off at full tilt toward the front entrance, his hands already forming an earth seal. Just as he drew close to the entrance, Hashirama released his chakra. Two gnarled bundles of tree roots shot forth from his palms and slammed into the stone archway. For the span of a breath, he felt iron resistance from the sturdy structure. Sure of his power, he pushed forward until the rough-hewn stone bricks whined and finally crumbled under the force of his jutsu. What began as two separate wooden spires transformed into an intricate maze of roots and branches, weaving through the stone as if it were freshly tilled dirt and tearing the entrance apart from the inside out. In the ensuing avalanche of dust, rock, and pitch, Tobirama and Tōka caught up to him.
“Let’s go,” Hashirama said, already moving forward.

They made it to the inner courtyard and were pelted with arrows. The Ten Heroes had help from the castle’s civilian guards. Hashirama was quick to summon a wooden wall to protect their three-man group from the projectiles, his chakra flaring with adrenaline.

“Tōka!”

She didn’t need to be told twice. Acting without hesitation, she instigated a genjutsu that knocked out their attackers. When the pounding sound of metal pelting wood petered out, Hashirama dismissed the wall. The entire courtyard was demolished from what he could see. Whatever bomb had gone off left little to the imagination. Bodies were strewn about, bloody and charred and all of them dead.

“No...”

Tobirama’s voice drifted to him, the younger boy having left his side to examine one of the bodies. As if in a dream, Hashirama joined his brother. It was worse than he’d expected.

“Father!”

Ikema was lying on the ground, his body battered almost beyond recognition if not for the proud Senju crest emblazoned across his viridian breastplate. His skin, the little that was exposed, had peeled off his body under the intense heat of the conflagration. He was missing an arm at the shoulder. Perhaps it had been blown clean off in the blast. Hashirama felt like he was looking down on himself as his body hovered over his fallen father and leader, like it was some other boy’s father and some other boy’s pain.

“Hashi, do something!” Tobirama shouted. “Help him!”

Without even thinking about it, Hashirama began to pour healing chakra into their unresponsive father. Normally calm and collected under duress, the onslaught of information gleaned from his medical chakra only served to jumble his thoughts. He wanted to save their father, but he didn’t even know where to begin with injuries as grievous as these.

“My sons...”

Shocked, the brothers and Tōka focused on the origin of the voice as fragile as the wind. Ikema was blind to the world, his eyes incinerated. His armor looked like it had fused with his blistering flesh in places. He wouldn’t live much longer.

“Father,” Hashirama said, his healing chakra still racing from his fingertips.

“We’re not gonna let you die!” Tobirama said, tears already streaking down his cheeks.

Ikema released a rattling breath, his whole body convulsing with the effort. Never in his life had Hashirama felt so afraid.

“Hashirama?”

“I’m here.”

The sound of his son’s voice lent Ikema one last burst of energy. A burned, bloody hand reached for his.
“Promise,” Ikema wheezed.

“Anything. Tell me,” Hashirama said, his voice cracking.

“End this.”

They stared at the dying leader of the Senju as they processed his last words. Tobirama was about to say something further when Ikema drew in a sharp breath, shuddered, and fell limp. Several moments passed before Hashirama realized that his healing energy was still pouring into his father. He ceased the flow of his chakra abruptly.

*Father...*

Tōka put a hand over her mouth to stifle a sob.

*Crunch!*

The sound of earth and rock splitting directly behind the trio forced them to flee to safer ground, giving them no more time mourn their fallen leader. A powerful earth-based technique razed what was left of the courtyard as Tōka, Hashirama, and Tobirama fastened themselves to the far wall with the aid of chakra.

“Four of them. Ten o’clock,” Tōka said, dark eyes narrowed and blinking away the last of her tears.

“Damnit,” Tobirama swore, his cheeks still stained with tear tracks.

Somewhere deep down, Hashirama knew that he’d just witnessed his father’s last moments on this earth. He also knew that it made him the new leader of the Senju, but none of that seemed to be registering as he looked down at the demolished courtyard filling with Senju forces while the Ten Heroes attacked from unknown locations. What did register was the need for a decision to be made and a strategy to be devised.

“I want you two to rejoin the others and act as though nothing’s changed. My father is still alive and fighting,” Hashirama said.

Tōka and Tobirama both turned incredulous eyes on the Senju heir.

“Hashirama, I don’t—” Tōka began.

“If word of this gets out now, it’ll demoralize everyone,” Hashirama interrupted.

The sounds of metal clashing and earth rumbling reached them from the smoking courtyard below their horizontal perch, shattering the moment and bringing them back to reality. They knew Hashirama spoke the truth, and losing this battle wasn’t an option. Tōka nodded and took off toward the group of Senju fighting their way deeper into the courtyard. Tobirama didn’t move.

“I’m not just gonna leave you,” he said, still shaken from witnessing their father’s grisly death.

“You’ll be safer with the group,” Hashirama said.

Any latent shock and hurt melted away, replaced with unabashed fury as Tobirama glared daggers at his brother and now leader. “I’m *not* leaving you. You need me.”

Hashirama tamped down the small flicker of anger at his brother’s defiance. He was being irrational. Hashirama could take care of himself much better when he didn’t have to worry about anyone else.
“Tobi, please don’t make me—”

“Make you what? Hold my hand? I don’t know if you were awake just now, but Father’s dead. Dead, Hashi. You’re not going in there without me.”

Another explosion, though not as destructive as its predecessor, racked the battleground and its combatants. The young brothers remained crouched beneath a window sill on the side of the perimeter wall, eyes darting about to make sure they weren’t being targeted.

“You always do this,” Tobirama hissed. “You always try to fight alone, and I hate it. You and I are a team.”

Tobirama’s face was smudged with dirt and blood, warped by the paths of his earlier tears. Twelve was an old age in this world, no matter what their father wished. It made him sad to think that Tobirama, who hadn’t even grown a beard yet, was as much a part of this as the rest of them.

But he didn’t have time to argue anymore. When Tobirama set his mind to something, he pursued it with the tenacity of a charging bull. It was the reason he usually got what he wanted, many times at Hashirama’s expense.

“Fine. But you defer to me, got it?”

Tobirama nodded. “Yeah.”

“Okay. Let’s go.”

“This is insanity. Ten men can’t overpower the Senju clan!”

Seikai Miyoshi bandaged a deep sword wound through his brother Isa’s left flank. The blade had managed to slip through a crease in Isa’s armor and slice the soft flesh beneath. Miraculously, no major organs were hit, but the rate at which Isa was losing blood was a cause for extreme worry. For all their skill and prowess, the Heroes were no medical ninja.

Sasuke Sarutobi, the leader of the Ten Heroes, was a tall man towering just over six feet and tightly packed with rippling muscle honed from a nomadic lifestyle of near-constant mercenary work. He was lean of frame, the angles of his face and shoulders so sharp he may have appeared gaunt to the untrained eye. A long, brown ponytail hung like a lash down to his waist, a clan tradition he could not shake even after all these years. He clenched a fist as he surveyed the destroyed courtyard below. Boiling oil traps had slowed down the enemy siege, but an unplanned explosion had been the first nail in the Heroes’ coffins. When he found out who was responsible, Sasuke would deal with the culprit personally. There was no way he was about to lose this stronghold.

“Seikai,” Sasuke addressed his teammate. “Stay here. I’m gonna join the fighting myself.”

Seikai didn’t argue as he concentrated on helping his fast fading brother, whose face had taken on an unhealthy, ashen pallor. Sasuke pursed his lips in a grim line at the sight, pausing. This was one of his comrades. He’d fought nearly to the death countless times with the brothers during their time serving the feudal lord Yukimura Sanada in his various irredentist campaigns. The pay was good and the brotherhood was better. As far as Sasuke was concerned, this was the life he’d always envisioned for himself, not the life of a stuffy ninja clan noble.

“Isa,” he said, kneeling before the younger man.
“Captain,” Isa said, his blue eyes bright with fear and fever. “It was an honor serving you.”

Sasuke gritted his teeth together. “We served Sanada. You and I are comrades. Equals. Fighting with you has been my honor.”

Isa managed a weak smile. “Thank you, Captain.”

“Go,” Seikai urged, his tone devoid of emotion. “We still have a mission to complete.”

Sasuke took one last glance at Seikai. Despite his exterior calm, Sasuke knew the man well enough to sense the turbulent emotions in his eyes, the mirror image of his brother’s. At the very least, Sasuke could give them their privacy in what was likely Isa’s final moments on this earth.

“Right.”

Breaking into a fast jog, Sasuke made his way out of the central operations room down a stone hallway that would eventually lead outside. The sight on the other side made him skid to an abrupt stop.

“Kirigakure,” he said.

A lithe, almost feminine man clad from head to toe in studded leather armor stood before him. His beautiful grey eyes held an unforgiving glint, sharply contrasting with his well-kept black hair and aristocratic features. Saizō Kirigakure, Sasuke’s second in command, was not easy to hit in combat.

“Sarutobi,” he said, his tone hard. “We have a situation.”

“I can see that,” Sasuke said, his raspy, no-nonsense drawl not even fazing his partner. They’d been together long enough to read between the mannerisms.

Saizō approached him, his footsteps silent as he gave the appearance of floating instead of walking. A master of illusions and deception, Saizō was the polar opposite of Sasuke in nearly every way. The latter preferred a more hands-on approach, favoring fierce hand-to-hand combat or violent, elemental ninjutsu, sometimes with the aid of his favorite summon, Mashira the demon fire monkey. His agility and unique fighting style had earned him the nickname ‘Flying Monkey’ throughout the continent, although his enemies never failed to link him to the animal in a less flattering sense. Even Sasuke’s physical appearance was antithetical to his partner’s. Unkempt, scar-faced, and muscular where Saizō was like an ornate calligraphy scroll, looping and serpentine down to his curling, cruel smile.

“Osaka Castle is doomed to fall,” Saizō said, stopping several feet away, an unreadable expression on his face. “We should withdraw while we still can.”


“The Ten Heroes have never faced the full might of the Senju clan.”

The sounds of fierce battle drifted to them as a stray throwing dagger broke a nearby window. The smell of burning flesh and petrichor assaulted Sasuke’s sensitive nose. The Senju were known as a clan of Suiton and Douton users. The fire must have been caused by the earlier unplanned explosion.

“That reminds me,” Sasuke said. “Who set off that explosion?”

Saizō smiled enigmatically. It was the one he reserved for interrogations. “Accidents happen, I
suppose."

Sasuke resisted the urge to shiver. He and Saizō had been through rain and shine together, and he trusted the other ninja with his life. But there were some things he’d never get used to. Shrugging it off in favor of joining the battle like he’d previously intended, Sasuke made to pass his partner. A hand shot out suddenly and latched onto his wrist.

“What are you doing?” Sasuke demanded.

“Are you sure you want to go out there?” Saizō crooned.

“Obviously. This is our mission. Come on, let’s go.”

Saizō didn’t budge.

“Kiri-gakure?”

At length, Saizō blinked and found his voice. “...I’m sorry.”

Sasuke frowned, about to question his friend’s odd behavior when blinding pain erupted in his back. He sucked in a breath of air as his knees rattled and gave out from under him. The image of Saizō standing before him blurred and disintegrated, replaced with the faces of some of his other comrades.

Someone leaned close to his ear from behind and whispered, “Don’t say I never did anything for you.”

Sasuke’s eyes widened at the sound of that voice. He couldn’t see Saizō, but all of a sudden, he understood what had happened.

“Damn genjutsu,” he said, holding in the urge to cough.

Saizō released a sharp breath in Sasuke’s ear, warm and clammy. The knife in his back twisted, and Sasuke saw stars. He bit down on his cheek to stifle a cry of pain.

“Anayama,” Saizō said. “Make sure the Miyoshi brothers don’t follow us out.”

Sasuke could make out a shadow bowing quickly before disappearing around the corner, most likely to assassinate Seikai and Isa.

“No!” he said. “You traitors.”

Saizō laughed. “Traitors? Sarutobi, you’re the one who told me there’s no treachery in this world, only self-interest. Or did you abandon your family for another reason?”

Sasuke felt his blood freeze at those words. He’d confided in Saizō his doubts about leaving the Sarutobi clan to pursue his own path. He’d left a widowed mother and infant sister behind, never once looking back. Escaping the oppressive influence of the greater clan meant severing all ties, even those he would have rather kept. But at the time, he’d told himself it was worth it; the clan would look after them in his absence despite their low birth. He sent them money from his mercenary work with the Ten Heroes, but was that really enough? He’d asked Saizō that question more times than he could count.

“Bastard,” he breathed, trying to ignore the personal attack. “As you stab me in the back.”

“Semantics,” Saizō said, releasing the dagger and taking a step back. “Kakei, retrieve the others.
Lord Sanada is waiting.”

Juzo Kakei, another member of the Ten Heroes, left to do Saizō’s bidding with a curt nod. Sasuke choked, unable to suck in enough breath to calm his racing heart. He could feel warm blood staining the back of his gi, dribbling down his back. Saizō would not get away with this.

“Why?” he demanded.

“Sanada knew this battle was a lost cause once the Senju were hired.” He chuckled. “I told him to enlist the Uchiha, but he wanted to preserve as much of the castle as possible, not raze it to the ground. Well, not that it matters now.”

_Uchiha? Senju?_

Those two had a blood feud extending to the beginning of time, to believe the old storytellers. Where they were involved, death and destruction were sure to befall everyone within range. Sasuke didn’t blame Sanada for declining the suggestion.

“Sanada will have you killed for this betrayal,” Sasuke said.

“Unlikely, seeing as he’s the one who wanted you gone in the first place.”

Sasuke nearly collapsed. “He... He _ordered_ you to kill me?”

“My my, look at you, figuring things out all on your own for once.”

Sasuke could not believe what he was hearing. “I thought you and I were—”

“Friends? Comrades?” Saizō laughed. “You ignorant fool! All this time you only saw what you wanted to see, and that tunnel vision was easy to deceive for someone like me.”

Sasuke wanted to hurt him. Badly. But he also wanted to shake Saizō until his trusted friend returned. Where was the man he knew? The man he’d bled and broken bread with? Sorrow and guilt and unrepentant fury bubbled up within him, a tangle of emotions his battered body could not manifest.

Saizō mistook his turbulent emotions for exhaustion. “Hm? Lost all your fight, Sarutobi?”

Growling, Sasuke blocked out the pain in his back and launched himself at his partner-turned-enemy, twisting through the air with lethal grace. He punched Saizō’s face, but the man was ready for this with another illusory technique—always one step ahead. Sasuke’s fist passed through Saizō’s face as though it were made of smoke. Another blinding pain bloomed in his side as he stumbled. Saizō had gutted him with another dagger. Sasuke fell to his knees once more, dry heaving.

“Pathetic. You’ll never beat me unless you can view me as a threat,” Saizō said, stabbing Sasuke again in the shoulder this time.

Sasuke grunted under the assault, collapsing to the floor in a heap of blood and metal. “Kirimakure...”

“I’ll be going now. Let’s see if the _great_ Flying Monkey can dance his way out of this one, shall we?”

Saizō smirked at his fallen opponent and walked down the hallway, his footsteps fading with every
passing second.

*I’ll kill him. I swear I will.*

Sasuke tried to push himself up to give chase, but only succeeded in merging with the wall in a half slump. He further irritated his wounds, drawing more blood and sending fresh waves of pain through his body. Removing the blades would only expedite death by exsanguination. He didn’t even have the energy to summon Mashira at this rate. Sighing, he let his head lean against the stone wall behind him, trying to will away the pain.

*I can’t die here like this,* he thought. *Not like this.*

Unfortunately, the only people he trusted to help him were no longer on his side.

Hashirama and Tobirama raced through the halls of Osaka Castle at full tilt. They’d encountered a number of castle guards on a mission to stab them to death with spears, but Hashirama barreled through them with his Mokuton. For a technique that embodied the very essence of life, it was extremely effective at dealing death.

They rounded a corner and encountered a pair of enemies, but these two were different. They bore Yukimura Sanada’s sigil carved into their armor: two rows of three white coins with square hollows in their centers.

*The Ten Heroes.*

Tobirama was quick to draw his short sword, skidding to a halt and falling into an attack stance. The enemy shinobi recognized fellow ninja in the Senju brothers and put their guard up. Even children could be deadly in a world where death didn’t discriminate.

“Where is your leader?” Hashirama said.

Tobirama stole a glance at his brother out of the corner of his eye. He had that dead look their father used to get in battle, a sign that he’d removed himself from the situation until all that was left was the execution of the right moves to win the battle.

“Step aside, kids, and I promise your deaths will be quick,” said the more heavyset of the two Heroes.

Sanada’s Ten Heroes were infamous all over the continent for their skill and teamwork. No one really knew the truth about why they had formed. It was rumored that Sanada forced great shinobi clans to hand over their very best on pain of extermination. Others claimed that the members were formerly wanted men guilty of murder or rape, among other heinous crimes. Whatever the case, the stories all agreed on one fact: Sanada’s Ten Heroes were elites who’d never lost a battle.

*Until today.*

Hashirama scowled, perhaps debating what course of action to take. Tobirama took the opportunity to lunge at one of the enemy ninja, striking fast and true with this short sword. The ninja he hadn’t aimed for noticed the attack coming from a mile away and retaliated with a well-aimed kick, catching Tobirama in the ribs and sending him careening into the far wall.

Hashirama struck with a thick wooden spire. One of the enemies managed to leap out of the way
just in time, but the other took the attack through his chest. Hashirama didn’t let up. He pushed the root onward until the enemy was impaled against the wall opposite Tobirama.

“Shit, Mochizuki!” the remaining Hero said.

At this point, Tobirama had recovered from his previous beating and focused on the remaining enemy. To his horror, the man had just finished a round of hand seals ending with the Tiger symbol. It could mean only one thing, and Hashirama was in trouble for it.

Fumbling to make haste, Tobirama summoned his chakra and tried to complete the staggering forty-four hand seals required for the Suiryūdan technique. He’d been practicing the pace for years since he first discovered his remarkable nature affinity, but forty-four hand seals were no easy feat.

He didn’t make it in time.

“Hashi!” he yelled, little more than halfway through the required seals.

Orange fire licked at Hashirama’s summoned tree roots, smoking and snapping as it crept ever closer to Hashirama himself. Just when Tobirama thought he might lose another family member, Hashirama detached himself from his roots and rolled out of the way. He didn’t escape unscathed.

“Tobi, now!”

Seeing a chance, Tobirama threw himself at their opponent just as he was winding down his fire technique. The man didn’t know what hit him when Tobirama drove his short sword through the juncture between his neck and shoulder.

Wide, green eyes stared in shock at his pint-sized attacker as Tobirama sank his blade in to the hilt and tore. The enemy shinobi collapsed with a sputter and Tobirama fell with him, a pool of warm blood forming beneath them and soaking their armor.

A few tense seconds passed as the brothers collected themselves. Out of sheer luck aided by the element of surprise, they’d managed to take down two of Sanada’s Ten Heroes and live to tell the tale. For now.

“Tobi, you okay?”

Tobirama blinked, trying to ignore the sticky feeling of the enemy’s blood seeping through his armor and staining his hands where he gripped his short sword. Clenching his jaw and closing his eyes, Tobirama pulled free the short blade in one smooth tug. The squelching sound of shattered bone and muscle slipping past cold steel made him wince, and he was thankful that Hashirama couldn’t see his face while his back was turned. Chunks of the fallen Hero slopped onto the floor, and Tobirama averted his gaze. Once the blade was free, he forced himself to his unsteady feet.

“Yeah, fine.” When he caught sight of his brother, however, fear flooded his features. “Your arm —”

“—is fine,” Hashirama cut him off, examining the appendage. “Nothing I can’t bear with now and heal later.”

Tobirama wasn’t fooled. Smoke rose from the damaged arm, and boiling blood dripped onto the stone floor from Hashirama’s fingertips. His arm guard was warped beyond recognition, and Tobirama suspected that the fire had roasted his brother’s skin beneath it. It had to hurt like hell.

“You have to heal it,” he said. “You can’t fight like that.”
Hashirama looked like he wanted to protest, but the sheen of sweat covering his forehead betrayed his suffering. After a moment’s hesitation, he lifted a hand to soothe the injury. Green light illuminated the now silent corridor as Hashirama tried to mend his battered arm.

“Let’s get going,” he said after a few moments. “We have to find their leader.”

Tobirama took one last glance at his brother’s arm. It still looked like it had been roasted on an open-fire grill, but the bleeding seemed to have stopped. Resigned, he nodded and followed Hashirama down the now cleared hall. It didn’t take them long to stumble upon another body.

“Another Hero,” Tobirama said. “Looks like this one’s already dead.”

“No,” Hashirama said, approaching the slumped man with caution. “He’s breathing. Look at his chest.”

Sure enough, Tobirama noticed the shallow rise and fall once he stopped to look carefully. Hashirama had always been more observant about the subtleties of life than he. “We should kill him, then.”

Hashirama was about to respond to this when the unidentified Hero groaned. Feverish, dark eyes half mad with pain and encroaching death shifted about in search for a target. “Who’s there?” he slurred.

Hashirama crouched down before the older man, studying his injuries. Tobirama didn’t know much about medical ninjutsu—he didn’t have his brother’s natural talent for or interest in the art—but even he could tell a soon-to-be hopeless situation when he saw it. The ninja boasted three glaring knife wounds, one of which was bleeding steadily from his left side.

“You’re one of Sanada’s Ten Heroes,” Hashirama said. “Tell me where your leader is.”

The unnamed shinobi blinked one eye after the other, as though trying with all his might to focus on Hashirama kneeling before him. Tobirama watched from over his brother’s shoulder. At length the man offered what could have been construed as a smirk.

“Lookin’ at him.”

Tobirama gaped at the fallen shinobi.

“You’re the legendary Sasuke Sarutobi?” Hashirama said, just as shocked as his brother.

Sasuke coughed, perhaps an attempt to laugh at them. “Not whatcha s’pected, eh?” His words blended together, as though his tongue had swollen too fat for his mouth.

“Understatement of the century,” Tobirama grumbled, his hand clenching around his bloody sword.

“Who did this to you?” Hashirama asked.

Sasuke struggled to breathe and didn’t bother answering for the longest time. Tobirama thought he might die before he got the chance at this rate. But it was a disturbing turn of events. He was certain that no one else had penetrated the castle before his brother and him, yet someone had attacked Sasuke regardless.

“My... My partner,” Sasuke said. “Stabbed me in the back. Literally.”

If what Sasuke said was true—if he even was Sasuke Sarutobi—then that meant that Sanada’s Ten
Heroes, long fabled to be as mysterious as they were invincible, were finished. All in the course of a bloody afternoon. There was something so wrong, so cheap about the whole thing.

“Hashi,” Tobirama said, shooting his brother a significant look.

Hashirama nodded. “I know.” To Sasuke he said, “Listen, you’ll die without medical treatment. I may be able to save you, but I want something from you in return.”

Sasuke looked like he hadn’t heard right, and Tobirama didn’t blame him. “What? That’s not really what I meant—”

“I want you to fight for me,” Hashirama went on. “I want your loyalty. In return, I’ll save your life. What do you say?”

For a tense moment, the only sound that could be heard was Sasuke’s rattling breath and the din of steel from the courtyard below. Tobirama could not believe his ears. His brother never made such rash decisions like this on his own!

“Hashi, I don’t—”

Hashirama shot his brother a glare that brooked no argument. Tobirama cut himself off, speechless by the fierce look in his brother’s eyes. It was the same look their father got when he’d made up his mind about something. For some inexplicable reason, Tobirama felt ashamed thinking it.

“What do you say?” Hashirama asked Sasuke.

Sasuke blinked, only half seeing the two young boys offering him an ultimatum—more like blackmail—and thinking back on his encounter with Saizō. The friend he’d trusted. His brother in arms. His greatest betrayer.

“Deal,” Sasuke said. “But I want revenge for...for this.”

Hashirama nodded. “Fine.”

Tobirama could not believe this was actually happening. Their mission was to kill this man, and yet here Hashirama was making an ally out of him! The green glow of Hashirama’s medical chakra illuminated the corridor, lending it an air of the supernatural as he worked to remove the knives and staunch the ensuing blood flow.

“Who are you?” Sasuke said after a moment.

Hashirama looked up from his work, and the two men locked gazes.

“I’m Hashirama, leader of the Senju clan.”
The Naka River

Chapter Notes

Once again, this chapter is still jumping around the timelines a bit. It starts just after the events of Chapter 1, but before the Senju siege of Osaka Castle from Chapter 2.

Madara was exhausted. The trip to the mainland from the island cluster where the new Uzushiogakure would be was not sitting well with him. He’d never liked sea travel; too much water. Izuna, of course, was enjoying the journey, all deep breaths and wide, dark eyes watching the flying fish chasing their barge. Where Madara tended toward contemplating the past, Izuna preferred to bask in the moment. He supposed it balanced them out, among other things.

“What do you think about the new Uzumaki village?” Izuna asked as they leaned over the starboard railing of the barge. “Lord Harukage seemed pretty happy about it.”

Madara let his eyes drift back to the fast-shrinking shores of the small island territory. “He’s not giving up much. He handed them the island, but he controls all the land inland to the north and west for leagues. He gets preferential rights to their services in return.”

Izuna frowned. “I dunno. They don’t fight much, so aren’t they just taking up space? The feudal lord needs an army.”

“The Uzumaki are the best fūinjutsu specialists on the continent. They’re so good at locking things up that people give them all kinds of things to keep safe. I guess you could call them bankers.”

“Why would I give them my stuff? I can fight anyone who wants to take it.”

Madara glanced at his brother. The part of him that trusted no one but Izuna agreed, but the memory of Mito sealing his best tantō into a seashell with little effort was one he couldn’t shake. Reaching into a pocket in his navy gi, he fingered the small token. “You’re just thinking about money or jewels. They can do a lot more than that.”

Izuna returned his brother’s gaze, interest piqued. “Like what?”

“They say the Uzumaki can seal any object within another, no matter how big or small.” He withdrew the seashell and held it out for Izuna to see. “That girl from the beach sealed Father’s tantō into this.”

Izuna squinted at the tiny shell, scanning it with his Sharingan. “No way. I can’t see anything in it.”

“That’s the point,” Madara said, pocketing the shell once more. “You know, apparently they seal people, too.”

“Living people? Why would they wanna do that?”

“I can think of a few reasons to want to hide someone and make sure he’s never found.”
Izuna remained quiet as he digested that thought. Lapsing into silence, the brothers contented themselves with watching the waves undulate with the barge’s slow journey, trying to beat it back toward the island. Eddies swirled in the distance, death traps for smaller boats and the untrained sailor.

“Ya hear that?” a voice said.

Madara and Izuna turned to see one of the hired sailors, his curly hair crusted with salt and a coil of thick rope slung over one meaty shoulder. They followed his gaze to the dozens of whirlpools dotting the early morning seascape.

“Hear what?” Izuna asked.

“The roar o’ the whirlpools,” the sailor said. “It’s a sea monster’s yawnin’, hear?”

“There are no sea monsters,” Madara said.

The sailor guffawed, low and deep in a way that reminded Madara of the roaring whirlpools themselves. “Yer confident, boy. Y’ever been to the bottom o’ the sea?”

“My brother’s no liar,” Izuna said, taking a step forward.

The sailor laughed again. “No liar, just young. Ya boys seen things, I can tell from the look in yer eyes. But not like this.”

“Like what?” Madara said, a little curious.

“A sea monster, bigger’n that island ya come from. Got one eye dark as a stone and three tails that glow like fire.”

“But there are no sea monsters,” Izuna said.

“I seen ‘im with these eyes,” the sailor said, pointing to his eyes for emphasis. “And I tell ya, he’s as real as you two standin’ here. On nights when the moon don’t shine, they say he circles the islands. His tails glow brighter’n any lighthouse, but ya don’t follow ‘em. The ones who do don’t ne’er come back.”

“If they don’t come back, how do you know that story?” Madara said.

The burly sailor clutched his belly as another rumble of laughter took him. “Ya boys’re smart ones. Strong shinobi. But I tell ya.” He leaned down as though this were some great secret he was about to impart, the look in his eyes suddenly unreadable. “In this world, it don’t matter yer strength when the nightmares come huntin’.”

Madara felt a chill run up his spine at the sailor’s frightening tone, so different from his previous bawdy jesting.

“Whatever, the Uchiha are plenty strong. We’re not afraid of some make-believe sea creature,” Izuna said.

The sailor grinned. These seafaring types loved to spin tales until they no longer knew fact from fiction. Everyone knew that. Perhaps he thought the stories that scared civilian children would also scare them, but they didn’t. If Madara ever feared anything, it would be something grounded in reality, not among the pages of children’s fables.
“Ya boys stay outta trouble, hear?” The sailor excused himself with a wave and got back to work.

“Hey, Madara? Do you think—”

“Don’t believe everything you hear,” Madara said. “Always question.”

Izuna leaned forward over the railing, dark eyes following the spinning whirlpools as they sank down, down, down to the seafloor. “It’s not that, I mean, if there was a sea monster, do you think the Uzumaki could seal it? Like the way they can seal people?”

Madara rested his head in an open palm, contemplating the thought. It was silly to talk about something they both knew was ludicrous, but the question was an intriguing one. He retrieved the seashell from his pocket once more and turned it over in his hand, as though all the answers lay hidden inside its tiny folds along with his father’s tantō.

Mito’s face flashed in his mind as clear as the day they’d met at the juncture of sea and sand. There was something about her that he couldn’t quite place, something sealed away much like she’d sealed his dagger, something that wanted knowing. It kept her rooted in his memory, the image of a fisher girl bursting through the waves when he first saw her, and the vision of her in full kimono, a princess who’d never known his struggle. She was an unsettling dichotomy of color and quiet strength about which he did not know enough. Madara hated not knowing.

“I guess if anyone could do it, it would be them,” Madara said. “The real question would be what happens next. You can’t keep a monster docile in its cage forever.”

Izuna didn’t respond. He had no answer to that. Waves bombarded the barge as they sailed over a whirlpool, its black center watching them with one depthless eye.

“Again.”

Madara hoisted his chokutō up and assumed an offensive position. Sparring was at the heart of an Uchiha soldier’s daily lifestyle. Madara had only lost a handful of times in his twelve years, which was more than could be said for most of the other boys in his age group and the one above them. The training master waited for his order to be obeyed.

Hikaku Uchiha lunged, chokutō aimed at Madara’s chest as he bellowed a battle cry. Madara stayed his ground, waiting until Hikaku came into range to parry the blow at the last minute, using his opponent’s momentum against him and whirling for leverage. But Hikaku was fast and a good improviser; it was what made him a tough opponent for Madara, who preferred to plan his moves ahead of time.

Instead of stumbling for lack of a target, Hikaku drove his dagger into the earth and turned around it. Madara wasn’t fast enough to block the punch Hikaku aimed at his face, and he staggered backwards under the force of the stinging blow. He had no time to be stunned, however, because Hikaku lunged at him once more. Ignoring the pain, Madara swung his chokutō and winced at the clash of steel on steel.

“Madara, you’ve got two left feet. Next time it’ll be my fist in your baby face if you don’t get serious,” the training master, Gendoru Uchiha, said over the clang of steel and labored breathing.

Gendoru was an old man with not a single black hair left on his head. At five foot two inches, he was not much taller than the boys he trained, but no one would ever hold it against him. He was
among the most adroit swordsmen the clan had ever seen, and he’d been in the business of breaking in the green boys since time immemorial, if the rumors that circulated among the young warriors were to be believed. They said even the clan’s esteemed leader, Tajima Uchiha, could not best him in a battle of blades.

Madara landed a well-placed hit with the flat of his sword against Hikaku’s thick, leather armor, knocking the wind out of him and buying precious seconds. Around them the other boys looked on with rapt attention, clenched fists concealing sweets and coins from foreign lands to exchange for a bet won or lost. Seeing an opportunity to gain the advantage, Madara jabbed with his sword. Hikaku looked up and snarled, eyes now bloody with the Sharingan’s glare. With lightning reflexes, he whacked Madara’s blade to the side with his own, the collision birthing orange sparks where the steel screamed in protest.

But two could play at that game. Madara summoned familiar, heated chakra to his eyes, watching as the world came to life all around him in a sharpness he imagined only nocturnal predators could rival. Everything seemed to slow down. He could see the tiny beads of sweat forming upon his opponent’s brow, the patch in the shoulder of his armor from a previous cut. And he could see Hikaku’s blade fly towards him with every intention to kill. He could see it getting closer, and he knew he had no time to block. Abandoning his own weapon, Madara clapped his hands together around Hikaku’s blade in a tight embrace. He could feel the sharpness slice through the calloused flesh of his palms, calling to the blood within and coating its shiny surface with beautiful red. Grunting with the effort, he stopped the blade’s momentum just as it nicked the boiled leather shielding his breastbone. For several seconds he did not breathe, not trusting Hikaku to pull back should they break their eye contact.

“Yield, boy,” Gendoru said as he yanked Hikaku back by the scruff of his neck. “We’re not in the killing business here. Now turn off that Sharingan before I turn you off.”

Hikaku blinked, the moment broken, and dispelled the Uchiha bloodline limit without a fight. Madara let his bleeding hands fall to his sides, scarlet eyes never leaving his opponent.

“Madara, turn it off. Now,” Gendoru said, his hand moving to the hilt of his katana.

Madara looked between the old training master and Hikaku, his breathing audible. The skirmish was over, and he’d lost. There was nothing more to it. And yet, the whispers from his audience reminded him that failure, more so than success, would follow him. This would not be forgotten, and that angered him the most. Nobody respected a failure.

“Madara,” Gendoru said, now drawing his katana. “Do you want to hear it from my sword?”

Madara let his eyes fall, the chakra receding with his bloodline limit. He registered that his face ached from Hikaku’s punch earlier, and his hands were shredded to ribbons. “No, sir.”

Gendoru watched him for a moment, suspicious. Then he sheathed his sword and closed the distance between them. A bony hand grabbed Madara’s chin in a painful grip, turning it left and right before releasing it. “You lost the battle but not the war. Stop sulking.”

Gendoru released him then and dismissed the boys for the day. Hikaku was the last to leave, but not before making the reconciliation seal as a courtesy. Madara returned it under Gendoru’s watchful eye, and Hikaku said nothing of the blood that smeared his fingers. When Madara tried to leave afterwards, Gendoru stopped him.

“You have potential, more than most of the boys I’ve seen in all my time as training master.”
Madara met the old man’s gaze, not having expected that. “Sir, I—“

“Quiet down, boy. Never interrupt an old man or a beautiful woman when they’re talking, you hear me?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Let this be a lesson to you. A battle lost today has no bearing on the war of tomorrow. You’re good when you stay calm, but you fight like a dying man when you think you’re at a disadvantage. You’re too dependent on the Sharingan. I’ve seen men better than you lose everything because of that crutch. If you take anything from me, take that.” He paused for a moment, thoughtful. “You’re not like the others. There’s something special about you, your brother too. You’re hungry, motivated. More often than not, it’s that drive that separates the strong from the weak. But it won’t mean anything if you don’t learn how to fight blind. Am I understood?”

“Yes, sir,” Madara said, this time with more confidence.

Gendoru peered at him a moment, searching for cracks in his resolve. “Get yourself cleaned up. You’re on polishing duty since you lost, and I don’t want to hear any excuses.”

Madara bowed and watched him go, thinking on the old man’s words. It didn’t matter that he relied on the Sharingan when he was better at wielding it than most of the other boys. And yet, the stinging in his palms taunted him. Maybe there was some merit to Gendoru’s words, but he’d never live this failure down with the other boys, never mind that Hikaku was older and more experienced. Scowling, he stalked off to find Izuna for help bandaging his hands before tackling the boring task of polishing all the training steel in the armory. It would be another sleepless night.

The mainland so far was boring. Madara found himself with little to do but train, which occupied his time but dulled his mind. He wanted adventure, some new challenge to conquer with all the boldness pent up inside, never quite satisfied with beating on his year mates. The wounds he’d received from his recent spar with Hikaku opened up fresh as the day he’d gotten them every time he took up a sword in the arena. He wouldn’t have cared much if not for the reminder of his inadequacy. It angered him, and that resentment came through in his fighting. He was more ruthless with his opponents, most of which stood little chance against his superior technique. Gendoru said nothing, but the looks he gave Madara were enough to communicate that he knew the lesson had not taken root as it should have.

Izuna knew something was wrong. No matter how good Madara was at putting on a show for others, he could never fool his brother. A part of him was glad for this. It was important to have at least one person who knew his true feelings and not use them against him. Still, he didn’t have the words to explain himself even if Izuna could deduce what had happened with one look at the raw skin of his palms. He knew Madara better than anyone, and he knew not to press.

Instead, Madara decided to wander this afternoon. He wanted to get away from the other Uchiha and the constant competition between them. It festered between missions when they had no one to beat up but each other. He just needed to think away from the smell of blood and burning.

The Fire Country was vast but unregulated for the most part. The feudal lord, Kenshin Uesugi, possessed a sizeable army, but they were not enough to police the far-reaching stretches of his territory. Looting and pillaging were common here unlike in the Whirlpool Country, where the size was more manageable. No one would dare pick a fight with the Uchiha, of course, but the damage
was easy to see. Civilians holed up inside and locked their doors when they passed through villages, unwilling even to listen to their bartering terms. There was a tangible fear that permeated this desperate country.

The scenery matched the atmosphere. Barren plains stretched as far as the eye could see with few trees creating islands between diseased patches of coarse grass and shrubbery. The fires that gave the country its name had devoured the life that once flourished here many centuries ago. This was the sight of an ancient battle between the sons of the Sage of Six Paths on the eve of their father’s death. Upset that his father passed his title to the younger son, Ashura, Indra, the elder and progenitor of the Uchiha clan, unleashed his fury on the very landscape in the form of black fire that burned for seven days and seven nights. The fires were so hot that not even the younger Ashura’s divine waters could extinguish them. That was the legend, in any case. Whether or not it was true was open to debate, as all stories are. Regardless, it was no secret that the Fire Country was not the most hospitable environment for sedentary living. At least it wasn’t a true desert like the Wind Country. There were worse places to rest between jobs.

Despite the sad, empty panorama interrupted occasionally by rocky hills, Madara had a particular destination in mind today. The Naka River ran from the northern border to the western, where it petered out under the scalding force of the mighty Wind Country desert. But here it ran swift and clean, a good fifty feet across at this particular spot. Madara stopped at the edge of the rocky bank, his reflection warped in the running water.

He closed his eyes and listened. The river’s babbling sound reminded him of running in the wind, a heady battle where every breath could be his last. It twisted and raged, always trying to stay on top and ahead. Yet when he opened his eyes again, it was just a river, one mass incapable of outrunning itself. Somehow, the realization calmed him. Bending over, he picked up a smooth, flat stone at the edge of the water. It glistened in the sunlight like a gem, though it held no material value. He palmed it in one hand, then the other. It felt cool against the dull heat in his shredded palms through the dressings that hid them. Small red splotches dotted the bandages, refusing to heal. The pain didn’t bother him so much as what it represented.

The other side of the river seemed farther away than it was. He could easily walk across it with the aid of chakra, but Gendoru’s words returned to him, unbidden. Was he really too dependent on the Sharingan? Was chakra truly a crutch? If it was true, it was a problem. With no one around to see him question himself, Madara took a moment to contemplate the old man’s advice. If he was falling into such a trap, he needed to climb out of it as soon as possible. There was no way he would ever make it to the top carried on brittle wings that could fail him at the first sign of strain. He needed to cover all his bases, eliminate any potential curve balls looking to catch him off his guard before they could cut him where it hurt. He clenched a ruined hand, ignoring the ache as he drew blood from the pressure.

“I can fight blind,” he said, fingerling the smooth rock in his other hand. “I don't need the Sharingan.”

For reasons lost on him, he suddenly felt the urge to fling the rock clear across the river. Never one to question his instincts, Madara gave in to the desire and swung his arm hard, releasing the rock at the apex of the arc. It skipped over the water as though it burned once, twice, thrice before finally sinking upon the fourth skip. Madara stared at the place where it had sunk, just missing the other side of the river by another skip or two.

“So I can’t even skip rocks the right way,” he said aloud, as though waiting for the river to offer up some explanation for this new inadequacy.
Splashing to the left caught his attention, and his eyes found the path of a flying rock skim the water’s surface before landing with an awkward thump on the beach a few feet away. Frowning, Madara walked to it and bent to pick it up.

“You just need to put your whole body into the throw.”

Muscles tensing at the sound of another’s unfamiliar voice, Madara whirled in a defensive stance, the tassels on his leisure yukata rustling. Across the river, another boy stood alone and watching him with a curious gaze. Dark of complexion and dressed similarly in loose garb, he didn’t look like much. But Madara recognized the stiffness in his shoulders and the wide positioning of his feet. His hand hovered over a section of the sash tying his robes, perhaps the location of a concealed weapon. This boy was a shinobi, there was no doubt about it.

“Who are you?” Madara asked, still clutching the offending rock.

The mystery boy didn’t move for a breath or two, but once he processed the question he smiled a lopsided grin. “…You can call me Hashirama. And like I said, you’re not doing it right.”

Madara pressed his lips together, sorely tempted to toss the rock back at Hashirama’s smug face. Who did this guy think he was? “Rock skipping is a useless talent. Who cares if I’m not doing it right?”

“Well, at least you admitted you’re not doing it right,” Hashirama said. “That’s the first step to fixing it.”

Madara squeezed the rock and took a step forward. “Listen, I’m not—“

“Hey, are you okay? You’re bleeding.”

The sudden change of subject caught Madara off guard. Following Hashirama’s gaze to his hands, he had to swallow the growl that wanted to escape. This injury was nothing life-threatening by any means, but it was a constant reminder of his shortcomings. He hated it.

“I’m fine. What’s it to you, anyway?”

“I can fix it if you want. But only if you want.”

“How?” Madara was growing more and more suspicious of this boy by the second.

Hashirama crossed his arms and puffed out his chest. “Because I’m kind of awesome.”

Madara gaped at Hashirama, waiting for him to laugh or something because there was no way he was serious right now. “…I’d call you arrogant, but I’m pretty sure you’re just dumb. I’m leaving now.” He turned to do just that.

“Hey, wait!”

Hashirama splashed as he ran across the river with the aid of chakra, and Madara repressed the urge to roll his eyes. He turned, unwilling to show his back to a potential enemy whose strengths he did not know. Everyone who wasn’t Uchiha was the enemy, that was what he’d always been taught growing up.

“Seriously, I can heal them if you want. See?” Hashirama held out a glowing, green hand, the telltale symbol of medical ninjutsu.
Madara stared at the offered hand as he turned over this newest observation. If Hashirama was a medical ninja, the likelihood of his being a real threat was low. Medical ninja were known to be passive supporters, usually trading their services for sums of gold or protection. He couldn’t be sure, of course, but it was a safe bet. Besides, if he was wrong, Madara knew he was more than capable of defending himself. He was an Uchiha, after all. This boy looked to be about his age, maybe only a year or two older. Madara had faced bigger and meaner before.

“I don’t have any money,” he said.

Hashirama looked confused for a moment before breaking out into that stupid grin again. “Oh, I don’t want any money.”

“Then what do you want?”

“I don’t want anything. You just look like you’re in pain.”

“Everyone wants something. You can’t get something for nothing.”

Hashirama thought about this for a moment. “…All right. Tell me your name, and I’ll fix your hands. Deal?”

Trusting a medical ninja required a leap of faith or a well-positioned knife to the heart. Giving access to one’s body was nothing to sneeze at, no matter the skill level of the medical ninja involved. One malicious pulse of chakra could mean instant death, and there was little time to circumvent such a technique. Hashirama must have picked up on Madara’s sudden wave of mistrust, and his expression softened again.

“Hey, if I wanted to kill you, I could’ve done it before you knew I was here. Besides, if I killed you now I’d never know your name.”

Madara wasn’t sure what was so important about knowing his name, proud as he was, but this Hashirama kid seemed guileless enough to be believed, if nothing else. It was hard to slip a lie past Madara’s keen eyes, and he detected none here. Hesitating another breath, he finally gave in and showed Hashirama his wrapped hands, the bandages now soaked with blood from their earlier abuse with the rocks.

Hashirama hissed. “That doesn’t look too good. Let me see them unwrapped.” He began uncurling the bandages even before Madara gave permission, which was irritating.

“These look like old cuts. Why didn’t you get them healed earlier?” Hashirama asked when the extent of the compounded damage was revealed.

Madara shrugged. “It’s nothing I can’t put up with.”

“Yeah, well, if they get infected, you could lose your hands.”

“…That’s ridiculous.”

“It’s not. I’ve seen it. These look like sword cuts. If you don’t clean the blade, you can get all kinds of diseases just from a little cut. You know, you’re lucky I’m here to help.”

“Whatever. Just get it over with.”

“Sure.” Hashirama raised a chakra-laden hand to hover over Madara’s.
He worked in silence, efficient and without discernable effort. Madara had to give him credit; when he finished with one hand, the scars were too faint to notice without close observation. He tried clenching and unclenching his mended hand while Hashirama worked on the other, testing the new skin and pleased at the raw, healthy feel of it. He could work with this. Training would be less burdensome now.

“So, are you gonna tell me your name?”

Madara’s gaze drifted to the green energy dancing across his other hand, watching as it churned out the dirty skin and blood to eliminate the threat of infection. He’d never paid much attention to medical ninjutsu because the Uchiha were so far removed from it. But watching Hashirama restore his hands like this was fascinating. He wondered how different the Uchiha would be if they employed skilled healers to fix them up after their rough missions. How many lives could be saved?

Hashirama finished his work and stood up straight, an expectant look in his dark eyes. Madara returned his gaze, a little awestruck by the power in this boy’s hands and repelled by it as a potential threat at the same time. Still, there was no malice there, no judgment or suspicion. He just wanted to know his name, what he was promised.

“Madara,” he said finally.

He declined to offer his clan name because Hashirama had not given his. It was a red flag, an indication that Madara would likely recognize him for his heritage, and that was always a wild card. The Uchiha held no alliances with other clans, but they were on neutral terms with most. On the off chance Hashirama was from one of the few hostile ones, Madara would be obligated to engage him in a battle to the death. Tired and troubled and with mended hands at such a low price as his name, Madara felt little inclination to do battle right now.

“Madara,” Hashirama repeated. “You don’t look like a Madara.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing, just that I took you more for a Musashi or an Oda. Something a little more fearsome.”

Madara raised a fist. “Are you saying my name’s wimpy? What kind of a name is Hashirama, anyway?”

Hashirama laughed, his hands raised in a placating gesture. “Well, it’s the only one I’ve got, so I’m stuck with it.”

Madara stared at the other boy, now at a loss for words. He lowered his fist. “There’s something wrong with you.”

“Yeah, I get that a lot,” Hashirama said, shrugging. “Anyway, I gotta get back.” He started to run back across the water to the opposite shore, but before he got to the other side he turned back and said, “Hey, if you come back here tomorrow, I can help you with your swing.”

“I don’t need your help,” Madara snapped.

Hashirama smiled a little. “Then I guess you’ll be able to get it across the river tomorrow, no problem.”

“Of course I will. I wasn’t really trying today, obviously.”
Just before disappearing behind rolling hills, Hashirama waved and said, “See you!”

Madara stared at the empty spot, wondering about the strange boy who’d been standing there only a moment ago. Strange was the understatement of the century. He stretched mended fingers, testing the tautness of the fresh skin. They ached a little, but it was nothing a good night’s sleep wouldn’t cure. He showed the river his back and walked back in the direction of the Uchiha camp.

“See you,” he said to himself before vanishing behind the rocky outcropping around which he’d come.

Two men sat alone in a tent upon a fine, crimson throw rug, their faces only half visible in the dim light of melting candles. A list of names scrawled in rigid angles lay between them as they conversed in hushed tones.

“I tell you, the boys get lazier with each generation. They don’t make them like they used to in my day,” Gendoru said, taking a sip of his ale and savoring the crisp effervescence.

“The problem is that the soldiers are outnumbering the nobles. My own son is a coward in battle. The only thing he can wield with any confidence is his cock.” Tajima Uchiha tapped long fingers against the rim of his own mug, grey eyes staring into the murky depths. His patrician features fell in a troubled frown.

Gendoru laughed. “Well, at least you’ll be blessed with a brood of grandchildren, my lord.”

“I have no use for bastard runts. They won’t be worthy, anyway. That boy doesn’t have an ounce of my skill.”

Tajitsu Uchiha was known throughout the clan as a womanizer and a craven. At sixteen, he was in line to lead the Uchiha upon the death of his father, but none supported the transfer beyond the courtesy allotted to any princeling. Gendoru knew it, and Tajima did, too. Tajitsu’s sisters, while possessed of more courage and chivalry than their brother, had the misfortune of being born women. They were obsolete in the struggle for power and leadership.

Gendoru took another swig of his beer. “Aye, that he doesn’t. There’s no beating around that bush.”

“What this clan needs is a strong base. I’ll wed my eldest daughter, Haruka, to a worthy noble.”

“My lord, all his shortcomings aside, Tajitsu is your lawful heir. To pass him over would be to break a thousand years of tradition.”

“What would you have me do? Reduce the Uchiha to a clan of whoremongers and drunks? As long as I breathe, we will not trade our swords for wine cups.”

Silence ensued as the two men brooded over the quandary. It had been a constant subject of discussion among the Uchiha nobles as Tajima grew older. Of course, no one dared raise the issue to his face. The last one who did so ended up excommunicated for slander, his wealth distributed among the other nobles. But Tajima was not a fanciful man. He understood the reality of the situation and knew something had to be done. The fact that he’d chosen to confide in Gendoru was either humbling or terrifying. Perhaps a bit of both. Gendoru had trained Tajima as a boy in the ways of the sword for which he was now notorious. Having lost his own father as a young boy, Gendoru supposed this was partly an unspoken plea for a mentoring voice.
Still, Tajima was known to be immovable. Gendoru could speak freely, but only for so long. Tajima had a short temper that did not discriminate, not even for an old friend.

“No, what I need is a strong boy I can wed to Haruka and groom for leadership. Haruka is Tajitsu’s senior and past the marriageable age. No one can object to my decision about the succession.”

A woman cannot legitimize authority, Gendoru thought forlornly, but he said nothing.

“Take me through the list of your best. I need a boy with noble blood and excellent command over the Sharingan.”

That had been about an hour ago. Now, mugs nearly empty and backs aching from bending over the list of high-born young soldiers, neither man was reassured. They were all too reckless or too stupid or too weak.

“That boy Hikaku isn’t a bad option. His mother is a second cousin of yours, his father a high-ranking lieutenant. The boy has decent control over the Sharingan, and he’s only thirteen,” Gendoru said.

Tajima shook his head. “It’s just not right. You said he’s impulsive in battle and doesn’t plan well. I need the opposite, someone who can strategize ten steps ahead of the enemy and remain calm under pressure. He must be malleable, not rebellious. I need someone who can carry the weight of the Uchiha pride on his shoulders and stand tall underneath it.”

Gendoru peered at the younger man over the thick spectacles he wore for reading. In all his years, he’d seen a good many boys with so much potential squander it in the heat of battle for empty glory or carnal prizes. There was no lack of good soldiers, but to find someone whose tactical mind was as sharp as his sword was no easy feat. They needed a born leader with the passion and drive to inspire others and keep the Uchiha at the top of the food chain.

“...There may be someone,” Gendoru said, rolling up the list of names.

“Let me see,” Tajima said, indicating the scroll.

“You won’t find his name here. He’s as low-born as they come.”

Tajima frowned. “Then why broach the subject at all?”

Gendoru had to consider for a moment if he ought to pursue this path. If he did, he would have to commit to it with all that he had or Tajima would not listen. Self-doubt was a weapon in the hands of an observant foe...or a shrewd superior. It was part of what made Tajima a good leader. Gendoru had always preferred the surety of steel in his hands to the shadowy schemes of politicians.

“He’s green, and he’s got a lot to learn. It’s difficult for him to improvise in battle when things don’t go his way. And he’s a bastard son of a third tier soldier and a civilian whore.”

“Then why are we even having this conversation? If what you say is true, this boy is not even worthy to clean the mud off my boots.”

Veiny hands fiddled with the ends of his wiry, white hair as Gendoru tried to compose his thoughts. “I’ve known this boy since he was four years old. He was always the quiet type, smaller than the other boys. He never said much, just watched and waited. I thought he was afraid at first, but when I put a sword in his hand, I realized how wrong I was.”

Tajima watched him with a neutral expression, betraying nothing. “How so?”
“He learns through observation. Once he sees something done once, he can replicate it. It’s beyond the abilities of the Sharingan; he can mimic in a matter of days what took me months to perfect. He’s a genius fighter.”

Tajima was silent for a moment as he thought about this. “You’re not one to give out praise where it isn’t due. Suppose this boy is what you say he is. A soldier can rule with a sword on the battlefield, but not in a throneroom. I have Ikema Senju to worry about, and I know for a fact that his eldest son will be a capable leader one day if I don’t manage to kill him first. Besides, I would never ask the Uchiha to bow down before a rat no matter how hard he bites.”

“My lord, you know I have the utmost respect for Lady Haruka, but I must be blunt. She is a woman, and a woman cannot be trusted to lead men. It won’t matter if she weds a highborn lordling if he doesn’t command respect on his own.”

Tajima pressed his lips together. “You speak quite freely with me. I hope you haven’t forgotten your place. I’m your leader, not your training grunt.”

Gendoru bowed his head, wincing at the biting tone. If he pushed any further, he could end up suffering the consequences. “No, my lord, never. I only meant... The Uchiha respect power and cunning. If the boy has that in spades, the chances of this unconventional succession plan you’ve hatched won’t go over so roughly. I meant no disrespect.”

Grey eyes, lidded with the effects of alcohol, peered at the elder man through the soft gloom. Gendoru held his breath, waiting.

“It’s out of the question,” Tajima said at length. “We are a noble clan descended from the Sage of Six Paths himself. Divine blood flows in our veins, and you would have me taint that legacy by adopting a whore’s son as my own? It’s ludicrous. Perhaps you’re deeper in your cups than I realized.”

Gendoru squeezed his hands to calm their shaking. “Forgive me, my lord. Of course you’re right. I won’t speak of it again.” On the inside, however, he itched to smack the younger man upside the head. For all the ocular prowess the Uchiha could boast, their egos tended to blind them from the most important details. But there was no arguing with an absolute authority, at least not like this.

The men rose, tired from the evening’s deliberation and the impasse that divided them now. Gendoru bowed low before excusing himself, but Tajima’s voice stopped him.

“Out of curiosity, what’s the boy’s name?” he asked.

“Madara Uchiha,” Gendoru said.

“Madara.” It smacked of disgust, as though he’d bitten into rotten fruit. “A dirty name for a dirty boy. How fitting.” With that, Tajima strolled to the back of the tent, a silent dismissal.

Gendoru watched his former student’s retreat, dismayed. He’d thought there might have been some hope in this option, but it seemed he was wrong.

*Stick to the swords, old man. Leave the politics to the young. Lord knows they'll never listen to you, anyway.*

Sighing, he stepped outside into the rain.
He hadn’t planned on going back to the river. He hadn’t been thinking about that strange Hashirama kid at all or the favor he’d done for him. This was what Madara kept telling himself even as he wandered back to the banks of the Naka River, lead by some invisible force. Something about Hashirama was suspicious, and Madara had learned early on to trust his instincts. He didn’t know much about medical ninjutsu, but he did know that it was a difficult skill requiring above average chakra control. Never one to ignore a source of power, Madara was unsurprised to find himself here again. Not that he would admit it out loud.

“I didn’t think you’d be back.”

Hashirama sat on the opposite bank hugging his knees as he stared into the rushing river water. Madara peered at him, curious. He didn’t know Hashirama very well, but it was obvious something was bothering him. The quirky boy who spoke too carelessly was nowhere to be found today.

“You look like someone died,” he said rudely.

Hashirama looked up, an unreadable glint in his eyes that sent a shiver down Madara’s spine. It was gone as soon as it had come, but the damage was done. He had to physically restrain himself from going for the tantō at his hip. Now curious and a little abashed, he tried again.

“...Did they?”

The river between them shone with the light of the sun, a glinting blade of steel between them. Water was all Madara heard, running and struggling to keep moving, perhaps closing in on a distant goal or escaping the place from which it had come. Alone and divided, he and Hashirama remained still as time itself slipped by without them.

“My brother,” Hashirama said. “When we found him, I didn’t recognize him. They burned his face off.”

Madara’s eyes never left the other boy as he spoke terrible truths without an ounce of emotion. He’d seen death, plenty of it, but every incarnation was unique, like spring flowers blooming for the first time. It was amazing to him how many ways the human body could greet death. Burning, of course, was one of the more familiar to him. But then again, he’d never lost a brother.

“People die.”

Hashirama just stared at him with a hollow look, and Madara couldn’t tell if he was shocked or angry or something wholly different. There was nothing there.

“Funny, isn’t it?” Hashirama said, smiling a little. “It doesn’t matter who you are, where you come from, where you’re going...even how old you are. People die, and they don’t stop.”

It was unsettling seeing him like this. Madara could almost fool himself into thinking their last meeting was a figment of his imagination. This boy was not the one from the other day. It made him angry, and he boldly crossed the river dividing them. Hashirama said nothing even though he must have seen Madara approaching over the river. Once across, Madara maintained a safe distance and remained standing, just in case.

“How old was he?” he asked.

Hashirama didn’t answer for a long time. A light breeze ran cool fingers through Madara’s shoulder-length mop of hair, struggling to weave through its choppy spikes. Hashirama released his knees and leaned his weight backwards on his palms.
“Seven.”

Seven.

He’d killed younger. He supposed Hashirama had, too. Children, in certain situations, were more dangerous than adults. Their young faces, so bright and full of hope, could be enough to disarm soft hearts long enough to wreak havoc. He’d once seen a girl child from a clan in Earth Country pose as an orphan and murder eight unsuspecting Uchiha in their beds during a northern campaign three years ago. Needless to say, the child and the soldier that had taken her in were both executed in plain sight as a lesson for all. The incident taught young soldiers to offer begging orphans the points of their swords instead of a morsel of food. One could never be too careful, and the enemy wore many masks.

“That’s an old age,” Madara said, dark eyes staring into the depths of the river.

“I know. That’s just the problem. There’s no room for children in this world. We’re born, and we die.”

“No.”

“No?”

“I don’t plan on dying, not yet. There’s still something I have to do.” Madara looked down on his companion. “If you don’t have something like that, then you’re already dead.”

“So I guess...I’m ghost who keeps coming back here.” Hashirama smiled again, and Madara decided he hated that fake smile, a mask hiding the pain underneath. A lie. “If I really were dead, then at least I’d get to see my little brother’s smiling face again.”

Unbidden, an image of Izuna as he used to be when Shiori was still alive came to mind. He smiled so much back then, so happy without a care in the world as long as his big brother was there to protect him. Losing that... He couldn’t imagine it.

“What was his name? Your brother,” Madara asked.

Hashirama looked surprised at the question. He was easy to read when he wasn’t trying to act tough. “Kawarama.”

“And I thought ‘Hashirama’ was ridiculous.”

The two boys locked eyes for a breath before Hashirama burst out laughing. He held his stomach to ease the spasms, tears kissing the edges of his eyes as Madara watched him, mildly disturbed.

“He woulda gotten so mad to hear you say that!”

Hashirama’s laughter died down, replaced with the sound of the rushing river. The sun was beginning to dip low on the horizon, clouding the waters until the bottom faded from view. As his own reflection disappeared into the abyss, Madara wondered about the denizens of the dark lurking under the surface, watching them.

“I’m sorry,” Madara said at length.

Hashirama hugged his knees again and watched the inky waters pass them by. Madara had to wonder what he was thinking in that moment. What did it mean to lose a brother? What did it mean to continue living without him? He would never know. Izuna was strong, and fire flowed in his
veins. Not even death could come between them.

“Thank you,” Hashirama said softly.

Madara lingered for a little longer in Hashirama’s company, silent as a statue. If it were him, he would not want to be alone.

“Steady your grips, ladies,” Gendoru said as he walked among the pairs of young shinobi. “This isn’t a tea party, it’s training. No need to be delicate.”

They were improving little by little, he supposed, although progress wasn’t stellar. Most wouldn’t live through puberty, and most of those that did would still die young, anyway. Only the prodigious or the cautious had the luxury of growing wrinkles and being called ‘grandfather’.

“The Senju won’t give you any breaks,” he said as he passed sweating boys with blood on their faces from careless hits. “Your eyes are a weapon. Try opening them.”

The ones that did live would be the ones that made the clan great. They would write its history, lead its armies, and carry the centuries-old Uchiha pride on their shoulders. In the end, history is written by the winners.

“Izuna, you’re too safe. Don’t let up.”

He lingered a little to watch the brothers duke it out. Madara seemed to have recovered finally after the botched spar against Hikaku, and now he was on the verge of cutting his brother to ribbons if Izuna did not start fighting back. The younger brother had always been wont to defer to the elder, a natural tendency but one that could get him in trouble one day. Even so, he exhibited a similar gift for the sword as his brother, as well as that same dogged determination lost on most of the other young boys. When he wasn’t sparring with Madara, he exerted a ruthless will that drove opponents to their knees.

Are they truly the stock of a lowly foot soldier and a common harlot?

As he turned to make his way back down the line, he spotted Tajima leaning against the nearby armory tent. Tajima wore a hood to conceal his face, but Gendoru knew him a mile away. He also knew that Tajima would not want to be approached, lest his identity be revealed. Instead, he thought about a more indirect method of getting the younger clan leader’s attention.

“Stop, everyone break apart,” he said, waiting for the boys to lay down their weapons. “I’ve been lenient with you lot today, and I’m afraid you’re getting lazy. Group with the pair next to you and work together.”

The boys scrambled to do just that, the spars suddenly turning more heated and serious as they were forced to concentrate not only on their opponents, but also on the movements of their partners. To the left, Madara and Izuna faced off against a pair of boys a good foot taller than them. Dark eyes narrowing, Gendoru tapped the shoulder of the nearest boy.

“Tano, you and Sen join that group. Catch them by surprise.”

The two preteens bowed and scurried to do as they were told. And he waited. The brothers were busy fighting off two formidable opponents and didn’t notice the approach of another team of enemies at their backs at first.
Izuna lunged, his twin tantō parrying his opponent’s sword and jabbing at dented armor, searching for a joint to slip through. As Tano and Sen prepared to ambush them, Madara delivered a hard blow to his opponent’s sword hand, knocking the blade to the ground. He whirled with the motion, just in time to block Tano’s chokutō from gutting him from navel to nose. The sound drew Izuna’s attention, and he scowled at the new odds.

Gendoru watched as the brothers quickly adjusted their formation without speaking, their backs touching to cover each other’s blind spots. Izuna brandished his two tantō while Madara squeezed a chokutō in a two-handed grip. A brief moment of calm passed before all four enemies ran at them shouting battle cries.

Steel sang as they fought, thrusting and rolling with the rhythm of the dance. They moved as one, tag-teaming their opponents with the fluidity of long-time partners well-versed in each other’s fighting styles. Where Madara pushed, Izuna caved. And when Izuna slashed with all his might, Madara skidded to fill his blind spot and prevent the ambush waiting to catch him in the back. Alone they were blind, but together they could see beyond their limitations, a lethal combination of give and take.

“To fight is to dance. If you have the right partner, you can deliver an unforgettable performance,” Gendoru had told them.

Madara disarmed Tano and bludgeoned the older boy’s head with the hilt of his chokutō, knocking him out. Sen, desperate not to lose, threw caution to the wind and charged wildly, a mistake that sealed his failure. Madara had expected such a reaction and was ready to put an end to the fight. He swung his blade in a hard, wide arc, catching Sen in the shoulder with a deep cut. It was a simple matter to knock his sword from his hand and subdue him.

All the while, Madara paid no attention to what was going on behind him. He trusted Izuna to see for him. It came as no surprise when he turned around and observed his younger brother shoving his last opponent to the ground and straddling him, dagger to the jugular should he try to put up a struggle.

It was over in under a minute.

“Pathetic,” Gendoru said, nudging the fallen Tano with a booted toe. “You just lost to two halfling bastards, boy. Remember that when you fight the Senju. A sword in talented hands cuts deep. It’s doesn’t matter who bore those hands.”

Tano picked himself up and kept his eyes downcast as he made the seal for reconciliation, which Madara returned without a word. Gendoru nodded, satisfied.

“Don’t just stand there. Did I say you could stop?”

The boys all returned to their sparring, unwilling to suffer the wrath of their training master. Gendoru made his way to where Tajima still stood, unmoving and unimpressed.

“My lord,” he said by way of greeting.

Tajima said nothing, and they continued to watch the young Uchiha hack away at each other with increasing ruthlessness and cunning. Gendoru could relax a bit; they were learning every day. It was a good thing, too. One day, they would be all that held the Uchiha military force together at the front lines.

“You didn’t tell me he had a brother,” Tajima said.
“Aye, he does.”

Tajima stepped away from the wall, perhaps bored with the whole ritual. “He’s decent.”

Gendoru stared at his leader’s back, stunned. “My lord, I—”

“I’ll be going. I’m a busy man,” Tajima said with a dismissive wave.

Gendoru watched him go, unsure what to make of this. Tajima rarely examined the up-and-coming soldiers until they were old enough to hold office in his army. Life had taught Gendoru that he was not cut out for the schemes and machinations of politicians, so he decided to let it go. Whatever Tajima was thinking (or not thinking) was out of his control, anyway.

“Crap, move!” Tano shrieked.

Madara released a signature Great Fireball at Tano and Sen, who had recovered after their defeat and resumed the attack. Some of the other boys had dropped their arms and cheered on the contenders. Izuna burst through the flames, tantō at the ready to catch Tano and Sen by surprise.

“Stop that this instant!” Gendoru said, jogging to the scene. “You’ll burn down the tents! Take it somewhere else!”

_Damn kids._

It was easy to forget that they were just children looking to have a little fun when the old training master turned a blind eye.
The Dream

There was no sand on the beaches of Uzushiogakure. Even so, Mito insisted on traversing the porous rocks barefoot to feel the cool, ocean spray on her toes. It was a welcome change from the stuffy shoes she had to wear in the presence of her lord father and the many important Uzumaki nobles and their guests. The sky was as stormy as Mito’s gray-green eyes, but she wasn’t worried about rain—the skies were always foggy at this early hour.

She perched upon a jagged expanse of rock, the waves breaking several feet below. There were whirlpools for miles as far as the eye could see, churning the water a frothy blue-green until their centers faded to black and sank down to mysterious depths. Most were about as far across as Mito was tall, if she had to guess, but others farther out were bigger—much bigger. She bet they stretched as far across as a whole house. The thought frightened her—what could have caused such a terrible force of nature? And yet, she wondered what lay below the surface, beyond that black eye of the storm to the heart of the ocean below. Had Madara and Izuna’s ship made it through the whirlpools safely?

“You’re up early, my lady. Eager to get started, I’d wager.”

Mito turned at the sound of Satto’s voice and smiled. He’d promised her he would teach her a very old technique today, and she could not say no to such an offer. “Yes, General. Can we begin?”

Satto escorted her inland a bit so they weren’t so in danger of tumbling into the sea. If Ensui had caught her out here he would be cross, but Satto wasn’t the type to keep tabs on her. They stood opposite each other, Satto in a comfortable blue gi and sandals, Mito in a salt-stained, brown fisher girl’s dress.

“Today, you’ll summon your first slug,” Satto said.

Mito went wide-eyed. “A slug? But only a few members of the clan can do that!”

“Yes, and not many of them had your talent when they were twelve years old. Unless you think this it’s a waste of time? I could always let your lord father know you’d like to practice tea ceremony instead.”

Mito shook her head a little harder than necessary. “No, of course not! Show me, please!”

Satto grinned. “Thought so. Okay, memorize these hand seals.”

It took her a few tries to get the seals perfect, and then came the chakra output.

“Channel just the right amount. Release too much or too little and the technique will backfire.”

That took the better part of the morning, and Mito’s stomach was beginning to grumble for some lunch. But she didn’t give up. She had a tendency to overcompensate with too much chakra, and each failed attempt resulted in lowered vitality. And yet, she kept at it until Satto was satisfied that her execution was good.

“And now for the contract,” Satto said, producing a thick scroll as long as his arm and unrolling it on the rocks.
Mito crouched down on all fours, curious eyes drawn to the beautiful runes painted over the paper. They’d faded with time, but to a practiced eye the scroll’s restoration was obvious.

“This is the Scroll of Shikkotsu. With this, we can communicate with the slug and snail beasts that live in the fabled Shikkotsu Forest. This scroll was originally passed down from the Sage of Six Paths himself to the descendents of his younger son, Ashura, the progenitor of the Senju clan. It fell to us when our family branched from the Senju many centuries years ago.”

“The Senju clan,” Mito said, thinking. “If we’re related to them, why don’t we have an alliance with them? They’re one of the most powerful shinobi families on the continent.”

“That’s right, my lady. You’d have to ask your lord father about the politics of it all, but my understanding is just that the Senju were so large a force that people began to develop specializations. We Uzumaki didn’t care for the bloodshed as much as others. Well, you can see where we are now.”

Satto’s smile was contagious, the crow’s feet around his eyes giving him a jovial air. Around them, the sound of waves crashing and the pungent smell of salt and sea bream in the air had an increasingly soporific effect on Mito. It was relaxing being here like this even though she was expending a rather large amount of chakra in such a short time.

“Anyway, let’s get a move on with the summoning. If the beast takes a liking to you, it could become a great ally.”

Mito nodded, eyes trained on the scroll. Tracing the many looping designs along the edges of the seal, she realized she was not just looking at an ancient written language, but also at a kind of painting. A forest.

“The Shikkotsu Forest,” Mito said, following one sloping tendril of ink with a finger. “Is it made of bones for real?”

“I’m not sure,” Satto said, thoughtful. “No one alive today has ever been there and lived to tell about it.”

“Why not?”

“Well, it takes a certain amount of strength, and not necessarily this kind.” He held up an arm and patted his covered bicep. “Your great, great grandfather found a way through the forest, or so they say.”

Mito hadn’t known her ancestor (not even the Uzumaki lived quite so long), but she’d heard stories from her father. His chakra was like the essence of life itself, able to heal even the gravest injuries via simple blood transfusion. Scientists and priests alike had studied the effects of the Uzumaki’s chakra, but there was no explanation for why it was so vigorous. There was even less information about how to control such a potent life force—only the few had managed to harness its true potential, and Mito’s great, great grandfather had been one such person.

She bit her lip. “I wonder... You don’t think I could possibly...?”

She wasn’t even sure what she was asking. Mito Uzumaki had been born into a privileged life with a stable, if not rigidly defined, future ahead of her. What could she possibly hope for outside of that, realistically? It angered her, but she knew that her father was right: better to learn the rules and play the game if she wanted a chance to win it.

“I don’t know,” Satto said, rubbing the back of his neck. “But I s’pose we won’t know anything
unless you try this summoning technique. What do you say?"

Mito followed his instructions, hyper aware of every move she made and her chakra output. Sweat plastered her bangs to her forehead with the exertion. Even with her expansive reserves for her age, her body couldn’t take such brutal output over the few hours they’d been out here. Biting her thumb to draw the blood necessary to sign the summoning contract, Mito held back a wince at the sting. The blood of her ancestors marked previous signatures, some loopy and beautiful, others more angular and illegible. The hand seals came next.

“Kuchiyose no jutsu!”

Chakra poured out of her like a waterfall, pooling and combusting with a loud pop and a burst of thick smoke. Mito coughed and tried to ignore the burn in her damaged hand. When the air cleared, her eyes lit up at the sight of her success. A snail-like creature a little longer than her arm sat on the ground before her, eyestalks peering around as though disoriented.

“I did it,” Mito said, breathless and falling to her knees. “I really did it!”

Satto squatted down to have a look at their guest. “And who might you be?”

The snail creature had a single blue stripe painted down her back and a spiked shell as black as the ocean floor. The flat of her belly leaked a clear mucous that Mito was disinclined to touch—not because she was revolted, but because it could be poisonous.

“I am called Sazae,” the creature said.

“I summoned you,” Mito said, observing the wicked points of Sazae’s still-developing shell. Just before she gave the creature her name, she remembered what Madara had said about his own name.

“A man’s name is his identity; it’s everything.”

“I’m Mito Uzumaki,” she said, dipping her head respectfully. “Thank you for coming here.”

Sazae peered at her askance (or so it seemed given her strange eyes—Mito wasn’t sure which one to focus on). “Lady Mito,” Sazae said haltingly. “It is my pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

Mito couldn’t help but giggle. Who would have thought turban shells were so polite? “Just Mito, please. We’re going to be partners, right?”

“I-I suppose...”

Satto cleared his throat. “My lady, you should spend some hours each day working with Sazae. A contract is a binding agreement between shinobi and summon beast. You’re responsible for her, and she’s responsible for you. Do you understand what that means?”

Mito wondered if snails could blush. She supposed it would look something like this, the way Sazae twitched her eyestalks and shrank visibly, and the thought made her smile. “It means...we’re like sisters. And sisters look out for each other.”

“Oh!” Sazae said, eyestalks peering about as though nervous. “That’s, um...”

“So, what kinds of jutsu do you know? Let’s try something!” Mito stood up and wiped her sweaty bangs out of her eyes, beckoning for the oversized snail to follow suit.
Satto watched the two new partners get to know each other from his silent post a few yards away. The last time he’d seen his young princess so animated was when he’d taught her her first sealing technique. That childlike light that brought her to life shone through now despite the gloomy atmosphere. It was hard to imagine that this girl, so vibrant before him, was the same one who swallowed her duties as the clan regent’s only daughter, an heiress destined to a life of servitude to whatever husband her father chose for her one day. It angered Satto to think of such strength being squandered for the sake of tradition, but he wasn’t one to argue politics on most days.

“Oh wow, do that again!” Mito said, eyes glued to a patch of rock rapidly dissolving under the power of Sazae’s acid spray.

“Oh, um, you liked that? All right, I suppose,” Sazae said.

“Oh, wait! Wait, let me just seal some of it for later!” Mito scurried to seal the acid away in one of the many sea shells or other knick knacks she carried on her person. With what looked like little effort, the acid was sucked inside a shell the size of her small hand, leaving only steaming rock behind. “Never know when I’ll need some melting power, right?”

Astounding.

Satto couldn’t remember teaching her that. Simple things like water or sand, sure, but snail acid? She would have to have taught herself the proper seals to incorporate in order to stop corrosion of the container, among other things. Satto shook his head, wanting to laugh.

“You don’t think I could possibly...?”

“Yes, I do,” Satto said to himself as he continued to watch Mito and her new summon practice.

I really do.

Madara met Hashirama by the Naka River nearly every day after his training was over for the day. It had become a routine for them, although neither admitted that he sought out the other’s company. Hashirama recovered after Kawarama’s death, although Madara suspected he was just good at putting on a stupid grin and hiding his true feelings. Not that he blamed Hashirama. Emotions were a sure-fire way to end up dead due to distraction and desperation.

Today, they were skipping rocks again and Madara was practicing his technique as Hashirama babbled something about centrifugal force. “You know, if you stopped talking I’d be able to concentrate a little more.”

“How’re you gonna know how to do it right if I don’t tell you how?”

Madara shot him a poisonous look. “You’re distracting me. It’s annoying.”

“All right, all right, geez. You’re nearly there, anyway.”

Madara ignored him as he bit his lip in concentration. Then, he pulled back and swung hard, feeling the flat rock spin out of his hand at the height of the arc just as Hashirama had explained. It skipped four times before sinking to the bottom of the river.

“Damnit,” Madara said, watching as the ripples drifted away with the force of the rushing water.
“You’re still not putting your back into it,” Hashirama said, passing his own rock between his hands. “It’s not about brute strength, you know? You have to want it to reach the other side.”

“I’m pretty sure that’s what I want,” Madara sneered, crossing his arm. “Whatever, this is boring.” Hashirama laughed and they sat down together at the bank of the river watching the sun dip low on the horizon.

“You’re wrong, you know,” Madara said after a while.

“How’s that supposed to mean?”

“Just because you want something doesn’t mean you can have it.”

Hashirama thought about this for a moment. “Wanting is half the battle. If you don’t really believe your desires, you’ll never get them.”

Madara snorted. “If that were true, then there’d be no poor people and children would outlive their parents. It’s a dream, plain and simple.”

“Well, what if it didn’t have to be?”

Madara felt Hashirama’s eyes on him and turned. He picked up a rock from the shore and tossed it between his hands. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“What if we could make that dream come true? What if kids could live in a place where they could grow up, have a family, be happy? Where they didn’t have to die so young?”

Madara instantly thought of Hashirama’s dead brother. It didn’t take a genius to deduce that the kid had been a victim of some fire technique or other, a casualty of Uchiha warfare. Many had died the same way before him, younger, too, but seeing how that singular death had affected Hashirama made him a little uncomfortable.

“That’s stupid. You can’t just make something happen because you want it to. I just said that.”

“Then how would you do it, smart guy?”

Madara resisted the urge to turn up his nose. “If you want something, you have to work for it.” He scratched the rock’s surface with a dirty nail, fingers itchy. “If you work hard, you’ll get stronger. And people listen to the strong.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Hashirama said. He broke out into a stupid grin. “So, I bet I’m stronger than you.”

Madara shot him a dirty look. “You keep dreaming.”

“Bet I could wipe the floor with you.”

“Bet I could.”

“You can’t even throw that rock across the river!”

Madara chucked the rock at Hashirama’s stupid head, but he caught it just before it hit his face—fast! There was a moment of tension before both boys scrambled to their feet and put some distance between them. They’d never resorted to this, concerned with revealing too much about their respective clans and techniques. It looked as though that was all about to end.
“You’re not gonna beat me just because you want to,” Madara said.

Hashirama grinned. “Then I guess I’ll just have to show you I’m better, huh?”

The seconds ticked by, and Madara ignored the glare of the setting sun as it sparkled upon the rushing waters of the Naka River, their audience. There was no one here but them, no river between them on this side of the bank. Madara’s hand hovered over the hilt of a hidden tantō, ready to draw.

Hashirama made the first move—a thrown shuriken. Madara easily deflected it with his blade, and Hashirama was on him soon after. It started with steel, both boys still loathe to show off any incriminating techniques. Hashirama was good. Madara went for the jugular, and Hashirama read his body language perfectly. But as the weeks rolled by and they continued to meet, they took risks.

“Katon: Gōkakyū no jutsu!”

Fire roared as it flew across the sparkling waters of the Naka River, drawing steam in its wake. Madara grinned when he thought he’d gotten a good hit, but Hashirama was a hard one to put down. The river water churned and rose as though called upon by the skies above, enveloping the fireball. Madara wasn’t about to let such a pitiful defense beat him, though. He fed more chakra to his technique and ran after it, sword drawn. The afternoon sun glinted against the cold steel of his chokutō, and he flew, fearless, into the heart of his own flames for a surprise attack.

Branches, gnarled and thick, ramified through the orange heat on a one-way collision course with Madara’s vitals. He was forced to slash his way out of the death trap, spinning in midair to cut one and use the momentum to hack at another. Nimble feet landed on the uneven water, but he didn’t let his guard down. Hashirama appeared through the dissolving fireball, his wooden branches twisting about him like a sort of shield. They snaked toward Madara as though sentient, but it was no matter—Madara knew this technique. He hacked away at them, splinters flying and sap staining his blade, until Hashirama was in range of his sword. Steel clashed with steel, sparks bouncing between them and falling into the murky waters below like so many stars.

“Not bad,” Madara said over the scream of steel.

Hashirama grinned. “Speak for yourself!”

The more they fought, the closer they grew. It was a dance, just like the old man had said. No one had fought Madara the way Hashirama fought him, so full of vigor and pushing him to his limits. And a dance can only be as stunning as the partners performing it. Whenever Madara had free time in the afternoons and evenings, he would return to the Naka River to see his friend.

_Friend?_

He supposed that was the only way to describe Hashirama at this point. He wasn’t an ally or a brother, but he wasn’t an enemy, either. _He’s not my enemy._ This was what Madara told himself. This was what he reassured himself of when he left their meetings drained to exhaustion, having suffered some beating from Hashirama’s unique Wood Release bloodline limit (unheard of, if he was being honest, but they never were honest). This was what he told himself at night when he would lie in bed and dare to dream of the world Hashirama talked about sometimes, a world without war where people could live together without having to fear death around every corner. A place they could create together, a world of peace and prosperity. A promise to become strong enough to make the dream a reality.
Izuna began to notice how worn out Madara was for training (how could he not?). Madara was slower than usual due to compounded exhaustion. Hashirama could heal his body’s aches and pains, but he couldn’t do a thing for the bone-weary limit Madara always seemed to reach with him. It showed in his training with the Uchiha, and Izuna was worried.

“I’m just doing extra training on my own time,” Madara told his brother to mollify him.

Izuna was not convinced, of course. “You never have any wounds or signs of chakra exhaustion. If you’re training enough to be this tired, it would show.”

Sometimes Madara wished Izuna wasn’t as perceptive as he was. “It’s nothing. Forget it.”

Izuna watched him from behind the glow of the Sharingan, searching for cracks in his brother’s armor. “Just be careful, Brother. I’m not the only one with eyes that can see underneath the underneath.”

Madara ruffled his brother’s hair, a rare sign of affection he would never display in front of others. “I know. It won’t be like this forever.”

Neither boy noticed the presence of another around the corner, having overheard their conversation. Gendoru waited until his two most promising students cleared out of the armory to step out of the shadows. Dark eyes followed Madara’s back as he walked out, the Uchiha fan emblazoned proudly upon his shirt back.

Like all good things, this, too, would come to a stark and horrifying end.

“Where do you go all the time?” Tobirama asked his brother when he returned late yet again. “I’m not gonna keep telling Father you’re fishing when you never come back with any fish.”

“You could tell him I’m watching the clouds,” Hashirama said with an easy smile as he removed his shoes and stepped inside the tent he shared with his remaining two brothers.

“Can I come next time, Hashi? Please?” Itama said, taking Hashirama’s hand in his.

“You’re too young to be training with me,” Hashirama said, patting his youngest brother’s head. “Just wait a few years.”

Itama did not like that answer, and it showed. At nine years old, he was only a year younger than Tobirama. It should have been no issue at all for him to train with his brothers, but Itama had none of the talent Hashirama and Tobirama had. It mattered little to Hashirama—he was happy to become strong enough to protect their family alone. That was his duty as heir. But their father was not as pleased with this situation. Ikema was a reasonable man on most days, but when it concerned the dignity of his family (and his heirs, specifically) he wanted the best for them and for the clan. Kawarama had had far more budding talent than Itama, and he was gone. A darker part of Hashirama wondered if his father wished he’d lost a different son, but Hashirama never let the thought take shape. Surely, their father treasured his sons equally.

“But I’m gonna kill all those Uchiha,” Itama said, now very serious. “Tobi’s only a year older than me. I can take ‘em!”

“Cut it out,” Tobirama said, laying a hand on Itama’s shoulder. “You’re not ready for the Uchiha.”
“Am too! I’m gonna make ‘em pay for what they did to Kawarama.”

Hashirama hesitated only a second before his bright smile was back in place. “Anyway, Itama, did’ya save me some dinner? I’m starving!”

The boys sat with Hashirama as he ate, talking for hours about this and that. Eventually, Itama fell asleep, and Hashirama and Tobirama lay in their bed rolls, whispering.

“Who’s this guy you’re fighting all the time?”

Hashirama smiled through the darkness. His brother was sharper than him on most days, and something like this would never get past him unawares.

“Just a friend,” Hashirama said. It was the truth, after all. Madara was his friend. As far as Hashirama was concerned, that was all that mattered.

“I’m your friend.”

“You’re my brother. There’s a difference.”

“Yeah. You don’t have to sneak around to train with your brother.”

Hashirama sighed. “Don’t worry about it, okay? He’s just another kid. We talk, we train, that’s it.”

Tobirama turned over and showed Hashirama his back. “You better wash before you talk to Father tomorrow. You stink of smoke.”

Hashirama said nothing to that fair warning, wanting to shrug it off as nothing. But in the back of his mind, he knew it wasn’t nothing. As he fell asleep that night, visions of brilliant battles danced in his head, fire and water and earth, symphonies of steel. And clocks ticking in the background, counting down the precious hours until the end. Hashirama didn’t get much sleep that night.

When Madara left the Uchiha settlement that late summer day, he knew something was wrong. He didn’t know what, exactly, but it was a gut feeling. He took the usual route to the banks of the Naka River, but his steps were heavy and mechanical. Even the air tasted stale without wind to churn it.

Arriving at the usual spot, Madara picked up a rock, their ritual greeting. He’d never been able to make his skip all the way across, but today he knew he would have to deliver.

Don’t look back, he willed himself. Dark eyes focused on the opposite bank where Hashirama suddenly appeared, rock in hand. No goofy waving, no unnecessary, ‘Madara, is that you?’ because who else could it possibly be? Everything about him was off, tense. This wasn’t the Hashirama he knew.

Madara clenched his fist around his rock. The time for dreaming was over. “I don’t have time to train today,” he said.

“Me neither,” Hashirama said, shifting his weight. “I guess we’ll just have to wait till next time, huh?”

“Yeah.”
Shadows moved behind Madara—a trick of the light? No, his eyes could see through the cleverest tricks.

“Catch!” Hashirama shouted, launching his rock across the river.

Madara swung his arm back and threw his own rock, arching his body and following through with the swing. Three, four, five skips. He caught Hashirama’s rock just as his own made it across for the first time. Victory.

Run.

The message was crude and hastily inscribed upon the rock’s surface, but its intent could not be clearer. Madara was not one to quail before fear on most days, but today he felt those icy fingers grab hold of him if only for a second. Hashirama clutched his own rock, eyes hard and unreadable. They turned and dashed back towards their respective homes, but it was too late. From among the rocks and trees emerged the ugly truth that Madara had always known would come between them—it was only a matter of time.

“We meet again, Ikema Senju.”

Madara skidded to a halt before the man he knew by reputation to be the leader of the Uchiha clan...and Izuna at his side dressed in full armor. Of all the people to have followed him here, he hadn’t been expecting the Uchiha clan leader to be here, and with his brother no less.

“Lord Tajima,” Madara said, the shock evident in his voice.

Tajima spared him a glance and nodded. “Madara Uchiha,” he said. “You managed to lure out the heir to the Senju clan. Good work.”

Heir to the Senju clan.

Madara looked over his shoulder to where Hashirama stood flanked now by another boy and a man Madara could only assume to be Ikema Senju, his father. Hashirama’s expression of frustration matched Madara’s as they faced off on opposite sides of the river, the seconds ticking away until the age-old fight would continue on the banks of the Naka River. Izuna’s expression was hard and uncompromising in the face of battle. Izuna would never betray him, but he would have been in a pinch if an authority figure had cornered him about Madara’s erratic behavior lately. Cursing inwardly, Madara returned his gaze to the Senju shinobi across the river. It glimmered silver under the light of the bright summer sun.

“Tajima Uchiha,” Ikema said, going for his katana. “You don’t know when to roll over and die even after all these years.”

“I could say the same for you.”

“Lucky for you, I’m happy to rectify that problem here and now, once and for all.”

The fight was explosive. Tajima led Madara and Izuna, who’d never fought with him before, in a triple Great Fireball. Orange flames covered the river like three great suns, causing the waters to hiss and steam as the fire barreled toward the other side. Madara squinted through the bright light, searching for Hashirama.

“Brother, I’m sorry, I didn’t have a choice,” Izuna whispered.

“I know,” Madara said, stealing a glance at the infamous leader of their clan several feet away.
The sound of roaring water drew their attention, and great water spouts the likes of which Madara had never seen Hashirama ever produce twisted up among the flames. Through the steam and mist, he could make out the boy he assumed to be Hashirama’s younger brother controlling the water. But there was no time to dwell on the sheer genius he was witnessing here. Sharingan flaring to life, Tajima shouted at the young brothers to follow him forward. With little choice, Madara obeyed his leader and flew into action.

Sentient tree branches found him and knocked him backwards. Hashirama let out a battle cry as he attempted to entomb Madara with his technique. But after all the time they’d spent training together, Madara was familiar enough with Hashirama’s power to know what was coming. The Sharingan slowed Hashirama down enough for Madara to spring off a branch and avoid the wooden tomb. In the distance, he caught a glimpse of Tajima and Ikema engaged in a deadly battle of fire and earth, astounding in their power.

*These are the most powerful shinobi alive today.*

It was humbling, even for him.

“Madara!” Hashirama shouted just as he landed on the earth and summoned roots from underground.

They rushed at Madara in midair, and he was unable to dodge the attack completely, suffering a laceration to the soft flesh in his left flank through the flimsy yukata he wore. Acting quickly on the untested strategies he could not help but dream up during his time spent with Hashirama, he gripped the offending root and powered up yet another fire technique. Flames licked at the wood and raced closer to Hashirama, who was too shocked to disengage in time. Fire burned his palms, and Madara used the split second of distraction while Hashirama slammed his palms to the earth to land and put some distance between them.

Blood dripped from Hashirama’s fingers, and Madara was suddenly reminded of their first meeting, when it was his hands that bled. A green glow indicated that Hashirama was healing the burns, but blood continued to fall. Behind them on the opposite bank, Izuna and Hashirama’s brother clashed in a fight almost more vicious than their own.

“Some dream, huh,” Hashirama said, panting.

It was wrong, all wrong. This wasn’t how he’d wanted this to end. There would be an end (this, Madara had known all along), but this bloody battle was not how he’d wanted to part ways with the only friend he’d ever had. Lurid Sharingan studied Hashirama.

“You’re next in line to lead the Senju.”

Hashirama nodded as he continued to heal his hands. “And you the Uchiha.”

Madara gripped the wound on his side and swallowed the pain. “No. I’m not like you, just getting something because I want it. A base-born soldier like me’s gotta work for it.”

Shouting could be heard in the distance—reinforcements. Of course, why pass up an opportunity to catch the enemy outnumbered? But Madara wasn’t about to let that happen.

“Then work for it,” Hashirama said, gritting his teeth against the pain from his burns. “We’ll become the strongest and make our dream come true!”

Snarling drew Madara’s eyes to Tajima, who’d just taken a slice to the shoulder between the joints of his armor from Ikema’s katana. Izuna was wearing out nearby and dripping wet. All the while,
the roar of the Naka River filled Madara’s ears like a war drum, fueling the bloodlust and forcing them onwards with the tide.

*Some dream.*

“I will,” Madara said. “I’ll do it, just you watch.”

“We’ll do it together,” Hashirama said, approaching him and holding out his half-healed hand, still bloody and blistering. “Promise me.”

Hashirama Senju, his mortal enemy by name and blood. Were they destined to become the same as their leaders, ripping each other apart for no other reason than a name? Together with this boy who had become his friend, his partner, the measure of his own strength and progress—could they make their dream a reality?

Madara took Hashirama’s hand in his, feeling the blood stick to his palm and mold to every groove and crevice between them. Red met brown and a thousand silent words passed between them. “I promise.”

Soon after, Gendoru arrived on the scene along with a small team of elite Uchiha soldiers. The Senju’s own forces began to trickle in as well, and Madara knew that if this didn’t end now, it would turn into a full-scale bloodbath with neither side coming out victorious or without heavy casualties. Tajima and Ikema, arriving at a similar conclusion, called off their soldiers, and once again the Naka River rushed between them. It seemed wider across now than it ever had under the glare of the late afternoon sun, a knife laid unsheathed between them.

“This isn’t over, Tajima!” Ikema said from across the river, backing up and nursing what looked like a broken arm.

“No, not until my men burn *all* your sons,” Tajima said, bleeding through his armor from invisible wounds.

Madara searched for Hashirama’s eyes, but the glare from the water was too bright. He knew Tajima was talking about Kawarama, the brother Hashirama had mourned. He didn’t know what it was like to lose a brother—Izuna was at his side worse for wear but alive and breathing, eyes narrowed at the Senju boy he’d fought. Hatred, disgust, anger. One look and it was easy to see even in the eyes of his little brother, the same Izuna who’d smiled brighter than a summer day at the prospect of candy and cried for hours when their mother died. Madara could see it in all their eyes as the Uchiha stared across the river at the enemies they’d been born to kill or die trying.

All over a name.

“A man’s name is his identity; it’s everything.”

It was what he’d told Mito Uzumaki so many months ago, and the words haunted him now as he finally understood their true and terrible meaning.

When he and Izuna had recovered, he was shocked to find out that Tajima wanted to speak with him about a chance to achieve everything he’d ever wanted if he could prove himself. It was really happening. One step at a time, the bastard boy with no name would rise up, and with him the hatred the Uchiha clan shouldered—its pride and joy, a legacy to the world.

“We’ll do it together. Promise me.”

“I promise, Hashirama,” Madara said as he was fitted for a new set of armor. The mirror before
him reflected the cold fire of the Sharingan and the Uchiha fan newly painted upon the shoulder of his breastplate. Sometimes if he listened hard enough, Madara could still hear the waters of the Naka River at his back, beating him onwards. War drums played in the background—the enemy awaited.

I promise.
Lying low and blending in was Saizō Kirigakure’s specialty. He had almost limitless patience so long as there was a clear objective in sight, content to wait for the perfect moment to strike his prey with the assurance of victory. Four years was not that long in the grand scheme of things, but he wasn’t getting any younger. Sasuke was still alive and working with the Senju, no less. Figures.

Saizō ran a slender finger over the item in his hands, large enough to fill his palm. Purple and beige swirled under his touch as though sentient, the way sand leaves trails in the the wind. While it was not yet dusk, the Land of Water was known for the mists that came in with the tide, hiding the light and blanketing the world in grey. A light breeze rustled the curtains on a nearby window—cool, but not unpleasant. Saizō liked this place. It suited him to be surrounded by shadows. Grey eyes flickered up to his partner.

“Anayama,” he said, tapping the object in his hand. “Where did you find this?”

Kosuke Anayama was a very large man, nearly twice Saizō’s size and broader across the shoulders than any man ought to be. He was the kind of man who was so thick-skinned that he was all but impervious to things like taste and feeling, content to wear his beaten breastplate and only enough boiled leather to cover his midsection at all times, snow or shine. The layer of furry hair that coated nearly all of him was insulation enough. But size was no indication of strength, as Saizō knew better than most. Still, Kosuke was loyal and dependable. Without him, the siege of Osaka Castle would have been messier than it was.

“S’pose I found it with my men on our way back east from Wind Country. Kinda funny, actually. One o’ the kids picked it up just lyin’ there in the sand, said it was shinin’ like glass. But I reckon that’s no glass, nor some ordinary sand.”

Saizō turned the object over in his hand, marveling at how the purple designs shifted as though trapped in an hourglass. “No, I would wager it’s something much more complex. Please send for Lord Sanada. He’ll want to see this.”

Kosuke nodded and ducked out of the room. The castle was nothing to write home about (certainly not as grand as Osaka Castle had been), but like Saizō himself, it was not the small stature that gave it a reputation for impregnability. This was the stronghold of Yukimura Sanada, a feudal lord of the eastern islands collectively known as Water Country. Due to the many irredentist campaigns he was engrossed in, Sanada usually moved between the conquered islands and the mainland to more strategically command the diverse groups of samurai and shinobi under his authority. Saizō, of course, was one of his highest ranking generals and a trusted adviser. After having proven his loyalty at the battle for Osaka Castle, it was a natural step.

Saizō had always preferred to let others handle the politics of power. He cared little for red tape and formalities. His place was on the battlefield, like most shinobi. Perhaps more of Sasuke had rubbed off on him than he cared to admit. Still, when something like this came along, Saizō could not help but churn up the political waters a bit just to see when they would run.

The door opened to reveal a short man (too short, some might say, though only if they had a death wish) clad in blues and greens. Candlelight made his bald head shine in contrast to the wiry, black beard reaching down to his collarbone. Saizō had to wonder about men who could grow such formidable facial hair and not manage to keep any of it on their head. Perhaps any hair was better
Sanada wasn’t one for traditional formalities as long as the job got done, but even formalities were a form of communication. Dispose with them entirely and there would be no difference between the foot soldiers and the generals commanding them. It was important to maintain a balance.

“Forgive me, my lord. I thought it best not to leave here with the item lest I draw suspicion.”

“You? Please. You’re trickier than the damn fog.”

Saizō smiled, but he said nothing of the slight disguised as a compliment. “This is what I thought you should see.”

He handed the mysterious object to his leader, whoturned it over in his meaty hands. After a moment he said, “And what the hell am I looking at? I don’t care about trophies, you know that.”

“This trophy is one I think you’ll be interested to hear more about.” Saizō moved to a nearby table and poured them some tea, which Sanada accepted with a frown.

“All right. What do you know?”

Grey eyes fell upon the shimmering object in Sanada’s hands, following the swirling purples like snakes scurrying from the light of day. Saizō’s senses had never let him down before, and they weren’t about to start now. “That’s a scale.”

“Must have been a pretty big fish for a scale like this.”

“Not a fish...a tanuki.”

Sanada set his tea down and beckoned for Saizō to retake his seat. “What are you getting at? You know I hate your damn riddles.”

*How boring.*

“That scale belongs to a monster of myth and legend known as Shukaku. Do you know the tale?”

“...You mean one of those giant beasts you hear about in children’s fairy tales. There were a few of them.”

“Nine, to be exact, and each with a corresponding number of tails. They’re known as the Bijuu. Legend has it that a man known as the Sage of Six Paths created them from one colossal beast. The Shukaku is a sand demon that takes the form of a giant tanuki and preys on people’s dreams.”

“Sounds like wet nurse drivel to me.”

Saizō smiled. “Indeed, that’s been the thinking for many hundreds of years. The stories we hear today are old wives’ tales. But you know what they say about rumors—they begin with a grain of truth.” He swiped a finger across the scale, and the surface swirled like so many grains of sand under a gentle breeze.

Sanada watched him with beady hawk eyes. “Let’s just assume for a minute that you’re not
blowing smoke up my ass. Why this? Why now?”

Saizō leaned back in this chair and steepled his hands, thinking. “I’ve been wondering the same thing myself, and I’m afraid I don’t have much of an answer.”

“Much?”

There is a reason he’s never lost a battle, I suppose.

“More of a hunch than anything concrete.”

“I don’t have all day.”

“Strife.” The word rolled off Saizo’s tongue like butter, so rich and warm. It gave him chills. “The area where this scale was retrieved was the sight of a mass slaughter. It’s why I sent a team to investigate in the first place. A small village in the Wind Country had reported a spike in aggravated crimes. Assault, rape, murder, the usual. But here’s the interesting part—”

“Oh please, I’m on the edge of my seat,” Sanada said rudely.

If he were anyone else, Saizō would have let him know just how much he appreciated being interrupted. But this was his benefactor, his leader, the one person in whose shadow he could carry out an agenda of his choosing. Speak softly.

“Of course. Some villagers took it upon themselves to hunt down the perpetrators of such heinous crimes, according to the reports. What was supposed to be a clandestine search and destroy mission turned into a manhunt. A bloody one.”

Sanada sighed and made to rise from his chair. “I don’t have time for this. I have better things to do than listen to gossip. Don’t you dare summon me like this again.”

“Trouble is, even after the suspected perpetrators were apprehended and the mob went home, the blood continued to spill,” Saizō went on. “The next morning, everyone in the village was dead in their beds. They’d died in their sleep.”

Sanada paused. “People die.”

“In their sleep? Certainly not children or healthy men and women. And the fear in their eyes as they slept wide awake... I’m told it was quite shocking even for some of my most seasoned men.”

Sanada looked intrigued. “They all died in their sleep? That’s impossible.”

“They were bleeding from multiple orifices, but there were no discernible injuries. It was almost as though whatever had killed them had attacked from the inside out.”

Sanada frowned deeply as he turned this over in his sharp mind. “Like a disease of some sort.”

“Or a nightmare.”

“What are you getting at?”

“If the old wives’ tales are anything to go by, the Bijuu are forces of nature that draw their powers from the earth and those living on it. Even the mist outside is one such source of natural energy. Dreams are another.”

“You think this Shukaku beast somehow killed all those people in their dreams?”
Saizō smiled. “When I was a child, I would have the most vivid nightmares. Night terrors, my beloved mother used to call them. I’d feel myself dying every night, the pain was so real. And I’d wake in a cold sweat, screaming. Sometimes I could still feel the pain even after I awoke.” Saizō moved a hand to his abdomen as though to cover an old wound. “There is power in dreams.” He reached for the shimmering scale Sanada still held. “And sometimes, the worst of them can cross over into the real world.”

A chill swept over Saizō just then—night had settled in. He rose to close the window, thick mist obscuring everything from sight but the faint glow of lanterns in nearby shop windows. Like red eyes watching him through the shadows.

“How do you even know this scale is from Shukaku? It could be a hoax. Could be that those villagers were all poisoned as part of some pathetic scheme for revenge. Wouldn’t be the first time something like that has happened.”

“No, it wouldn’t, but I’m quite sure.” Saizō returned to his seat and held up the scale. “The chakra coming from this thing is unlike any I’ve ever felt before. It’s dark and potent, and it feels nothing like a normal shinobi’s. It’s not something man could have created.”

Sanada was a cruel man when he wanted to be. Saizō had always been drawn to the cruelty in others, and right now he felt like pouring himself another cup of tea as he watched the wheels turning in his leader’s head, plotting and planning.

“Saizō,” Sanada said slowly. “Do you still have those night terrors? I can’t imagine a man as twisted as you being afraid of anything natural.”

“I do,” Saizō said, taking a sip of his tea. “But I’ve learned how to control my nightmares. The trick is to seek them out, not run from them.”

Sanada stood up again, this time with a dark, simmering set to his gaze. “Then what are we waiting for?”

“Your hair’s gotten so long, my lady.”

“Yes, quite the hassle, isn’t it?”

“Nonsense! I think it’s lovely.”

Mito watched her reflection in the mirror as her handmaiden combed out the long, red tresses that now reached down to her lower back. It had been at her father’s request that she agreed to grow it out, not wanting to argue with him on the practicality of physical beauty—Mito had better things to spend her time thinking about, so she simply agreed without a fuss. But times like this always reignited that old spark of regret at having caved without a fight. Long hair was more trouble than it was worth, in her mind.

At sixteen, more than just Mito’s hair had grown. Gone was the awkward little girl still learning how to walk on stick legs (mostly). Most of it was of course due to the natural aging process that had smoothed out most of her angles for gentle curves. But beneath the soft skin lay practiced muscles gained from the extensive training she’d put herself through growing up despite her father’s silent disapproval. As long as she never fell behind in her lessons and duties, he could not find a reason to keep her from honing her skills. With Sato as her biggest defender, Mito found enough time to focus on that which she considered truly important.
And then there were nights like this one.

“Is something the matter? You look a little down,” the handmaiden said as she wove Mito’s hair around an ivory comb inlaid with gold.

“Lena, you’re too perceptive for your own good, you know that?”

Lena had been Mito’s personal handmaiden for a couple years now. Unlike Mito, Lena had the option to keep her black hair short and tied back at all times. Possessed of a quiet strength only the most helpless looking women could grasp, Mito had learned to see the indomitable spirit hidden behind glowing olive skin and brown doe eyes. Native islanders may not have looked imposing, but they knew how to adapt and survive in this harsh land better than anyone.

Since the founding of Uzushiogakure four years prior, native inhabitants had trickled in from around the Whirlpool Islands seeking protection from the feudal lord’s samurai soldiers in return for labor. It was no secret that the feudal lord let his soldiers go about their lecherous business while turning a blind eye so long as they served him well. It was deplorable, in Mito’s mind, and she’d made her concerns clear to her father time and again. Always eager to have more hands working to build this new village into something great, Ensui welcomed most of them and employed them. They were hard working and rarely complained, as any workers with a fair and just boss are wont to behave.

Lena, about five years Mito’s senior, knew everything there was to know about being a lady despite her common birth. It was her passion to excel in the home, and she’d saved Mito a world of embarrassment when she fell behind in her lessons on more than one occasion. Lena was the perfect ally to have in her situation.

“One of us has to make sure you at least look the part of a demure princess,” Lena said with a grin. Mito’s true passions and interests were no secret to Lena, as was her distaste for all things related to the formalities of court. Politics were dirty, and yet the nobles insisted on primping and perfuming it with lavish dinners, beautiful kimono, and enough wine to drown in. It was despicable, but it was the way things were. Mito had learned to don her mask well over the years.

“It’s not the worst thing that could happen, I suppose,” Mito said as Lena beckoned her to stand for dressing. Tonight’s attire would be a deep blue silk with a white obi. Wave patterns cascaded down the right breast all the way to the floor, looping into whirlpools with black eyes at the centers. Mito traced one with a finger, marveling at how realistic it looked. But like the whirlpools themselves, there was no seeing to the bottom of these painted cousins.

“Tonight your lord father is hosting the Uchiha clan, is that right? I remember you telling me they’re a family of strong shinobi,” Lena said to take her mind off the primping.

Mito’s thoughts drifted to a time long past. There was no way Madara would be here tonight—it was a dinner for the leaders of the clan only. She hadn’t forgotten his promise to become something great, a leader, but having lived the life of a noble herself, Mito wasn’t holding out hope that change would come so quickly. Simply wanting something to be did not guarantee that it would come true. And so, she resigned herself to an evening of stale conversation with men more concerned about how deeply they could cut than how much they could do to change the unjust ways of the world. The Uchiha thrived on blood, if their reputation was anything to go by. Mito was not looking forward to tonight.

“I wish I could be like you,” Mito said, watching her reflection in the mirror. “You have no cares in the world aside from your job, which you chose for yourself. It must be nice to be who you want to
Lena tightened Mito’s obi with a little more force than was necessary. “My lady, you don’t know what you’re saying. You have been born into a life of privilege—”

“Yes, and it’s exactly that I can’t stand,” Mito said, taking Lena’s wrists in her hands. “What good are beautiful kimono and all the jewels I could want when I live in gilded cage? My father holds to key, but one day a husband will inherit it from him. I don’t have the freedom you have. I never will.”

Lena suddenly frosted over, all good humor gone from her expression. “Lady Mito,” she said. “You’re not like me. You have a chance to make a difference because people will listen to you. You speak of cages, but I see only a platform that lets you stand higher than I ever will. If anyone can change the wrongs of this world, you can. Don’t you see that?”

Oh, Lena. If only she could understand. “I’m trapped. My father wants me to marry. I’m sixteen, a woman grown, and it’s all he thinks about now. That’s all I’m good for.”

Lena shook her head. “You have so much power. I only wish you could learn how to use it properly. And I don’t mean those tea ceremonies your father wants you to do every morning, as lovely as they are.”

Frustration gave way to laughter. It was relaxing to vent to Lena like this sometimes. At least she had someone to talk to. Still, talking never did much for anyone. No matter how powerful Mito became, her destiny would not change. It was her curse.

“I should be going soon,” Mito said. “Father will be expecting me.”

Lena nodded. “Yes, my lady.” She opened a small container of makeup and dabbed a bit with a brush, spreading it upon Mito’s lips. “There, beautiful as always.”

Mito thanked her politely. She exited her room with somber finality, bracing herself for another dinner rife with superfluous formalities and leers from men older than her father. It was the way things were, the rules of the game. The trick was to see past them to what truly mattered. Tonight, the Uchiha were here to discuss an upcoming campaign for which the feudal lord had recruited them. It would be prudent for Mito, a seemingly harmless female with no knowledge of the real world, to discern any potential causes for worry or compromise. The Uzumaki were a neutral party, but the Uchiha were a different beast entirely. The feudal lord wanted no complications. Delicacy was of the essence.

Making her way down the winding corridors of the main house, Mito kept her eyes steadfastly ahead as Lena followed her. They did not speak. Torches lit the stone hallways, shadows dancing around her as she made her way forward. She reached the dining hall shortly, its high ceilings and warm lighting meant to relax, though Mito felt anything but. The walk across the room to the front where she would be seated among the other nobles felt like a trek. Unescorted, she kept her head held high and dared not look into the crowd of lesser men gathered round lest she catch a salacious eye and lose her composure.

Ensui took her hand when she reached the head of the room, and she smiled. “Father.”

“Mito, over here, please,” he said, indicating the seat to his right.

It was the seat traditionally reserved for trusted counsel, and Mito had occupied it for some time now. Ensui’s daughter would be wed to a powerful man one day, and it was his duty to make sure
she was ready to navigate whatever uneven waters awaited her. He trusted her judgment as much as any adviser these days. Lena took her own place at the table behind to keep watch should Mito require assistance at any time. Satto was seated at Ensui’s left.

“Lord Tajima, please allow me to introduce my daughter, Mito.”

Ensui gestured to the infamous Uchiha clan leader across the table. He was attractive in a patrician sort of way for an older man. Silver streaked his jet black hair and brought out the veins of grey in his dark eyes. The scars on his face gave him character and spoke of his skill—both with the sword and with sense, seeing as he had lived to show them this long. She wondered how many people he’d killed in his lifetime. None of this showed on her face, however, as she held out a delicate hand for him to take, her kimono sleeve barely revealing the flesh of her wrist.

“At your service, my lady,” Tajima said politely.

Mito dipped her head in a show of respect as he kissed her hand. “My lord, I trust your journey here was a pleasant one?”

Tajima smirked and the small scar bisecting the left side of his mouth crinkled. Yes, in his youth, she imagined he must have been wolfishly dashing. “It was, my lady. And allow me to introduce the rest of my party. My eldest daughter, Haruka.”

He indicated a young woman several years Mito’s senior, pretty but severe in demeanor if her cold expression was anything to go by. Mito maintained her warm smile nonetheless.

“My son, Tajitsu.”

A young man grinned with a little too much enthusiasm for Mito’s tastes. He was tall and resembled his father only enough to confirm the blood relation, but he had none of the battle-worn exterior or aristocratic good looks his parent possessed. He was too baby-faced to have seen much action, and where Tajima was chiseled and strong, Tajitsu was soft and sallow.

“And my heir, Madara,” Tajima finished.

Mito turned to the young man seated next to Tajima, and the perfect mask cracked a little. He’d grown considerably. His hair was longer but still wild, the grey in his eyes more subdued, smoldering. And the rounded face of his early childhood had lost its softness, replaced with an angular, almost jagged appearance that made him look older for his age in the best way possible. Mito found that she’d lost her train of thought briefly as she stared into those depthless eyes she could only remember in some dreams.

“Princess,” he said, dipping his head respectfully by way of greeting.

Unlike Tajitsu, Madara’s very aura spoke of a hard life. Mito wondered if she leaned in close, would she be able to smell the blood of his enemies absorbed into his very skin? Madara did nothing to indicate he recognized her, but the way his eyes lingered suggested he did. She composed herself with all the grace learned from years of etiquette lessons.

“My lord,” she said softly, watching him carefully through painted lashes.

A tick of the lips, barely there, but she caught it. So he did remember her. As they were seated, she looked around for his brother, Izuna, if she remembered correctly, but he was absent. As the serving maids poured wine for everyone and Madara settled in, back straight, she had to wonder—where had the lowly soldier in borrowed armor gone? How on earth had he managed to rise this far in so short a time? The curiosity burned so intensely that she had to pinch her thigh under the table.
to keep herself grounded and level-headed.

“Lord Tajima, I wasn’t aware you had another son,” Ensui said lightly as he gestured for the serving maid not to pour him too much wine.

*He doesn’t,* Mito thought to herself. Her father knew it, too. Tajima Uchiha had several children, all but one female. His only trueborn son, the one seated two spots down from Mito, was a known lecher and drunk. Indeed, he seemed all too happy to encourage the serving maid to fill his wine cup to the brim.

“All adoptive son,” Tajima said. “I took Madara and his brother in when they were young. Very promising talent, the both of them. I can’t think of anyone better suited to lead my warriors one day.”

Ensui smiled good-naturedly, but Mito had to bite her cheek to keep her own smile at bay.

*One day, I’ll lead the Uchiha clan. Together, Izuna and I will reinvent them.*

Looking at Madara now, she felt a strange pride well up inside as she remembered his promise all those years ago. He’d done it, just like he said he would. She had no idea how (it was unheard of for a lowborn soldier to be elevated to the top like this), but even back then she could tell. There was something about him that made others turn their heads and look.

“A toast, then. To the next generation,” Ensui said, raising his glass. “We old men won’t live forever. It’s comforting to know our children will carry on our legacies with grace and dignity.”

Tajima hesitated for a moment, and suddenly Mito wondered what his trueborn son thought about all this. To be passed over for someone who wasn’t even blood related was a terrible slight. Tajitsu, whatever his opinion on the matter, seemed rather blasé about it for the time being as he stole sips of his wine while waiting for the toast to finish.

*Strange…*

“Yes,” Tajima agreed. “To the next generation.”

Mito smiled again, just like her instructors had taught her. The perfect mask for the perfect lady, always. When she took a sip of her wine, she found Madara watching her over the rim of his own cup, and they locked eyes. In the muted candlelight she thought she detected a flash of red in those dark depths, but she couldn’t be sure. Ensui’s voice drew her gaze. Now was a time to play her part, not drift away with her silly daydreams.

The meal was splendid. Ensui was not one to waste anything, but for such an important guest as the leader of one of the most powerful shinobi clans on the continent, not a single detail was left overlooked. Seven courses of soups, grilled vegetables, and all manner of nautical game were served on plates of hand-painted porcelain. Salted swordfish with lemon; whole roasted snapper; raw-cut tuna, octopus, and scallops; and roasted potatoes with rosemary and hot peppers. Uzushiogakure was an island nation, after all. The wine, of course, flowed in a steady stream.

“The campaign shouldn’t be anything too difficult,” Tajima said after a bite of scallop. “We’re to quell an insurgency in the eastern Fire Country. My men know the land well.”

Ensui nodded. “Very good, very good. Lord Kenshin will be pleased with a swift reconciliation, I’m sure. You’ll have my elite guard under your command led by General Satto Uzumaki.” Ensui indicated Satto seated to his left.
The feudal lord with control over both Whirlpool and most of the Fire Country, Kenshin Uesugi, had called upon the Uzumaki to quell an insurgency on the mainland. As part of the deal to serve the feudal lord in return for the land to settle Uzushioagakure, the Uzumaki were obliged to cooperate. However, hand-to-hand combat was not their specialty. As such, Kenshin decided to call in the services of soldiers more familiar with traditional warfare.

“I’m curious, though,” Satto said. “Lord Kenshin, that is, when we last spoke with him, seemed unclear about the cause of the conflict.”

Tajima took a sip of his wine, the scar on his lip crinkling again as he smirked. “Does it matter? They’re digging their own grave, whoever they are.”

Mito listened intently even as she refilled the glasses of the men around her. It seemed the Uchiha made no secret of their battle lust. It didn’t escape her notice that Haruka was content to not be attentive to the others despite the expectations of their gender. She looked like she would rather be anywhere but here, but made no effort to conceal it like Mito did. A part of Mito envied her that, but she said nothing.

When Mito raised the wine bottle to Madara’s cup, he touched her hand to stay it.

“None for me,” he said.

His touch was cold, but they stayed that way, suspended, for a few moments.

“Oh course,” Mito said softly.

“I’ll take some more,” Tajitsu said jovially.

Mito immediately pulled away from Madara and obliged his adoptive brother. She didn’t notice how Tajitsu’s eyes lingered on Madara instead of the drink he was so fond of.

“Your daughter is lovely,” Tajima said. “Is she promised?”

Mito reclaimed her seat and tried to ignore the spike of anger at being talked about as though she were not present. Why did men insist upon ignoring women when they disdained the same behavior directed at them?

“Not currently, but there’s time,” Ensui said, the pride in his voice not lost on his dinner guests. “She’s barely sixteen, and I mean to make a good match for her.”

“She’s an age with Madara, then,” Tajima said. “If he wasn’t betrothed to Haruka, I might be tempted to make you an offer.”

“Father, please,” Haruka said, her smile tight-lipped.

It was meant as a compliment and Mito had no trouble blushing, but not out of feminine modesty. “My lord is kind,” she said, remembering her manners despite the tickle of resentment.

“Yes,” Ensui agreed. “I would consider myself a lucky man to marry Mito to a lad as gifted as your son.”

“Well, perhaps after the campaign we could work something out. My other son, Tajitsu, isn’t promised to anyone yet.”
Ensui smiled and thanked Tajima for his consideration of their small clan, but Mito felt a little queasy at the talk of her future without a single word of consideration for her own feelings.

Silly girl. Get your head out of the clouds.

This was one game she’d known she would lose from the beginning no matter how well she played her cards.

“Princess,” Madara said suddenly, drawing Mito out of her thoughts. “Will you be joining us on the campaign?”

The abrupt change of topic was a welcome one for Mito, even if she knew her father would not approve.

“You flatter us,” Ensui spoke up. “But my daughter could not possibly—”

“It would benefit me greatly to have her join us. My lady’s expertise in our clan’s sealing techniques is prodigious for her age,” Satto interrupted.

Ensui was never one to lose his temper in public or so much as raise his voice, but Mito knew where to look. He was not pleased by this rather gross breach of rank and station. Still, she was both thrilled and a little shocked that Satto would make the case public. They’d spoken about it in private and she was of course eager to join the campaign, but she wasn’t holding out hope. Ensui would prefer to see her safe at home pouring wine and entertaining guests. She didn’t blame him, but it didn’t make her any less upset.

“General, we’ll discuss this later,” Ensui said.

“The perfect lady and a soldier, too,” Haruka said, leaning forward on her elbows and watching Mito with dark eyes that seemed to glitter with unspoken thoughts. “You’re quite the full package.”

Mito didn’t know why, but she didn’t think that was a compliment. “I wouldn’t say full package, but I’ve been blessed with very good teachers, if that’s what you mean.”

Haruka smiled, and Mito wondered if she’d done something right. This woman was hard to get a read on.

“Ladies, ladies, no need to start the fight early,” Tajitsu said, biting off a piece of bread.

“You won’t even be fighting,” Haruka said. “Why do you think Father passed you over for Madara as his heir?”

A short silence ensued, and Mito thought Madara would resent that comment from the woman to whom he was supposedly engaged to be married. He gave no indication of his feelings on the matter, however.

Maybe he’s learned the rules of this game, too.

“Father,” she said. “You’ll be remaining here in the village to oversee our domestic affairs, will you not?”

Ensui blinked in surprise at the sudden query. “Yes, of course,” he said, suspicious.

Mito continued without pause before he might get more than a word in edgewise. “General Satto is a brilliant military strategist and fighter, but with all due respect, he is not in a position to represent
Uzushiogakure’s political interests. Allow me to participate in the campaign. I’ll be your liaison with Lord Kenshin and give you a full report of the activities. Isn’t that why you’ve been including me in your political agenda thus far?”

Ensui would be having a talk with her later about speaking so freely before outsiders, but Mito knew which buttons to push with him to get what she wanted. The fact that she’d done it in front of their guests only added to the pressure.

“Lady Mito, I daresay you would be more effective at a negotiation table than some of my advisers,” Tajima said, chuckling.

Ensui did not look pleased despite the praise to his only daughter. Still, he had no other option. If he backed down now, he would appear to be standing in the way of the campaign’s success. “Very well. I’ll allow you participate in the campaign. You’ll be under General Satto’s direct supervision at all times.”

But even with a chaperone in Satto, it was a victory she had not thought to win at the start of this dinner. Mito dipped her head respectfully, trying to hide the smile that threatened to bloom. “Yes, Father. Thank you.”

“Still, the battlefield is a dangerous place for men and women alike,” Tajima said, expression unreadable. “Accidents do happen.”

Mito fixed him with a hard look. She’d gotten the same reaction a thousand times before. “Then I’ll count myself lucky and honored to have the very best of the noble Uchiha clan there to ensure they don’t happen this time.”

Tajima studied her for a moment before smirking and raising his glass. “To the next generation, indeed. I look forward to working with you and yours, Lord Ensui.”

Everyone raised their glasses, and Mito caught Satto’s eye as he winked at her. She bit back the urge to laugh happily, settling instead for her usual peaceful smile, superficially pleasing in appearance. Conversation continued informally with talk of such things as past accomplishments, upcoming marriage and birth activities, and other polite dinner conversation.

Across the table, Madara caught Mito’s eye and held her gaze, but he said nothing. Now that she thought about it, he barely said anything at all, preferring to remain the silent observer. All except for his one comment about her joining the campaign. Mito would have thought little of it, but she found it hard to ignore him even in his silence. Towards the end of the night, he rose to leave early, excusing himself.

“I’d like to speak with Izuna,” he explained to Tajima.

Mito watched as Madara’s adoptive father put a hand on his shoulder, a noted sign of affection. Something about it seemed strange to her, but she couldn’t place what that was.

“I’ll see you early tomorrow morning. I have some items to go over with you,” Tajima said.

Madara bowed, and a young servant gestured for him to follow to the room he’d been assigned. Madara had to walk around the table past Mito, and when he did he let his hand brush the edge of the table. It was fast enough to go unnoticed, but Mito stared at the object he’d left there for her.

A seashell, one all too familiar even after all these years.

She turned to watch him go, but he did not so much as spare her a glance. Quickly, before someone
else could see, she pocketed the tiny shell within the heavy folds of her kimono. It was another ten minutes before she was able to excuse herself, claiming to be tired. No one questioned her early retirement, but her father reminded her that they would have a talk later. She agreed and bade the table goodnight, following Lena out of the dining hall and back to her own chambers.

It wasn’t the first time Mito had snuck out of her room. Even in the soft sleeping yukata Lena had dressed her in for bed, she was able to climb out the window without a sound, making sure to take Madara’s seashell with her. Outside the air was heavy with a thin fog that had rolled in with the evening tide, crisp and fresh. The yellow paper lanterns strung up along the paved paths through the inner village were blurry through the mist, lending a magical, almost otherworldly filter to the scene. Mito tied up her too-long hair in a messy bun, wishing yet again that it was short like it used to be when she was a child and things like men’s opinions of her physical appeal mattered little.

She had no idea where she would find Madara, but she knew he would be waiting for her somewhere. What else could the seashell mean? He remembered her, just as she remembered him. And somehow, that thought filled her with an effervescent confidence. She never would have spoken so forcefully to her father like she had tonight if not for Madara’s questioning. Why? She didn’t even know him. And yet, here she was stealing through the shadows of her family’s vast garden villa in search of a boy she’d met as a child. She could have laughed at how stupid it all sounded.

A fork in the road caused her to slow. Either she could go left through a series of red Torii to the sea, or she could go right through a natural Ginkgo tree tunnel lined with red paper lanterns. If she looked up, she could make out a few hard-working stars that managed to shine through the thick, golden branches. Mito decided to take the tunnel.

Walking slowly, she played with the seashell in her pocket. How to find him? He was here somewhere, he had to be. The distant sound of waves crashing against the rocky shores of her island country made Mito pause, a light breeze pulling wisps of red from the bun in her hair. She walked over the fallen Ginkgo leaves to a narrow opening between the tree trunks, eyes searching for the water.

“Mito Uzumaki,” a voice said from somewhere behind her.

Mito froze but didn’t turn. Under the quiet cover of a lantern-lit night, his voice was softer, more rich than deep as it had sounded in the dining hall. She gripped the seashell harder and turned to face him.

“Madara Uchiha,” she said, breathless.

He stood before her in casual night wear, as though he, too, had snuck out to be here. It was a ludicrous thought. Madara was an adult male perfectly capable of handling himself, she assumed. There would be no handmaidens keeping watch over his door. Or his window, if he’d chosen a similar path here as her. Mito took the opportunity to study the changes she’d previously noted only in passing at dinner. He was taller than her now, but of average height for a man of sixteen years. The mane of black hair reached just past his shoulders, definitely longer than it had been when they were twelve. Aside from the obvious growth that had cut away all the cherubic softness of childhood, he was nothing too out of the ordinary, neither strikingly handsome nor forgettably plain. Except for the eyes. They glowed with the same red glare as the lanterns above, and they seemed to devour what little starlight seeped bravely through the Ginkgo tree canopy.
Remembering herself, Mito produced the seashell he’d given her and held it out. She tapped it with a manicured finger, initiating a quick transfer of chakra, and suddenly a series of sentient, black runes poured from the mouth of the shell. In a matter of seconds, the tantō she’d sealed within the shell four years ago had materialized in her free hand. “I told you I’d give it back,” she said, holding out the tantō for him to take.

Madara approached, his eyes never leaving hers until they were only a foot apart. It took all her willpower not to fidget under the intensity of the ruby stare, like being seeing for the first time by another living creature. He took the tantō from her by the hilt and turned it over, examining it for imperfections or other corruption. Perhaps he found none because he slipped it up the sleeve of his yukata. Mito still held the shell, and he gently closed her fingers around it with his own.

“Keep it,” he said. “Every sword needs a scabbard to shield it.”

It had been so long and she barely knew him and here they were. She’d wondered if this moment would ever come, if he would ever achieve the dream he’d confided in her that day on the beach so many years ago. Mito smiled.

“Congratulations...my lord.” She added the formality just to see his reaction.

He blinked, and the Sharingan faded. Gone was the eerie glow of a man who’d grown up without her. They were back on the beach and twelve years old again.

“I’ve worked hard for this,” Madara said finally. “I’m not all there yet.”

Mito shook her head. “I knew you would do it.”

There was so much to say that she didn’t know quite where to start. Luckily, Madara chose for her.

“That trick with the shell won’t do much good on the battlefield, you know. I hope you’re as good with a sword as you are with your words.”

Mito felt a little embarrassed by the teasing. “I shouldn’t have spoken to my father that way. Not very becoming of a lady, I guess.”

“At least you looked the part this time.”

Mito covered her smile to stop the laugh that wanted to spill. “Those kimono are so cumbersome. If you knew what it was like, how much time it takes just to get it all on, you’d find it pretty ridiculous, too.”

“I don’t doubt it.” He smiled just a little.

Footsteps approached from the direction Mito had come. She tensed, and Madara peered through the gloom. It was too soon, too early to say goodnight. They’d only just gotten here! Mito wasn’t ready to let him go without satisfying her burning curiosity about all he’d accomplished in the last four years. Without hesitating, she took Madara’s hand in hers and dragged him deeper down the Ginkgo tree tunnel at a jog.

“Come on!” she whispered.

He followed without a thought, and they passed by lantern after lantern as they neared the end of the tunnel. Once through, Mito veered down a narrow path to the left that led to the surrounding hills overlooking Uzushiogakure. Aside from the sea, it was a place where she sought reprieve from the life of a lady and her duties at court. She released him when they’d gone far enough.
“No one comes out here at this time of night,” she said, facing the village.

Above, thousands upon thousands of stars twinkled brightly enough to bathe the grassy hills in pale light despite the meager crescent moon. Uzushiogakure glowed below, soft orange lights in the windows of children as their mothers sang them to sleep, or looking in on friends having a last drink before bed. She smiled, panting a little from the flight.

“I love this place,” she said, a little breathless.

The sea breeze was stronger here without the cover of the village, and it blew her hair gently. It was then that she realized it was loose and long. The tie holding her bun in must have fallen out during their flight, and rivers of red fell about her shoulders and back. She didn’t have another tie, so she would have to suffer for now.

“Your hair’s longer than it used to be,” Madara said, sitting down on the grassy earth and eyeing the long tresses.

“So is yours,” she fired back, hesitating a moment before taking a seat next to him. “A lot’s changed, actually.”

He was silent, and Mito felt the urge to fill the space between them. She withdrew the seashell that had previously concealed Madara’s dagger and played with it. Perhaps the best place to start would be the beginning.

“He called you his son,” she said, eyes still gazing out over her village. She left the question unspoken for him to answer or leave alone, should he so choose.

“He didn’t have one before Izuna and me.”

“...What about Tajitsu?”

Madara chuckled, but there was nothing humorous about it. “I’m sure you can see how he’s no fit son for an Uchiha.”

Having spoken only a few words to Tajitsu, she couldn’t say she knew him well. But he was an easy hand to read. No good leader would ever love his drink more than his people, and given Haruka’s commentary at dinner, Mito suspected the lack of scars on his face wasn’t due to his unparalleled skills on the battlefield. A part of her was almost surprised Tajima had brought him along, the older son he’d clearly disinherited in favor of a lowborn soldier, but tradition was like ripe bamboo—damn near impossible to bend and growing like wildfire, impossible to stop.

“How,” Mito began, unsure if this was a direction he would be comfortable going in. “...How did you do it?”

“Hard work and a lot of blood. Tajima needed an heir, and I needed an in.”

It didn’t add up. From what Mito knew of the Uchiha clan, they were rigid and old-fashioned on their best days. How could Madara, born without so much as the right to the family name, have risen to the throne in just four years? She was missing something important.

“I suppose marrying Haruka will be the icing on the cake once Tajima passes,” she said.

Mada turned to look at her, eyes hard. “My father isn’t about to roll over and die.”

Ah.
“You consider him family, don’t you?” Mito held up a hand to keep him from misunderstanding. “I think that’s wonderful. When I met you and Izuna, you looked like you only had each other in the world. And now, well, it’s not just the two of you anymore, is it? I’m happy for you.”

Whatever anger Madara was feeling abated after a moment, and he backed down. They returned to watching the village lights, and Mito felt a little lighter.

“A lot’s changed,” he said, echoing her words from earlier.

Mito’s eyes fell upon the small, pink seashell in her hand that he’d kept with him all these years. “Change is good.”

“Things will keep changing, too. One day, this will all look different.”

“What do you mean?”

Madara was silent for a moment, and she wondered what he could be thinking. “This world is ours for the taking. We can reinvent it any way we want. Make it better, turn dreams into reality. The possibilities are endless.”

Mito had the feeling he was trying to tell her something, but she couldn’t quite figure out what it was. He’d revealed quite a bit already, and she didn’t want to push her luck. “We... Are you including me in this dream world of yours, then?” she said with a smile.

When he looked at her again, his eyes were depthless and unreadable. She had the most uncanny urge to reach for him, but she held back. It wouldn’t be appropriate.

“Do you want to be?”

Sea breeze tickled Mito’s cheeks and the back of her neck, eliciting goosebumps, as she stared back at Madara with wide eyes. It was the same feeling she’d gotten during their first meeting, like he truly saw her beyond all the beautiful silks and satins to the girl underneath. He called her a princess, but he had never once treated her like one.

“I’d like to see it one day,” she said. “More than anything.”

He rose and offered her his hand, which she took. Under the soft starlight, she almost felt like they were the only two people in the world. The thought made her heart beat a little faster.

“You should sleep. We have an early morning tomorrow,” he said at length.

Irritation flared at his words. She was no child. “So should you. I bet you’re grumpy in the mornings.”

Madara laughed a little but said nothing. Mito didn’t protest as he pulled her back toward the village, his hand in hers.
Tobirama was not one for seafaring adventures. For all his familiarity with water, he could not stand the stuff without the comfort of dry land beneath his feet. The barge that transported the Senju garrison from the mainland to the Land of Whirlpools was steady enough, but just the sight of those giant whirlpools across the seascape was enough to send Tobirama fleeing below deck.

“It’s really something, Tobirama. You sure you don’t want to have a look?” Sasuke made little effort to hold back his laughter from the other side of the the door.

“Hell no,” Tobirama bit out.

“What would your people say if they knew their prince was afraid of getting his hands wet?”

Tobirama was about to say something unconscionably rude, but the barge lurched and his stomach lurched with it. He barely made it to the window in time. A school of fish tailing the boat attacked his churned up lunch with gusto, and Tobirama groaned miserably.

“Tobirama?”

“Just go away,” he said, hanging his head.

A pause, then: “You just threw up, didn’t you?”

“I said leave!”

Sasuke sighed on the other side of the door. “You’d feel better above deck. Would help ya get your sea legs.”

Sasuke was having no luck with Hashirama’s irascible younger brother, and he sighed. Nothing much had changed over the few years since the botched battle for Osaka Castle. Tobirama was still headstrong and uptight, and Hashirama maintained his carefree, do-gooder persona. Sasuke had found it remarkably easy to transition from his prior role as absolute leader to trusted right hand. Hashirama was a good leader, charismatic and equally relatable to hardened soldiers and lowly civilian laborers. Despite his mere seventeen years, Hashirama had earned the respect the Senju clan, from the highborn to the foot soldiers. Not without some help from Tobirama and Sasuke along the way, Sasuke liked to think. But Hashirama was a likeable guy, possessed of a manner of charm lost on most.

Something heavy fell against the door, and Sasuke sidestepped in time to avoid getting slammed in the face. Tobirama leaned against the handle in the threshold, his face wan and pale as a ghost. He burped and squeezed his eyes shut to stop any traitorous tears from falling.

“There, feel better?” Sasuke said, smirking.

“Shut up.”

“Come on, you can hold my hand up the stairs if ya want.”

Tobirama muttered curses under his breath and pushed past Sasuke up the stairs to the deck. Chuckling, Sasuke tailed the younger Senju brother outside. It was midday and the air was crisp
and fresh, heavy with the smell of salt and sliced fish from the wares the barge carried. Tōka was busy speaking to Hashirama on the starboard bow, and Tobirama shuffled toward the pair on wobbly legs.

“Oh, Tobirama, you don’t look so good,” Tōka said.

“Really? I had no idea,” Tobirama slurred bitterly. He put a hand on his aching head and leaned against the railing.

“Tōka, we can finish up when we arrive. Maybe my brother will have returned to the land of the living by then, hah!” Hashirama said, clapping Tobirama hard on the back.

Tobirama gagged and his eyes bulged. He dry heaved over the edge of the barge. Tōka ignored the interaction, long used to this type of behavior from her cousins.

“Sounds good. I’ll be with the captain if you need me.” Tōka left the three men to attend to her business.

“Found this one puking up his guts below deck,” Sasuke said, grinning and leaning backwards against the railing on Hashirama’s other side. “Reckoned he could use a little of that good ol’ ocean breeze.”

“It’s wonderful up here,” Hashirama agreed.

Tobirama groaned and flipped the two of them off, but he was paid no mind.

“So, Uzushiogakure,” Sasuke said. “Can’t imagine what such a small island nation’s got to offer the likes of the great Senju clan.”

“We’re not so great as you make us out to believe, Sasuke,” Hashirama said. “And besides, it was my brother’s idea to make the journey. Isn’t that right, Tobi?”

Tobirama, who had recovered somewhat from Hashirama’s earlier friendly battery, righted himself and wiped his mouth on his blue sleeve. He glared at the two men who had done nothing to help his plight.

“Maybe not one of my more brilliant ideas, in retrospect,” he said.

“Nonsense! I think your judgment’s on point with this,” Hashirama said. He gripped the handrail and looked out over the sea at the whirlpools that peppered the view, swirling down to darkness. It was a magnificent sight, and one unique to these waters. “Besides, it’ll be a good opportunity to gauge what our sister clan has done with its newfound roots.”

Tobirama had made the suggestion a year ago to take more permanent and reliable precautions with Senju clan secrets, forbidden techniques, and teachings when those secrets had been compromised in a midnight raid on their camp by rogue shinobi. Rumors said the Uzumaki could seal anything, tangible or intangible.

“I heard the leader can even seal a man’s soul in a pot and fill him with another, like a monkey’s or something!” Tobirama had said to Hashirama and Sasuke. “Imagine that! I’d like to use that on those damned Uchiha, turn them all into the shit-throwing gorillas they are.”

Sasuke had not taken kindly to Tobirama’s disdain for primates. It was a useful pretense, though. While the Senju had a real need to safeguard clan secrets, the prospect of a potential alliance was far more appealing and the true motive of this mission. The Uzumaki, however, were known to be
a neutral party, and they were tethered to a feudal lord. Any alliance with them would come with constraining political baggage. Sasuke wasn’t keen on politics. Hashirama had made him a general in his army, trusting his past leadership and military experience for the kinds of pyrrhic battles the Senju inevitably waged against the Uchiha. Politics were more Tobirama’s thing, and he even had good ideas once in a blue moon. This, everyone was in agreement, was one of them. It was now up to the charismatically carefree Hashirama to make sure it panned out in their favor.

“Who knows? Maybe the clan leader will have some pretty daughters for you to pick from,” Hashirama goaded his younger brother. “It’s high time you thought about settling down.”

Tobirama got that sour, incredulous look he got when Hashirama said something particularly asinine, in jest or otherwise. “Hashi, I’m fifteen years old. How on earth could I please a woman if I can’t even grow a proper beard?”

Hashirama guffawed and slapped Tobirama on the back again, causing him to gag once more and dry heave over the edge of the barge.

“That’s true! You always were so baby-faced. You get that from our lady mother, rest her soul.”

Tobirama grumbled something, but it came out unintelligible as he continued to retch. Sasuke shook his head.

“I forget at times that you two are still boys. What’s this world coming to when children are leading men into battle?”

Hashirama leaned on his elbows and stared over the seascape. In the distance, Uzushiogakure’s rocky shores and verdant hills materialized on the horizon. He didn’t catch Sasuke’s expectant stare.

“I plan to be the last boy to set foot on any battlefield,” Hashirama said, his tone even and sober, a chillingly far cry from his facetious prodding of Tobirama only moments ago. “This world will die along with us, and the next generation will have a new world to look after. I’ll make sure of it.”

Sasuke stared at his leader, so young and green in many ways, but wiser than most men he’d met in his vast travels around the continent with the Ten Heroes. Some people, he supposed, had something that set them apart, a touch of beautiful insanity that others recognized as true genius. Sasuke himself had never had that even in all his years as a leader. Tobirama didn’t have it, either. Hashirama was an odd one, the person who made a room a little lighter when he walked inside, the person who turned heads and commanded attention. He was the beacon of hope people wanted to believe in. And he’d never asked for any of it. He wasn’t perfect, and most of the time he bit off more than he could chew. Sasuke had learned this right away when he joined the Senju. Tobirama had struggled with it his whole life.

But what are leaders without their brothers, their generals, their lovers, their children? As though reading his mind, Tobirama straightened up again and put a heavy hand on Hashirama’s shoulder.

“No, Brother; we’ll make sure of it. Together.”

Hashirama never took his eyes off the frothy sea and its many dark, swirling eyes that stared back at him. “Right.”

“My lord, we’ll be docking in ten minutes.”

Hashirama, Tobirama, and Sasuke turned at the first mate’s voice.
“Thank you. I suppose we should get ready,” Hashirama said, smiling. The first mate excused himself.

Sasuke watched his young leader, curious. Gone was the faraway look in his eye, the one he got when he thought no one was paying attention. Like he became someone else, an older soul sagging beneath the weight of the world he foolishly assumed was his to bear alone. Hashirama took a deep breath and sighed.

“Ahhh, I feel so invigorated! It must be thrilling to live in such a place, don’t you think so, Tobi?” Tobirama’s expression soured. “I’d rather not think about it.”

“Aw, you’re such a stick in the mud.”

“Mud doesn’t make me seasick.”

“All right, children, get your things ready before Tōka comes back,” Sasuke said in mock scolding.

Hashirama laughed and Tobirama rolled his eyes.

“Worst goddamned idea I ever had,” Tobirama grumbled as he trudged below deck to gather his things.

“Oh, cheer up, Tobi!” Hashirama called after him, slapping him on the back once more.

Tobirama nearly tripped and shouted obscenities at his brother. Sasuke watched them go. Children, indeed.

The journey north to Kenshin Uesugi’s stronghold was not long at the pace the Uchiha troupe set after docking on the mainland. Mito had traded her hand-painted kimono for more mobile leather and armor. Her long, red hair trailed behind her in a thick ponytail like a bloody lariat. She’d never been in a real battle before, but the longer she was around the Uchiha, the more she felt like there was no turning back. They practically breathed it.

General Satto and a small garrison of Uzumaki soldiers were with her most of the time. Mito was the youngest of their group and the only one without true combat experience. They tried to preserve court formalities, but it only served to isolate her more. She watched at night when they broke camp as her brethren shared battle stories or sparred. Whenever she approached, they stopped their activity and bowed. Yes m’lady, no m’lady. It was enough to drive her mad, though she knew they meant well.

The only thing that kept her going was the rational part of her that reminded her of her true purpose here: to liaise with Lord Kenshin on behalf of her father. Mito was the political clout, not the seasoned warrior. Everyone had a part to play, and she’d been eager to capitalize on hers at the dinner some nights ago. Now, she wasn’t so sure.

The Uchiha stayed away from the Uzumaki. Shinobi clans were tight-knit on the mainland. Alliances were only as good as the blood that connected them, and the only blood that mattered was family. Still, Mito watched Madara interact with his adoptive father and did not know what to make of it. He was not family no matter how she spun it, and yet, looking in from the outside, it was impossible to tell otherwise.
"Don’t you have papers to sign or something?"

The voice directly behind her startled Mito, and she spun with her hands poised to defend herself. Haruka gave her a weird look that barely concealed her smirk. Mito relaxed a little.

“You startled me,” Mito said.

“Mistake number one, my lady.”

Mito had never had many friends growing up. As the clan regent’s daughter, she’d been isolated in her studies and her upbringing. With no siblings and her boy cousin too young to tell left from right, she’d learned how to entertain herself whenever she wasn’t training with Satto. Haruka did not seem to have that problem, and it showed in the way she carried herself. Cool, confident, like she knew everything. Maybe she did.

“How do you know Madara, anyway?” Haruka asked.

She was pretty, Mito thought. Long, dark hair that she tied back in a braid, sharp eyes, high cheekbones. Royalty, through and through. She was also a seasoned warrior and several years Mito’s senior. Maybe the rumors about those Uchiha eyes were true. Maybe they could see right through her to her soul.

“We met when we were children, at the beach. It was a campaign outside Uzushiogakure, before the village existed.”

“Ah, that,” Haruka said, tapping her chin. “I remember I didn’t even know Madara existed back then. It was before my father took him in.”

Mito peered at the older girl, trying to glean her true intentions. From the moment she’d met Haruka, she couldn’t get a read on her. Was she the spoiled heiress, or the hardened soldier? Perhaps neither. The answer was no clearer now than it had been at the dinner in Uzushiogakure.

“And now you’re promised to him,” Mito said.

Haruka whipped her head around to lock eyes with Mito, and her eyes flashed red. “The only promise I’ve made is to win glory on the battlefield. I could care less for these idiotic political dances.”

So that’s it. Mito felt a tension leave her as a warm feeling touched her heart. Familiarity. Kinship.

“You don’t want to go through with the arranged marriage.”

Haruka didn’t need to say anything. Princesses were all the same, it seemed, be they Uchiha or Uzumaki.

“I guess you would understand,” Haruka said, her expression unreadable. “Marriage is just a tool for them to tie women down. Attach us to a man and we can’t run off, not to battle, not anywhere. Funny, isn’t it? They train us to fight and die for them, but all they really want is to lock us up in a lonely tower where no one can touch us.”

There was nothing funny about it. Mito had never heard her own reservations so boldly voiced aloud by another in her position.

“But here we are,” Mito said softly.
At length, Haruka nodded. “But here we are.”

Haruka smirked, a sinister expression that only made her more beautiful. Mito had never much envied other highborn women since they all shared the same fate, but the burning in her stomach couldn’t be ignored. It wasn’t bitter, but it was hollow. A void Mito couldn’t fill. Haruka was so...so unapologetic despite the gilded cages that entrapped them both.

“That again, the tallest towers are often the best vantage points.” Haruka gave Mito a once-over, her dark eyes lingering on the tantō at Mito’s hip emblazoned with the Uzumaki clan’s sigil. “Especially in battle.”

Mito’s heart raced at the prospect of battle, of a taste of the life she was not destined for, but that Haruka knew intimately she wanted to experience. “I’ll be sure to remember that.”

Suspended silence stretched between them, and Haruka laughed. She put a hand on Mito’s shoulder, a friendly gesture, Mito liked to think. “I’m sure you will.”

Haruka left to rejoin her clan mates, and Mito was left to watch from her proverbial tower, smiling for true.

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Three days of travel by boat and by foot and Madara had not seen Mito once. He didn’t seek her out, of course, why would he? But when he passed by the small Uzumaki garrison’s camp at night, he would keep an eye out for a shock of red. This proved fruitless considering almost all Uzumaki had red hair. It was a fool’s errand, besides. There was nothing to discuss with her. Haruka was the liaison with the Uzumaki, not him. This did not stop him from detouring as he went to meet with his lord father and the Uchiha military leaders in the off-chance that he might catch a glimpse of her.

“Looking for something?”

Madara tensed and put a hand on the chokutō at his hip out of habit, but relaxed at the sound of that voice.

“Haruka.”

She watched him with her usual aloof boredom. Outside of Izuna and Tajima, Madara could count her as someone he had come to trust with his life. She’d been the first and last of her siblings to treat him with genuine kindness upon Tajima’s adoption. She’d taught him how to sit up straight, hold his silverware, and read between the lines during her father’s council meetings. She had taught him how to be an heir when she, for fault of her gender, could never be.

Haruka was a sister to him, a mother figure, and his betrothed. In a world where titles meant everything, Madara had never cared for them with her, nor she with him. She was simply someone he could stand to keep close without the edge of a sword between them. While Madara had no interest in marriage, he understood the formality of the process and, especially, its importance for him, of all people. Better Haruka than one of her younger sisters, none of whom even bothered looking at Madara if they could help it.

She smirked. “Careful now, I might be jealous.”

Madara glared at her. “You would sooner bed a sword than a man.”
She laughed. “You know me so well. But just think of what they would say. ‘Princess weds her own katana.’ The scandal I would cause.”

“They’d say you’re compensating for something.”

“Yes, you.”

Haruka put a hand on Madara’s shoulder. They were about the same height, which reminded Madara of how young he still was. Haruka had seen more battles than he had, and she wore the Uchiha fan proudly. It was no wonder their father had put her in charge of her own squadron and trusted her military expertise as much as he trusted that of his seasoned generals.

“Anyway, Father wants to speak with us and Izuna. I’m off to find Izuna now. Have you seen him?”

Madara shook his head.

“Well, make yourself useful and help me look. You know how Izuna likes to steal off by himself, the little fox.”

“I know.”

“Good.” Haruka let her hand fall and walked past Madara. “By the way, she’s on the east side of the camp training.”

Madara looked back at Haruka over his shoulder. “I’m not looking for her.”

Haruka had already skipped away and didn’t hear him. Madara frowned and stuffed his hands in the pockets of his gi and he stalked off. Haruka was odd when she wasn’t fighting. Madara was well aware of her disdain for the institution of marriage as it related to a princess, forced into wedlock without any other recourse in life. Madara didn’t see the big deal. Marriage was a contract, a natural part of life even if he didn’t care for it himself. It wasn’t the end of the world, as Haruka would opine sometimes in private. Women’s troubles, he supposed.

Without realizing it, Madara’s feet had taken him to the eastern edge of the camp. The sun was setting and the first campfires crackled to life behind him as Uchiha and Uzumaki soldiers prepared their evening meals. Tomorrow, they would arrive at Lord Kenshin’s stronghold, receive their orders, and finally head into battle. Madara was eager to flex his sword arm against an enemy other than the Senju. Before he could dwell on that thought, the sounds of battle drew his attention to a thin forest marking the edge of camp.

The closer he got, the better he could hear. Someone was slicing through wood and beating the ground, stepping lightly. Curious, Madara approached through the trees. Mito was alone in a hollowed out clearing among the trees, and she was spinning. Madara halted his approach and activated the Sharingan to better see her in the encroaching darkness among the leafy trees.

She wore boiled leather and whalebone armor over light blue training gi. Three crude sparring puppets stood at equidistant locations, and she was twirling in front of the centermost one. He’d never seen anyone move like that before, like ribbons in the wind. Her red hair spun with her in a long ponytail, a trail of blood, as she hit the puppet with her tantō and open palm in succession. Breaking out of his reverie, he stepped forward and made his presence known.

Mito slowed her movements and slumped a bit, panting. But when she saw that her visitor was Madara, she lit up and smiled.
“Madara,” she said, pushing sweaty bangs out of her eyes. “What a pleasant surprise.”

“Princess,” he said, looking her over.

She’d exerted herself, perhaps having trained for a couple of hours. Her cheeks were prettily flushed with exertion, and he could almost see her blood pumping with his Sharingan, the little bursts along her exposed skin.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

Mito gestured at the puppet she’d been assaulting. “Training. I couldn’t just sit still and wait for tomorrow.”

“I’ve never seen anyone train like that.”

“Oh, right, I suppose you wouldn’t have. That was a special type of kata native to the Uzumaki. We don’t teach it to outsiders, so that’s probably why you’re unfamiliar with it.”

“How does it fare in battle?”

“Well, I suppose. Most opponents aren’t used to it, though I can’t speak from personal experience much.”

Madara circled the small clearing, and Mito followed him with her eyes. “From what I could see, that style leaves you open to attack from a skilled swordsman. All that spinning should make you dizzy.”

Mito smirked, and Madara stopped. He remembered that look from when they were younger and she’d surprised him by sealing his father’s tantō in a seashell.

“Whirlpool kata mimics the whirlpools that surround our village. From a distance, they look like they can’t do much just spinning. But if you get too close, you’re sucked in. Once it pulls you under, there’s no coming back.”

Madara wasn’t sure he bought that, but he was intrigued enough to hear her out. “Show me.”

“Really?”

Madara assumed a defensive position, one palm out and facing Mito. “Really.”

Mito sheathed her tantō and crouched low, lower than a soldier with any desire to defend herself ought to. Madara said nothing, more interested in watching her discover her own weaknesses than pointing them out himself.

“Okay,” she said. “Here I come, then.”

She whirled, and Madara moved to block. With the Sharingan, he could be superhuman, predict his opponents’ moves before they could deliver them. In a way, he could see the future and divert its course. How frustrating—how fitting that he could not do it with Mito now.

He saw her duck and he jumped, anticipating that her extended leg would knock him in the ankles to throw him off balance. Instead, she sprang back on a hand and swung her leg up in a swift arc, hitting him square in the chest and knocking him backward. She left her midsection open to attack, and with her ankle in his grasp he saw an easy opening. Too easy. Mito never broke her fluidity and let him pull her ankle to the side. With her other hand, she pushed off the ground and flew
toward the sky. Doubled over, she twisted away from Madara’s searching hand and grabbed his 
wrist. Connected at two appendages, she used her momentum and his weight to soar over his head 
and toward the ground, rolling when she landed.

Madara picked up on her movements just as she executed them and rolled with her, forced to 
release her ankle in the process. Mito was on her feet just as quickly and spinning toward him. 
Madara feigned to the left and avoided an open-palmed strike that would have hit him in the chest. 
The look of surprise in her eyes was enough to take advantage of the moment, and he grabbed her 
arm and pulled.

It was his mistake.

Like water, she moved with him and around him, enveloped him. Instead of blocking like any 
trained shinobi should have, she let him strike her shoulder and fell back with the blow. Her free 
hand grabbed onto his shoulder, and she kicked her legs off the ground, up and over his head. 
Before Madara had a chance to extricate himself, she flipped him over and he landed hard on his 
back, the wind knocked out of him. Mito’s arm was stuck underneath his shoulder blade, but her 
free hand had found his heart and lay flat against it. He couldn’t even move his legs to roll over 
with hers pinning them down.

Seconds passed and their breathing mingled. Madara’s Sharingan faded to black, and he stared up 
at Mito panting over him. Her grey-green eyes were bright with adrenaline and firelight from the 
torches illuminating the training area. As he recovered, he felt her weight leaning into him, the 
warmth of her palm through his gi, the tickle of her blood-red hair against his neck.

“Oh,” Mito said, remembering herself. She scrambled off him and stood up straight, rubbing the 
arm that had landed under Madara and probably ached smartly.

Madara picked himself up and dusted off his pants. “Oh,” he repeated.

Mito blushed and wrung her hands. “I’m sorry. I got carried away.”

“Don’t apologize for knocking me down,” Madara said. “It was just unexpected.”

She stopped wringing her hands and met his eyes. Strange, he’d never seen her like this, self-
conscious. Afraid of his anger. He didn’t like the look on her.

“This isn’t court and I’m no sensitive prince. Don’t treat me like one.”

“I’ve never thought that,” Mito said, taken aback. She let her hands fall to her sides and composed 
herself. “Forgive me, I only meant that I shouldn’t have been so presumptuous with someone of 
your experience.”

Madara frowned, understanding. A part of him was disappointed in himself for thinking that Mito, 
of all people, would cling to titles. Her misplaced modesty irked him even more. What kind of 
training was she used to where hierarchy was more important than improvement? Even the Uchiha 
were free of the shackles of rank and station on the battlefield.

“It doesn’t matter. In war, no one cares if you were born a bastard or a noble. All that matters is the 
last man standing. Or woman.”

Mito nodded, and her shoulders relaxed a bit. “I’ll have to take your word for it.”

“What did you do?”
“What do you mean?”

“You tapped my chest here.” He put a hand over his heart. “Why?”

“Oh, that. It’s the reason we Uzumaki use the Whirlpool kata.”

She held out her palm for him to see and traced it with a finger. Dark patterns appeared on her skin, like shadows rising up from the depths of an ocean. A seal, branded to her body just beneath the skin.

“There’s a legend that says death takes the shape of the center of a whirlpool, where souls drain to the bottom of an endless sea. Once it drags them under, they can’t escape. When I get close enough to my opponent, I can strike him over the heart or some other vital area, like the back of the neck, and seal off his life force.”

“A one-hit kill,” Madara mused aloud.

He took Mito’s hand in his and traced the shimmering rune with his thumb. Death, in the palm of her small hand. But it was no lady’s hand. It was rough with callouses and small scars from years of training, knives, mistakes.

“Or paralysis. It doesn’t have to end in death,” she said.

Madara looked up and caught her gaze, wide-eyed and candid. “You’ve never killed a man before.”

She didn’t pull away, and he didn’t let her hand fall. “No,” she admitted. “Is it that obvious?”

“You will soon. This battle will be bloody. Better to kill than be killed.”

“I suppose.”

They lingered in silence a moment, her hand in his, content to just be here.

“What’s it like?” she asked softly.

She was close enough that he could smell her, sea salt and honey and sweat from their earlier tussle. He licked his lips and thought about her question.

“It’s like dying. You watch the light leave the other person’s eyes and see yourself in them, but you’re still breathing.”

“You’ve died many times,” she said.

“Only if I can see the look in their eyes.”

With her free hand, she traced his temple, just centimeters from his greatest weapon, reverent. He tightened his grip on her hand in warning, but she wasn’t deterred. Her touch was warm and tender, her gaze half-lidded and entranced.

“And how much can you see?”

Even without the Sharingan activated, she was so close that he could see the splash of freckles across her cheeks and nose and the dark red of her lashes, almost black under the glow of firelight and starlight. Her parted lips, chapped from lack of pampering while she traveled away from her lavish palace. The look in her eyes reflecting his, alight and alive, looking right at him and seeing,
the way she’d looked at him on the beach all those years ago. Like he was just enough as he was.

“I can see everything,” he said, leaning closer.

Her breath on his lips quickened as she leaned her weight into him the second time that night. Her kiss was timid at first, but her smile put him over the edge until they crashed together, fumbling, stumbling through the dark, inexperienced, curious, longing, exquisite, together. The feel of her hand slipping over his heart, a hand that could kill but wouldn’t kill him, for she’d never killed anyone and she wouldn’t start here, now, so close, too close, not close enough but there’s time, time for them where she’s not a princess and he’s not a soldier living in a dream—is that what it is? Just a dream?—but Madara would make his dreams a reality, and Mito wasn’t a dreamer at all, and she wasn’t a princess now, with him, with her, drowning, sinking toward dark, death, depths that pulled them under, deeper, away from the light, but they were together, and she was the water and he could see in the dark, so they would be okay as long as she didn’t move away, those unpracticed, chapped lips on his, sweet and searching and seeing—

Snap!

Madara tensed and pulled away from Mito, exhausted all over again for lack of air. He turned toward the sound wood splitting, Sharingan blazing as he squinted through the oily darkness and searched for a source. At his side, Mito recovered and peered around him.

“What is it?” she whispered.

Someone was here, he thought.

But even his gifted eyes couldn’t detect anyone around. Paranoia, perhaps, but that hyper awareness of his surroundings had saved Madara’s life more than once. He trusted his instincts, even if there was nothing to show for them now.

“Nothing, apparently,” he said, turning back to her.

Mito looked into his Sharingan eyes, the last sight many men and women had ever seen, thoughtful. He thought she’d be embarrassed, flustered after what had clearly been her first moment of intimacy with a man—a boy, you’re just a little boy—but she entertained a half smile.

“They’re beautiful,” she said. “I didn’t realize before, but they’re so beautiful.”

Such a naïve thing to say, the way Izuna used to say it. “Power is beautiful, but I doubt you would feel the same about the death that follows.”

“Maybe,” she said. “But maybe it’s worth it.”

There had been times when Madara had become curious about women. He and his year mates had made fools of themselves one night when Madara was fourteen. It had been Hikaku’s idea to pay a visit to the local brothel during a campaign in Grass Country. Madara had never been drunk and he’d never touched a woman before, and in the morning he wondered if it was even worth the trouble when he had a head-splitting hangover and double training sessions when Gendoru found out about the boys’ indecent midnight adventure. There was no excuse to slack on training, be it the comfort at the bottom of a drink or the pleasure of a woman’s touch, and Madara would be wise to take that lesson to heart to avoid another debauched training session like the one that morning.

He’d been curious about Mito in a way he’d never been curious about Haruka, but it was more than that. Magnetism, from the first time he’d seen her in Uzushiogakure after four years. Even as
children on the beach, something about her had stuck with him. Her candor, her passion, her
naïveté and his. The color red, like blood and death and the whole world as he saw it, day in, day
out. The way she spoke to him like she didn’t expect anything of him that he didn’t already expect
of himself. The way she’d known him before he was anything worth knowing, and she looked at
him the same. Curiosity was for children, and Madara and Mito had never really been children.

He traced her bottom lip with his thumb, tempted to kiss her again but preferring to let the moment
linger. “Maybe,” he said.

“M’lady? Are you there?”

The voice startled Madara and Mito, and they released each other.

“It’s one of my father’s soldiers. I should go,” Mito said, walking toward the edge of the clearing.
“I’m coming!”

Madara watched her leave, but she paused and looked back, smiling.

“Thank you for the spar. I won’t let you hit me the next time!” She ran off into the darkness
toward camp without waiting for his response.

Alone, Madara waited until she was far enough away to take his leave. Someone had been here
watching them, he was sure, but he didn’t know what to make of it. The Uchiha cared little about
carnal desires as long as they didn’t interfere with the mission at hand or the clan’s standing, but
Mito was the princess of the Uzumaki clan. Perhaps there could be consequences for her that he
couldn’t imagine.

His eye caught the damage she’d done to the centermost battle puppet, and he ran a hand over its
middle. Runes were burned into its wooden body, some still hot to the touch. Whatever the
consequences, if any, she could handle them, he was sure of it.

Madara walked to the edge of the clearing and, before leaving, executed a technique that snuffed
out the torches. Plunged into darkness, he made his way back to camp, unwavering even in the
dead of night.

Madara wasn’t the only one who could see in the dark.

Red eyes watched the young warrior retreat back to camp, suspicious but never quick enough to be
sure. As the heir to the Uchiha clan in name but not in blood left the training field and made his
way to their father’s tent, Tajitsu lingered in the shadows, his flawless genjutsu hiding him from
even the keenest eyes. Moon and starlight were all that was left to him, and they did little to
illuminate his aquiline nose and hooded eyes. He smacked his lips and bared his slightly crooked
teeth in a grin.

Tajima thought him an inept fool, a drunkard and a womanizer who cared little for the Uchiha
clan’s pride, but he was only half right. Tajitsu had not taken his father’s adoption of Madara and
Izuna well, though he hid it behind his usual façade of inebriated nonchalance. Underestimation
was his greatest weapon, more than his skill with genjutsu.

“Illusions will not win a war, boy,” Tajima had told him when Tajitsu came to him, overjoyed at
his discovered gift for the art.
“Not a war, perhaps,” Tajitsu said to himself as he dispelled the illusion even Madara’s potent eyes could not penetrate. “But politics is nothing but illusion. And I will take what’s mine.”

The Uzumaki princess was the perfect ace in the hole. It was no secret that Tajima ultimately sought an alliance with the small island clan, gifted with its strange powers unbeknownst to any other clan in the world, especially the Senju. There was power to be had with the Uzumaki, and Tajitsu aimed to acquire it in his father’s stead. To do so, he would not only have to take the princess for himself, but he would also have to disinherit Madara. Since a battle of swords would end poorly for Tajitsu, he would have to resort to other means to claim his rightful inheritance.

“I was always the son you needed, Father. Pity you could never see that.”

But another did.

He summoned a raven, a large bird and conspicuous, but not under the cover of night. To its foot he attached a small scroll with an encrypted message and sent the bird on its way. Saizō Kirigakure was not a man anyone ought to trust, Tajitsu least of all. But politics was not a game of trust, only one of convenient alliances and the ability to foresee when to burn those alliances to ashes. The Uchiha, above all else, were renowned for their ability to burn any who stood in their way. All in due time.

Good things come to those who plan.

Tajitsu retreated from the darkened training field, Sharingan lighting his path toward the camp.

Mito made her way back toward the Uzumaki section of camp with the soldier who had come to retrieve her, the only woman in the garrison besides Mito herself.

“Mara, do you know what it’s about?”

The soldier shook her head. “No m’lady, but the General wanted to speak with you.” She paused, hesitant. “If I may, perhaps it’s got something to do with tomorrow.”

Mito tucked her stray bangs behind her ear, wishing for the yellow hair clips she’d forgone in her hurry to get to the training field. “I suppose you’re right. It will be a big day for all of us, as well as our Uchiha brethren.”

“Yes, m’lady. Please know that you’re safe with us. Er, with me. I’ll gladly give my life for you.”

Mito stopped walking, and Mara slowed to a halt just ahead.

“M’lady? Is something the matter?”

“I don’t expect you to lay down your life for me, or for anyone else, for that matter,” Mito said, fists balled.

“I... Forgive me, m’lady. I meant no disrespect.”

Mara’s strawberry blonde hair was tied back in a severe bun, and she wore boiled leather and whalebone, identical to Mito’s armor. To the outside observer, there was little difference between the two women. Mito sighed.

“Listen to me, please. Not as your princess, but as your fellow clansman.” Mito approached Mara, a
soldier only a year her senior, no more than a girl who had maybe had her own first kiss not long ago. “On the battlefield, we’re equals. You and I fight together with the rest of our clan. Please don’t forget them to save me, or to save yourself. I beg you.”

Mara’s eyes were wide with with shock and speechlessness. She shifted her gaze to the ground, unsure what to say. “M’lady, I’m...”

Mito smiled and put a hand on her shoulder. “Please, call me Mito. I insist.”

Mara looked up at her princess, a woman who could order her execution on a whim if she felt like it, though of course Mito never would. Funny how some with power chose never to use it, to abuse it. Mara managed a small but genuine smile.

“Yes, m’la—I mean, Mito.”

Mito smiled brightly. “That’s better. See? It’s not so hard.”

“There are rules, m’la—er, Mito.”

Mito’s smile turned devious, and she leaned in close. “Not between us girls.”

Mara smiled again, showing her teeth, and Mito laughed. Mito took Mara’s hand and dragged her along, giggling all the way. Other Uzumaki soldiers stopped what they were doing to observe the two women, but none raised any complaints. Not against their princess, whom they adored for her compassionate and gentle nature.

The pair arrived at Satto’s private tent, and Mara hung back at the entrance.

“The general requested only you, um, Mito,” she said shyly.

“Thank you for the message. I can see myself out, so please don’t wait up on my account,” Mito said, entering.

Satto sat on the floor upon a fine tatami mat going over military tactical scrolls, perhaps in preparation for the battle on the horizon. He was always one to over-prepare. Mito smiled a little.

“General, you wanted to see me?” she said, taking a seat across from him.

“Oh, yes, there’s something that’s been on my mind that I wanted to share with you.”

Satto sighed. “You know, I’ve been working for your father since I was your age.” He paused, smiling, remembering. “The two of us got into so much trouble back then, mostly with women, wouldn’t you know it.”

Mito smiled with him. She liked when he talked of his past and her father’s younger days, back when Ensui wasn’t a lord, but just a kid, like her, eager to experience the world and all it had to
offer. It made him seem human, closer, and she treasured the memory of these conversations most when Ensui was at his most lord-like, when she was sure he couldn’t understand. He did. He’d been where his daughter was now.

“Your father was damn strong. He was always one of the best of our generation. I even told him once that he’d make a better general, and I’d be the better lord! Oh, that was a good old time.”

“You and Father have been such good friends for so long. We should all be so lucky to have such a friend,” Mito said.

Satto took a swig of his beer and slumped a bit. “Princess, tomorrow you’ll experience your first real battle. It won’t be like our sparring sessions or training with the soldiers, you know that, right?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Ah,” Satto grunted. “Well, you don’t, but you will. S’pose it’s inevitable, but at least it’s you.”

“I’m not sure what you mean.”

“I mean you’ve got something I haven’t scarce seen in all my years. You’ve got a talent, my lady.”

Mito felt her cheeks grow hot, and she took a deep sip of ale to banish it.

“Have you ever heard of chakra chains?” Satto said suddenly.

Mito set down her mug and gave Satto her full attention. “I’ve read about them in my books. They’re chains made of pure, condensed chakra. Conduits for seals. Only a few Uzumaki have ever been able to summon them.”

“Aye, that’s right. You know, they say the Uzumaki chakra chains can do the impossible. Miracles. Even seal death itself in a bottle to save for later.”

Mito shifted and hugged her knees to her chest. “If that’s true, I’m sure it’s just a fairytale. No one can stop death.”

Satto seemed to consider this. “Not stop it, aye, just divert it. Thwart it, perhaps. But not stop it.”

“Why are you telling me this?”

Satto sipped his drink and leaned forward over his crossed legs. “Because tomorrow’s a big day, and I don’t have the ability to divert death.”

Mito got a chill, but she stubbornly dismissed it. It was silly. “You speak as if you’ll die tomorrow.”

“Any day could be a man’s last. God knows I’ve lived a long and good life. I’ve no regrets.”

“General, I don’t want to talk about this anymore.”

Satto shook his head. “But you must. I’ve been looking for the right time to tell you this, and I figure now’s as good a time as any.”

“Tell me what?”

“My grandmother... She was the last living Uzumaki who could produce the chakra chains. She
taught me everything she knew, just as I’ve endeavored to teach you.”

Mito’s eyes softened. “She must have been an extraordinary person. I wish I could have met her.”

“Aye, and she you, I’m sure. She would’ve just loved you.”

“General, if you don’t mind my asking...what happened to her?”

“She died in war, way back when we still accepted mercenary work. Bloody times.”

“I’m sorry.”

“No, no, it’s nothing to be sorry about. She died a noble death.”

Mito clutched her half-empty mug to her knees, troubled. “Why are you telling me all this?”

“Because, I wanted you to know while I’m still here to tell you. My lady,” Satto set down his mug and took her hand in his, “you have the potential to do great things.”

“You keep saying that,” Mito said, frowning. “But I don’t understand what you mean.”

“I mean that I think you might be able to awaken the chakra chains. They come around once every generation or so. If anyone can access them, I believe you can.”

“But I haven’t learned how,” Mito protested. “You’ve never even spoken of them before.”

“The chakra chains aren’t something you learn; they’re something you just know.”

Mito’s eyes fell. “But I don’t know.”

Satto released her hand. “I asked my grandmother once how she did it, back when I was a boy much younger than you are now. I wanted to be able to use the chakra chains one day, like her.”

Mito looked up. “What did she say?”

Satto smiled warmly and tapped a finger over her heart. “She said, ‘Look inside.’”

Mito put a hand over her heart, confused. “I don’t understand.”

Satto leaned back and laughed. “Well, I never said it made any sense!”

Mito finished her drink and set down the mug, scowling. Riddles had never been her forte. She was better with rote memorization, formulas. Rules. “That’s not fair.”

“Oh, my lady Mito, life never is. That’s what makes it fun.”

Mito thought on Satto’s words, trying to figure them out, and he stood up.

“Anyway, you’d best get some rest. Tomorrow we meet with Lord Kenshin, and you can bet that your lord father will want a full report.”

Mito rose. “Yes, of course. Good night, General.”

“Goodnight, my lady.”

Mito left Satto’s tent and headed for her own, deep in thought. The enigma of the chakra chains was beyond her, a fable, and yet it had taken root in her heart. Such a power... It could be what she
needed to break free of her cage, if only she knew its secrets. Something to show her father she was more than a trophy to be bought and sold, a true warrior of the Uzumaki clan born to fight on the battlefield and in the council room. Without an answer, though, the chakra chains remained a thing of myth. It wasn’t good enough. And Mito was not so naïve as to lay her hopes on stories and myths.

Too tired to dwell on it any longer, Mito retired to her tent. Her final thoughts as she fell into a dreamless sleep were of Madara and the kiss they’d shared. She didn’t know where this path led, but for once in her life she was ready to run toward the unknown, confident in her ability to fight for—or against—whatever lay at the end.

When Madara arrived at his lord father’s tent, Izuna and Haruka were already present. Notably, Tajima’s other biological offspring were absent, including Tajitsu.

“Madara, have a seat,” Tajima said, indicating the place opposing him on the floor.

Madara sat down between Izuna and Haruka. He exchanged a glance with his brother, who gave him a blank look.

“I called you all here because there is something you should know. It concerns the origins of our great clan,” Tajima said.

Haruka shot Madara a significant look, and he knew she was thinking this was just another lecture about the importance of clan pride and responsibility. Anticipating a long lecture, she passed Madara a cup of wine and took a sip of her own. Izuna didn’t touch his, and Tajima’s was already half-empty. Madara became suspicious.

“How much do you know about our ancestry?” Tajima asked.

Izuna spoke first, having more of an interest in history than Madara ever had. “The noble Uchiha clan was founded a thousand years ago by the progenitor, Indra. He was a son of the Sage of Six Paths and gifted with a sight that could see beyond this world.”

“Very good, Izuna,” Tajima said. “Indra waged war with his younger brother, Ashura, the progenitor of the Senju clan. We continue Indra’s war to honor his legacy and his sacrifice.”

“Father, why the history lesson?” Haruka asked. “Is this about tomorrow’s battle? I was under the impression we wouldn’t be fighting the Senju, or their deceased ancestors.”

From anyone else, Tajima may have reprimanded the cheek. But Haruka was his favorite daughter, the apple of his eye, the princess and the warrior he’d never had in Tajitsu before Madara came along. “That’s right. Tomorrow’s battle is not a part of our blood feud with the Senju, and as such I expect nothing but excellence from all three of you.”

“Yes, Father,” all three children said in unison.

“But that’s not why I called you here,” Tajima said. “There is something I want to pass down to you all, as my father did for me. A part of history, and a taste of the future. You’re old enough now.”

Madara sipped his drink, now eager to hear more.
“The Sage of Six Paths recorded the history of his deeds upon a stone tablet in an encrypted code. He passed this tablet down to his eldest son, Indra, in hopes that it would be a lesson to his descendants.”

“What does it say, Father?” Izuna asked.

“That’s the thing. It requires a special doujutsu to decipher. Our Sharingan can read only small portions of the text, barely enough to glean much meaning from it. It’s said that the Sage of Six Paths possessed a doujutsu far more powerful than our own Sharingan: the Rinnegan. With it, one could read the tablet and interpret it as it was meant to be read.”

“What’s the use of a tablet no one can read?” Haruka asked, frowning.

“Just because we can’t read it now, doesn’t mean we won’t be able to someday,” Tajima said.

“Where is this tablet?” Madara asked, speaking for the first time since arriving in the tent.

“In a safe place,” Tajima said. “There is a shrine buried deep below the Naka River in the Fire Country. There, you will find the tablet. I don’t know if it will help you, any of you. But I believe we were given this knowledge for a reason. One day, someone worthy will develop a sight strong enough to see the tablet’s true meaning. Until then, you must keep the knowledge of its existence safe. Madara, Haruka.”

Tajima took Haruka’s hand since she was seated beside him.

“You will lead this clan when I am gone. Keep the tablet safe, and one day, pass on the knowledge of it to your children. It could be the key to defeating the Senju once and for all. It’s worth my life and more if it can bring us victory.”

“Yes, Father,” Haruka answered readily, fire in her eyes. If nothing else, Haruka was a true warrior and one who would proudly carry on her father’s legacy.

Madara nodded. “Of course, Father. It would be my honor.”

“Father,” Izuna said. “From what you could read of the tablet, what did it say?”

Tajima stared at the center of their small circle, his eyes faraway. “It’s difficult to say, but there was something... It speaks of a power beyond our Sharingan, one born of a strong heart in times of great strife. Those eyes can see beyond what you and I see now. They can hypnotize the present and foretell the future.”

Madara watched Tajima closely, thinking on his words. A greater doujutsu than the Sharingan was unheard of. There were stages of the Sharingan, and those with more experience awakened more tomoe, but there was no form beyond it. Either the tablet was a hoax, or it contained secrets no Uchiha living today was worthy of knowing.

Yet.

“Keep the tablet safe, my children,” Tajima said. “It’s the key to our future.”

“Yes, Father,” Madara said. Haruka and Izuna echoed him in turn.

Tajima chuckled. “You three... You’re my future. My legacy to the world. You carry a heavy burden upon your shoulders. Don’t underestimate it. Just because we won’t face the Senju tomorrow doesn’t mean you can let your guard down. Fight as though your lives depend on it, or...”
“You say that as if you mean to leave us,” Haruka said, smiling and patting her father on his shoulder, though her smile did not reach her ears.

“No, of course not,” Tajima said. “But you are my children. My heirs. Never forget your responsibility to this great clan. You are their leaders, they’re hope. Without you, they are lost.”

Madara breathed deeply and set his jaw. “I give you my word, Father,” he said. “I will protect the tablet and this clan with my life. I won’t lose, not to the Senju, not to anyone.”

Tajima nodded. “Ah, you better not, or I’ll be the laughing stock of the council. Adopting bastard boys... Well, you’re worth more than any son of mine, and that’s what matters.”

Madara said nothing to that, but a foreign heat tingled in his eyes. Izuna also remained silent. It was Haruka who resolved the moment for them, as she always did.

“Father, you’re not dead yet,” she said, smiling brightly. “No need to be so gloomy with us. We should be resting for the battle tomorrow.”

“Ah, right. My daughter, you are always right,” Tajima said, standing.

His children stood with him and bowed to excuse themselves. Madara was the last one out following Izuna, but Tajima called him back.

“Just a moment, Madara.”

Madara hung back and signaled to Izuna to wait for him outside. He approached his lord father, expression schooled.

“You will lead this clan when I’m dead,” Tajima said. “I bet you didn’t think that when you were just a boy living with your harlot mother, did you?”

Madara tried to ignore the slight against his birth mother and shoved his hands in his pockets to hide his clenched fists. “No, sir.”

“Don’t look at me like that. I’m just stating the truth. She was a harlot, and your father was a lowborn soldier. There’s no shame in that now that you’ve proven yourself. I imagine they would be proud of where you are now.”

Madara relaxed a little, but something still stung in the back of his throat.

“Listen to me, boy,” Tajima put a hand on Madara’s shoulder. He wasn’t much taller than Madara now, and the similarity in height gave Madara the confidence to meet his adoptive father’s eyes. “You’ve got something. Something I’ve never seen before. I didn’t want to admit it at first, but I can’t deny it anymore. One day, you’ll be stronger than all of us, stronger than me. You’ll lead this clan, and it’ll be your decision where to take them.”

Madara was taken aback at the honest admission. Gendoru had told him on several occasions that he had a gift, something that set him apart even from his younger brother. But to hear it from Tajima was something else. A revelation. The recognition Madara had sought all his life.

“I know you’ll find the means to decipher the tablet, somehow. And when you do, I want you to promise me something.”
“Anything, Father.”

Tajima squeezed Madara’s shoulder in a gesture of affection. “Promise me you’ll use that knowledge to destroy the Senju.”

Madara’s eyes widened in shock. It was nothing new, nothing out of the ordinary. He’d spent years of his life clashing with the Senju, killing their ranks, grieving over his own men who’d fallen under the Senju’s swords.

“We’ll become the strongest shinobi and make our dream come true!”

Hashirama’s words returned to him then. They had clashed time and time again on the battlefield since that day, and each time was bloodier than the last. Still, neither of them had ended up dead, and both managed to bring new tricks to the fight to surprise the other. Madara would expect no less from Hashirama.

“I know you feel a connection with Hashirama,” Tajima said. “I felt it with his father before him. But it’s just the bloodlust. You won’t be at peace until he’s dead, believe me.”

“We’ll do it together. Promise me.”

“Promise me, Madara, that you’ll keep this clan safe from the Senju’s terrorism. Promise me you’ll defeat Hashirama. That you’ll end this.”

Madara’s throat clenched and it became hard to breathe. Hashirama’s smile, the bond of friendship they’d forged had stayed with him through the clang of steel and the heat of his fire. Was it possible to protect Hashirama’s dream and destroy him at the same time?

“Madara?” Tajima said.

Was it possible to choose between his father and his friend? Between his future and his past? Madara’s eyes were gifted, but even they could not see an answer to this problem. They weren’t strong enough. They couldn’t see far enough. He was still just a boy. Silly little boy with the pride of a nation on his shoulders.

“You’ll survive, my sons, because you’re strong. Together, you’re invincible.”

But Madara wasn’t alone shouldering his burden. He had Izuna. Together, they could conquer both the past and the future. Together, they were invincible, just as Shiori had said.

“I promise,” Madara said.

Tajima let his hand fall from Madara’s shoulder and smiled. “Good. Now, get some rest. You have a big day tomorrow.”

“Yes, Father.”

He exited the tent, mind blank, and walked.

“Madara,” Izuna said, jogging toward him. “What did Father want?”

Madara looked down at his brother, suddenly feeling tired. “Nothing important.”

Izuna narrowed his eyes. “You’re hiding something.”

Madara sighed. “It was nothing you need to worry about. He’s just concerned about the future.”
The brothers made their way toward their shared tent not far from Tajima’s. The other soldiers had turned in for the night save for the sentries. Torches and campfires burned, the only source of light aside from the wan light of the stars overhead.

“He shouldn’t worry about the future,” Izuna said as they entered their tent together. “He has you for that.”

Izuna settled into his sleeping bag for the night, and Madara did the same.

“No, he has us,” Madara corrected him. “You and I are one.”

“Yes, Brother. Now and forever.”

Izuna fell asleep quickly, as he always did, but Madara remained awake. His thoughts fluctuated, turbulent like an ocean storm. He thought of Mito and the turn in their relationship. It probably meant little, but he raised a hand to his lips, remembering her there if only for a few fleeting minutes, and how he’d wanted to drag it out. He thought of Haruka and Tajima, his adoptive family and their expectations of him, of a future he would usher in for the Uchiha clan. And he thought of Izuna, the one person with whom he could imagine forging that future. The one person without whom there would be no future.

Together.

Shiori had been right. Together they were invincible. Maybe Madara could do it. Maybe he could lead the Uchiha clan to glory and still achieve the dream he and Hashirama had conceived of so many years ago. A dream that included Mito, and Izuna, and all the children of the world who would never have to live Madara’s life.

He fell asleep that night dreaming of such a utopia, a place among spring’s first green leaves where he could have it all, a place of beauty and peace. He’d never slept so soundly in all his life, and he never would again.
‘Stronghold’ was putting it lightly, Mito thought as she entered feudal lord Kenshin Uesugi’s greystone castle under thick banners of scarlet and gold. It was larger than her father’s keep back in Uzushiogakure, larger even than the old feudal palace on the islands. She remembered being there as a girl and meeting the then-feudal lord, Harukage Nagao, Kenshin’s older brother. Once, Harukage had been a great samurai warrior and had claimed the Whirlpool Country as part of his family’s territory in Fire Country. Later in life, when the sword became too heavy for his aging hands to wield, he’d grown fat with a weakness for wine and women. Mito had known only the older version of Harukage, and she could not say she was sorry to hear that Kenshin had wrested control of the family’s assets from Harukage and even shed the family name entirely, choosing instead to take the Uesugi name. Harukage’s fate was uncertain, though Mito had heard whispers of his forced suicide by hara-kiri. It was all part of the game, the strong devouring the weak, and Harukage had lost it either way. She didn’t dwell on it.

Kenshin’s guards led Mito, Satto, Tajima, Haruka, Madara, and Izuna, along with a small group of Uzumaki and Uchiha soldiers, into the castle’s inner keep where Kenshin would receive them. Mito still wore her battle uniform under a linen robe, but she tied her hair back in a bun to keep it out of her face. It wouldn’t conceal the fact that she was a woman, but long hair had a way of putting off noblemen to any kind of talk that didn’t involve pillows. Mito wasn’t taking any chances.

The keep was plain for a castle as splendid as this one. From the sight of soldiers and civilian workers buzzing about the place rearranging furniture and carrying food, scrolls, and all manner of strange samurai weapons, Mito would have guessed Kenshin was supervising spring cleaning.

She dared not look at Madara since the group had arrived at Kenshin’s castle in northeastern Fire Country, although this proved harder than she’d imagined. It was easy to slip back into her court persona, but Madara’s presence somewhere to her right was like a physical weight. Perhaps he was looking at her, but she didn’t turn around to check. Today was bigger than either of them, and she did not want to screw this up after her father had agreed to make her his representative.

“My lord,” the guide said, stopping abruptly. “Your guests have arrived.”

Mito looked around at the group of men and women bustling about. Some were crouched over a wide, wooden table and studying written plans of some kind. None of them paid the guide any mind.

“Lord Kenshin?” Tajima said, stepping forward.

“Shh! I’m in the middle of something, damnit.”

The man who’d spoken was hunched over the plans with charcoal chalk in hand, his fingers blackened from furious scribbling. He muttered something to the man next to him and made some changes to the plans, scribbling here and there. This went on for several minutes, and Mito could hear whispers among her entourage. She spared them a severe glance over her shoulder, and the soldiers, both Uzumaki and Uchiha, ceased their gossipping.

“Blasted idiots. It doesn’t make any sense, can’t you see that?” Kenshin said, throwing down his chalk. It broke in two and left a black mark on the paper.
“But sir, we’re trying to—”

“Oh, shut up. I had to call in the goddamned shinobi because of your incompetence. Now get out of my sight.”

The samurai advisor frowned but held his tongue. Bowing, he excused himself with a muttered ‘yes, my lord’, and barked orders at his underlings to move out.

“Now then, who the hell are you?” Kenshin asked, looking the shinobi over.

Tajima spoke first. “Tajima Uchiha, my lord. My sons, Madara and Izuna, and my daughter, Haruka.”

Kenshin looked Tajima up and down, a scowl on his face. “Hmph. Didn’t expect you to come here yourself. How much am I paying you, again?”

“Enough,” Tajima said with a smirk.

Kenshin grunted. “Well, at least I know I’ll get my money’s worth. I’ve heard awful things about the Uchiha.”

“I’m pleased to hear it.”

Kenshin turned to the Uzumaki next, and his eyes fell upon Satto. “General, where is Lord Ensui?”

Satto bowed. “My lord sends his regrets, but he could not leave Uzushiogakure unattended.”

“So he sends you instead? I don’t know what kind of deal you had with that fat oaf, but you work for me now.”

Satto righted himself and smiled pleasantly. “No, my lord, not me. I’m not versed in issues of politics. He sends his daughter, Mito, as his representative.”

Kenshin finally turned to Mito, who stood next to Satto. She held her head high as he peered at her, giving her a good look. He was a tall man, muscular under the red samurai armor he wore. His hair was black as night, unkempt and long everywhere it grew, and the wrinkles around his eyes suggested a man constantly irritated. No surprise there given how he’d dismissed one of his samurai moments ago.

“You must be joking,” Kenshin said. “I don’t know how you shinobi do things, but we samurai don’t send a woman to do a man’s job.”

Here we go, Mito thought to herself. She took a deep breath.

“Lord Kenshin, my father sends not only his deepest condolences, but also an elite team of Uzumaki shinobi per the contract he signed with your late brother.”

“...My god, you’re serious,” Kenshin said, too incredulous to be offended.

Mito retrieved a scroll from her sleeve and unfolded it on the nearby table over Kenshin’s plans. Perhaps because he was curious (more likely because he wasn’t used to being brushed aside by a woman), Kenshin followed Mito to the table and peered at the unrolled document.

“This is a copy of the contract my father signed with your brother. The feudal lord may call upon the Uzumaki clan during a time of conflict for military, tactical, and political assistance. According to the terms, our military forces will cooperate with yours, but they will be under Uzumaki
command at all times. Lord Kenshin.”

Kenshin stared down at Mito with a menacing scowl on his face and waited. Mito continued without letting his intimidation tactic faze her.

“My father has vested in me the power to assess whether this conflict will end in a victory beneficial to the Uzumaki clan. Nowhere in our contract are we required to aid you in a suicide mission. I’m happy to send General Satto to meet with your samurai commanders to start formulating a plan of attack, but before that happens, I’ll need to know exactly what the situation is and what kind of enemy we’re up against. Then, in my judgment, I’ll determine how the Uzumaki clan will be best fit to aid you.”

“Young lady, do you have any idea who the hell you’re talking to?” Kenshin said, slamming a hand on the table over the contract. “I am not my brother. You work for me, not him.”

“My lord, with all due respect, we are bound by the terms of this contract. If you would like to renegotiate them, then I would be happy to inform my lord father and set up a meeting. But first, you have a rebellion to quell and inadequate forces to do it. I suspect the problem is much more than a civilian uprising, and yet this is the first I’m hearing of it. Why else would you have called us and the Uchiha clan here?”

“Lord Kenshin, I don’t mean to interrupt, but I came here to exercise my sword, not my patience,” Tajima said. “Perhaps we could move this along?”

Kenshin glared at Mito, ignoring Tajima, and Mito held his gaze. They called him the God of War, an avatar of a true deity sent to earth to change the tide of war as the world knew it. Kenshin was renowned all over the continent by his allies and enemies alike. But in a world where magic was real and the magicians, long operating in the shadows, were finally coming to light and working together, the age of the samurai was facing a new kind of warfare in which even their sharpest blades could not claim victory unaided. Kenshin’s enemies here were probably shinobi, and the only way to beat them was by fighting fire with fire. Mito knew it. Kenshin knew it. Tajima knew it. The only question was whether Kenshin’s pride as a samurai, as a man, and as a god who would find no worshippers among his hired shinobi mercenaries knew it.

Kenshin leaned in close to Mito’s face, and she could smell incense and tobacco on him. She kept her face straight, for once thanking her strict court tutors and their insistence on perfection.

“For your sake, I hope you lot are as good as you claim to be. All right, come with me. I don’t like talking strategy in front of incompetent fools,” he spat at the samurai tacticians that had failed him thus far.

Kenshin turned away and barked orders at some of the retainers running around. Tajima followed the man to a door near the back of the room. Mito gathered up the contract and returned it to its place up her sleeve. Only then did she take a moment to release the breath she’d been holding.

“You did well, my lady,” Satto whispered. “Kenshin is known for his rudeness. The important thing is that he respects your position now.”

“That remains to be seen,” Mito said. “But thank you for the vote of confidence, General.”

Satto smiled and signaled his soldiers to follow. Nearby, Mito caught Izuna’s eye. So much like Madara, and yet none of the weight his brother’s presence evoked. When he nodded, Mito was surprised at the acknowledgment, and it showed. Izuna turned away, hiding a smile, and walked after his father. Madara followed with Haruka, who winked as she passed. Mito fell into step with
“He’s not familiar with the ways of shinobi,” Madara said to Mito as they followed the rest of the group.

“No, but he will be,” she said, eyes ahead.

Madara smirked and brushed his hand against hers, which Mito tried to pretend didn’t affect her as they emerged into a much smaller room adjacent to the keep. A round table sat in the center, and Kenshin had taken a seat on the opposite side. Mito parted ways with Madara and took a seat next to Satto. When everyone was settled in, Kenshin stood up.

“All right, we’ll do things your way for now, but I warn you all: I don’t entertain fools at my table.”

“Lord Kenshin, where are your generals?” Satto asked.

“You’re looking at him. What kind of man would I be if I couldn’t defend my own territory? Now, everyone shut up and listen, because I’m only going to explain this once.”

Kenshin unrolled a map of his territory across the table and began to explain the problem. What had begun as a series of small civilian uprisings had escalated into full-on guerilla warfare the likes of which his samurai, trained in the etiquette of organized warfare, were unprepared to handle on such a large scale. Kenshin suspected involvement from rival feudal lords, his prime candidates being Wind Country’s Shingen Takeda and Water Country’s Yukimura Sanada, but the perpetrators had been careful thus far not to reveal their true identities. The next thing he knew, Kenshin’s governors stationed around the Fire Country were dropping like flies, victims of assassination.

“Damn shadow games. This isn’t war, it’s a coward’s errand,” Kenshin said.

“It’s important that we determine who the enemy is and attack the source. The uprisings are happening all over the Fire Country, and there’s no way our forces or yours can spread so thin and still make a difference,” Tajima said as he studied the map. “What can you tell us about Takeda and Sanada? Is it possible they’re working together?”

Kenshin grunted. “Not on your life. It’s every man for himself in this game. No, they’ve got too much bad blood between them to work together.”

“Perhaps against a common enemy?” Satto said.

“Takeda doesn’t have a contract with any shinobi. It’s against his principles to hire mercenaries. His men are born and bred to be loyal.”

“Then Sanada,” Tajima said. “He’s no stranger to mercenary work. He organized the Ten Heroes some years ago, but they’ve disbanded. Their former leader allied with the Senju clan.”

“Don’t bring your family shit into my house, Uchiha,” Kenshin snapped. “I know you and the Senju got it bad each other, but this is samurai business.”

“There’s no indication of involvement by the Senju clan,” Mito interjected before this discussion became truculent. “What happened to the rest of the Ten Heroes? Did any of them remain with Sanada? Perhaps they’ve organized their own shinobi forces.”

“That I don’t know,” Kenshin said, thoughtful. “But that snake Sanada gets hard at just the thought
of things like shadow magic. We’ve clashed before, but nothing like this. I don’t like it. It feels like
this is all misdirection while he prepares for the finale.”

“There’s nothing magical about shinobi. We are men, no different from you. And men make
mistakes. Perhaps you just haven’t been reading the signs carefully enough,” Tajima said.

Madara stood up suddenly and took the room by surprise. He hadn’t spoken at all, and Mito had to
wonder what he thought about all this. His eyes roved over the map and the marked locations of
past or current rebellions.

“It’s not about where the enemy’s coming from,” he said, tracing the map with his fingers. “It’s
about where he’s going.”

No one spoke as Madara’s cryptic words hung in the air, but Mito was most interested in hearing
what he had to say. A box on a stand behind Kenshin held charcoal chalk, and she got up from her
chair to retrieve it. She handed a piece to Madara across the table, and he accepted it without a
word.

“What are you seeing?” Tajima asked.

Madara didn’t answer; he drew.

“The formations,” Izuna said, standing up and leaning over the map next to his brother. “They’re
not meant to scatter.”

Tajima chuckled and shook his head. “I’ll be damned.”

Mito followed Madara’s lines, searching the puzzle for an answer she could not see but that was so
clear to him. To her, the lines were random, nonsensical, but not to Madara. Satto gasped.

“Not scatter,” he said, understanding. “Converge.”

“Where will they converge?” Mito asked.

Madara drew circles around a point on the map by the coast. Cut off by the sea behind and a
stampede of fleeing civilians, soldiers, and undercover shinobi driving the flock, there was
nowhere to run. Mito swallowed hard as she finally saw the big picture.

“Here,” Madara said. He looked up at Kenshin. “They’re converging here.”

Kenshin’s eyes roved the map and Madara’s crude lines. Mito saw the light in his eyes change.
He’d been so focused on the smaller rebellions, suspecting a bigger picture but never quite seeing
it. Shinobi moved in different circles than samurai, and he’d played into that stereotype just as the
enemy had hoped he would. The warlord knocked his chair over and swore.

“Lord Kenshin,” Mito said, wanting to nip another argument in the bud before it could manifest.
“May I suggest an immediate counter-strike before the guerilla forces reach here?”

“My samurai are spread out across the country. Some are days away on horseback,” Kenshin said
more to himself than to the room. “Damn it all to hell.”

“My forces are here,” Tajima said. “You have the might of the Uchiha clan ready to fight at a
moment’s notice.”

“Aye, the Uzumaki, too. We’re not many, but we’re worth our salt,” Satto said.
“This was supposed to be a planned counterattack, not a last-minute scramble to the finish line against an enemy I can’t even see,” Kenshin said.

“You can’t see them, but we can,” Madara said. “It’s why you called us in, isn’t it?”

Kenshin was silent a moment, thinking. Mito was ready to take charge of the situation when he finally broke out of whatever train of thought had whisked him away.

“I’ve got a hundred men here. I’ll send messenger hawks for the rest scattered around the country. With any luck, the closest ones’ll make it back in a day’s time. You!” Kenshin shouted at one of his guards stationed at the door. “We’re marching in an hour. Tell the others.”

“Yes, sir!” The guard exited the room to do his master’s bidding.

“General, I think it would be best if you met with Lord Kenshin’s samurai troops. If we’re going to outwit an enemy whose identity we don’t know, we’ll have to work together,” Mito whispered to Satto.

“I was thinking the same thing. I’ll get right on it, my lady.”

“Where is my sword? Get me my sword! Damn shinobi. They think they can take Kenshin Uesugi by surprise? Not today!” Kenshin marched out of the room swearing under his breath. “Oi, Uchiha! And, er, you, woman! Get out here!”

Mito exchanged a look with Madara across the table.

“Madara, you go. I want you to lead this campaign,” Tajima said.

“Father,” Madara said, shocked.

“Remember what I told you last night. Now go. General Satto and I will meet with Kenshin’s samurai.”

Mito followed Kenshin back out to the keep, and Madara jogged after her. “This is it,” she whispered to him.

“Yeah,” he said. “Are you ready?”

Mito flashed him a smirk. “I better be.”

It was nearly done.

Saizō ran a finger over Shukaku’s scale and admired the swirling sand patterns it made, like magic. Months of planning would finally pay off. Finally, he would see a power reserved for fables and nightmares, and he would take it for himself.

“Kirigakure.”

Saizō set down the scale on his desk and looked up at his visitor. “Anayama. What is it?”

“Raven came for you,” Kosuke said, walking further into Saizō’s tent with a bird perched upon his meaty arm. “Think it’s from that Uchiha.”
“Ah, just what I’d been waiting for.”

Saizō rose and unclipped the message from the raven’s foot. It was short and encrypted, but Saizō recognized the code. He read it through twice before holding it over the kerosene lantern on his desk and letting it burn.

“Anythin’ important?” Kosuke asked.

“Oh yes, very important.” Saizō watched the parchment crumple and blacken under the heat of the small flame. “Anayama, inform Lord Sanada that we strike tonight.”

“Tonight? So soon?”

“Of course. Shinobi are warriors who lurk in the shadows. Those samurai won’t even see us coming.”

“I hear they called in some help.”

“I’m well aware. But I’ve called in some help, too.”

“Hey, Kirigakure. You think this’ll really work? Think it’ll lure out that monster?”

Saizō smiled at his partner. The light of the kerosene lamp offered little light, and half of his pale face was cast in shadows. Even though Kosuke was almost twice Saizō’s size, the sight made him shiver just a little, knowing all too well what could be lurking in those murky depths where no light could reach.

“Slaughter enough lambs, and the wolf will come running.”

Uzushiogakure was heaven on earth as far as Hashirama was concerned. A part of him was sure fairies had built the place, so in tune with nature as it was. The clan leader, Ensui Uzumaki, had welcomed Hashirama and his entourage warmly, and they wanted for nothing. Even Tobirama had taken to the place, eager to learn of the clan’s history and current status as suzerain nation-state. Ensui had provided Hashirama and his highest officers with their own quarters complete with on-hand staff to see to their needs. Sasuke seemed to have taken a liking to his, a pretty native islander named Lena.

When Hashirama mentioned this to Ensui as they walked together under a natural Ginkgo tree tunnel, Ensui laughed.

“I can’t say I blame him. Lena is a treasure. She normally assists my daughter, Mito, but she agreed to help out with your party while Mito is away.”

“You have a daughter?”

“Yes, my pride and joy. She’s young, but she’s got a good heart and an even better head. Pity she wasn’t born male. She could have been an excellent leader.”

Hashirama thought that an odd thing to say. Tōka was a rather excellent squadron leader and one of many sources of sage wisdom to Hashirama, and she was a woman, too. But he could understand a man’s desire for a male heir. “Well, Inari is young, but I’m sure he’ll make a great and just leader one day.”
“Ah, my nephew. Yes, he’s just a lad, but he’ll grow. Children always do.”

There was something about this place that soothed Hashirama’s nerves, nerves he didn’t want to burden Tobirama or anyone else with. Maybe it was the fresh air, no traces of blood or rot anywhere, the sound of breaking waves against the rocky shores. The whirlpools in the distance, peaceful death traps only more alluring when viewed from afar. Ensui was a good man, Hashirama could tell, but he was also a cautious one. The older generation usually was, just like Hashirama’s father before him.

“I confess that I came here under pretense,” Hashirama said. Diplomacy, in all honesty, was not his forte, and he found that honesty served him well enough. He’d never been the savvy political type, preferring to look out for his own instead of parlaying with foreign leaders. But he had to try, or Tobirama would berate him endlessly.

“I gathered as much,” Ensui said, grinning.

Hashirama stared at the older man. “You knew?”

“I’m an old man. When you’ve lived as long as I have, you tend to see through the frills. It’s all right, I knew this was coming eventually. Frankly, I’m surprised you waited this long.”

A little bummed, Hashirama tried to gather his thoughts. Sincerity had always been his sharpest blade, and it had won over even the most skeptical men, like Sasuke. Something told him that Ensui, however, had an agenda all his own that might be difficult to mitigate.

“Then you know I want your oath,” Hashirama said.

“And you know I have to respectfully decline that generous offer.”

Hashirama slowed to a stop. A man-made break in the Ginkgo tree tunnel cut a view to the ocean beyond a wooden balcony, probably a popular spot for young lovers to admire the view at night.

“Lord Ensui—”

“Please, just Ensui. My counselors aren’t here to watch us.”

Hashirama nodded. “Ensui. The Senju and Uzumaki are connected by blood. We were originally one clan with one name. I understand why the Uzumaki and so many others branched off, and I can see the fruits of your labors. This place... It’s really something.”

“It’s a legacy I plan to leave to the next generation,” Ensui said, the pride evident in his tone. “Here, we can practice our trade without involving ourselves in the affairs of the mainland.”

“But that’s just the problem. The mainland’s problems extend beyond the coastline. You’ll get dragged into it eventually, so cut your losses and join me. You can maintain your way of life and still ensure the next generation’s legacy by eliminating the conflicts of today.”

Ensui sighed. “I understand your position, Hashirama, I truly do. But I cannot send my people to their deaths fighting a war with no end. It’s nonsensical, no better than ritual suicide.”

Hashirama ran a hand through his long hair, frustrated but unwilling to give up. “The Uchiha won’t be a problem forever.”

“Oh, really? And how do you figure that? They’ve been a problem for you for the last 1,000 years, and nothing’s changed. My ancestors split from the Senju for a reason, and I won’t be the one to
question their judgment.”

“We’re part of the problem,” Hashirama said more harshly than he’d meant to. “There’s blood on both our hands. That kind of wrong isn’t easy to forgive, even after 1,000 years.”

Ensui stiffened, but Hashirama held his ground.

“Unfortunately, it’s not something I can forgive today. I’m sorry, Hashirama, but the Uzumaki will remain a neutral party. I have no quarrel with the Uchiha, and I’m not keen to find one. If you want to discuss other items of business, then I would be more than happy to oblige you. But I won’t entertain any further talk of an alliance.”

Ensui began to walk back toward the Uzumaki palace, and Hashirama watched him go. The man was stubborn and set in his ways. Even Hashirama’s usual charisma wouldn’t sway him now. There was no point in beating a dead horse for now. Better to consult with Tobirama and think about a different route.

“I have a dream of creating a place like this one day,” Hashirama called to Ensui.

Ensui stopped and looked back at his guest. “Do you, now?”

“But it will be a place for everyone. Senju and Uchiha, even Uzumaki if you decide you want to be a part of it.”

Ensui smiled knowingly. “That’s some dream. But I think that’s all it is, a dream. Traditions are not so easily broken.”

When Ensui turned to leave this time, Hashirama didn’t stop him. Alone under the Ginkgo trees, the only sounds that reached him were those of the beating ocean below the balcony and chirping birds hiding among the leaves above.

“Not alone,” Hashirama said. “But together, we can make our dream a reality.”

With no one around to listen, even Hashirama could question the voice that dissipated in the emptiness with no one here to echo his resolve.

———

War and peace were night and day in the blink of an eye. For Mito, the change in those around her, Uzumaki, Uchiha, and samurai alike, was so jarring that she had trouble getting her bearings. Perhaps the most remarkable change of all was the one she saw in Kenshin. He’d gone from the cantankerous, even reluctant political leader to the heart and soul of the battlefield. A god of war in every sense of the moniker.

“I don’t care how you shadow lurkers do things on your own time; here we play by my rules,” he’d explained at the onset of the march from the Uesugi stronghold. “This is my front line. I want you to mix with my samurai. And I want you to fall back when I give the command. The rear guard will take your place. These guerillas want to play hide and seek? Then we’ll flush them out with their tails between their legs.”

“Switching the front and rear guard to compensate for exhaustion,” Satto said, picturing the setup based on the crude plans Kenshin had penned. “It’s genius.”

“You’re damn right it is,” Kenshin said, rolling up his plans and storing them. “I thought of it.”
Mito had remained silent, not wanting to speak up during talk of battle strategy given her lack of experience. Madara had been silent through the entire exchange as well, though for different reasons, she knew. He would be leading the Uchiha into battle tonight.

And what a battle it was.

Samurai outnumbered both Uzumaki and Uchiha forces, their red armor standing out against the blacks, blues, and whites of their shinobi allies. Some wore snarling demon masks.

“All the better to scare the shit outta them,” Kenshin had said when he caught her eyeing his ghoulish mask.

He’d laughed at her startled reaction, and she let it slide. No use standing up for herself to a man who would never think twice about her until she proved her worth at every turn.

Oh, to be a woman in a man’s world.

Madara and Izuna were too far away to see from her position, but Mara and a few other Uzumaki soldiers marched with Mito, probably to look out for her. For all her earlier vehemence about equality on the battlefield, Mito couldn’t deny that it was a comfort to know she wasn’t charging into this mess all alone. As though sensing her troubled thoughts, Mara flashed her a shy smile, which Mito returned even though she didn’t feel the emotion behind it at all.

“Just keep your eyes open, my lady,” Satto had told her when they had a moment of privacy. “One step at a time. You can’t go forward unless you deal with whatever’s in front of you first.”

Years of intensive and specialized training were enough to lull anyone into a false sense of security. As the sun set and night converged over the burned and barren plains of the Fire Country, Mito shook her head to remind herself that this was not a dream, that she was really going into battle. That this was kill or be killed. She’d never felt her green sixteen years more than she did at this moment.

It began all wrong. There was no futile parley between parties, no formalities or even a cliche big bang to start the race to the death. As darkness encroached, people just started dying for no reason at all.

“Look sharp, ladies!” Kenshin roared as he charged into battle with a katana longer than any Mito had ever seen before.

Before she even had time to breathe, she was fighting. Her first opponent was dressed in green samurai armor and a mask of dirt and sweat. There was a hunger in his eyes, feral and fearful, that ignited a primal instinct in Mito. She flipped backwards and fell into the familiar defensive position of her Whirlpool kata. One second, one precious moment to breathe, and she lunged.

He swung a short sword, slashing blindly but viciously, and Mito fell with the arc as though avoiding ribbons instead of razors. She caught herself on the ground with a hand and twisted. Her opponent stumbled forward, not having expected her to move the way she did, and Mito took advantage of the opening. Drawing her tantō with her free hand, she swung her legs through the air and kicked her opponent hard in the side, sending him falling to the ground. Without slowing down, she whipped around and landed on top of him. The blade of her tantō plunged deep into the man’s chest and pinned him to the ground. Wide-eyed, he watched her as they fell.

One second, not even enough time to breathe, and he was gone, never remembering hitting the ground. Mito watched it happen, saw his soul light up his eyes and fade away, leaving only her
own reflection in them just as Madara had said it would happen.

Two seconds. Three, four, five. She couldn’t move. His blood crawled out of him like it wanted to be anywhere but near her knife. She could smell it, and it was getting worse the more the knife jiggled inside him, cutting and scraping under her shaking hands. Six seconds, and a hand on her shoulder brought her back to reality.

“Mito!”

Mara pulled her back, and the knife with her. Mito coughed, having forgotten to breathe, and took Mara’s offered hand.

“Are you all right?” Mara asked, searching Mito’s face for something.

There was light in Mara’s brown eyes, little flakes of gold that glowed under the light of the moon rising in the east. Mito couldn’t see herself in them, and she was grateful for it.

“Yeah, I think so,” she said, swallowing. “I’m sorry.”

Mara spared a glance at the body of the enemy Mito had killed. “Forget him and keep moving. There will be time to think after the battle.”

Mara nodded and left Mito to intervene in a nearby tussle in which one of their Uzumaki brethren was outnumbered three to one. Mito looked around, and suddenly she could hear. Screams, battle cries, steel on steel and the roar of jutsu, fire, water, earth, all around. And the rattle of death, a new sensation, yet one that roused something old and tired in her bones, like they knew this song well. If there were time, maybe she would have cried. But there was no time, not for anyone. Only those who could outrun their fates would survive here.

So Mito ran.

The ran toward a group of dark-clad enemy shinobi ganging up on some of Kenshin’s samurai, pummeling them with high-level douton. She bit her thumb and tasted blood, but she never slowed down, not even when she scraped the ground with her bleeding palm and screamed:

“Kuchiyose no justu!”

Not even to fly through one-handed seals and lunge at the nearest enemy shinobi, spinning but never losing momentum, and strike his heart with the glowing flat of her palm. He fell, and the others hesitated in the chaos only to suffer fatal burns from flying acid that melted their gi and armor, through their skin to their bones. They crumbled into ash and disappeared, unlike the first man she’d killed.

“Lady Mito,” Sazae said, slithering up beside her master.

Mito patted a hand over the giant snail’s spiked, ebony shell, like sharpened diamonds. Sazae towered over Mito now at nearly ten feet tall and still growing.

“Let’s flush out the enemy, Sazae,” Mito said.

“Right away!”

An acid wave swept through the plains, and men and women screamed, scrambling from their hiding places in trees and in the ground and among genjutsu to escape death.
Something was weird about this fight.

Izuna stepped on the body of a green-clad samurai and sprang into the air. At the apex of flight and gravity, he crossed his twin tantō and slashed left and right, decapitating the enemy below him. The severed head landed just to Izuna’s left and rolled away. Bloody Sharingan searched for his brother, but he didn’t have to search long as Madara backed up towards Izuna, fending off a kunoichi wielding a spear.

Izuna gritted his teeth and sent more chakra to his eyes. Just as Madara drew back to regroup, Izuna threw one of his tantō at the kunoichi.

“Kai!”

The blade hit her in the belly through her black gi and she stumbled, coughed up blood. And then she vanished, powder on the wind. Madara retrieved the tantō and handed it back to his brother.

“Genjutsu?” he said, eyes searching for the source.

“A good one at that,” Izuna confirmed. “Too good.”

Back to back, the brothers regrouped and moved with the tide of battle. The break was short-lived when a river of acid splashed in their general direction, and they were forced to part to avoid a grisly death by disintegration. Izuna glared at the stuff, his eyes watering with the acid’s emitted fumes as it leaked into the earth and burned it away.

“Mito,” Madara said.

Izuna noticed the large snail summon not far off, as well as the unfortunate soldiers who hadn’t been as nimble on their feet to avoid its acid. As though materializing from the shadow of the moon, more and more shinobi, all dressed in black, rushed to the source and converged on Mito and her summon creature. When Madara moved with them, Izuna called him back.

“Brother! She’s not your responsibility!”

Madara faltered. He never faltered, and Izuna lost his composure for a moment. It was a moment too late.

Hands, tens of them, sprang forth from the earth and grabbed at the brothers’ legs, dragging them under. Madara swung his chokutō and severed some of them in one swoop. Izuna kneeled down and released the genjutsu once more, his eyes stinging in the process.

“Izuna!” Madara shouted, rejoining his brother. “What do you see?”

Madara had always been the better fighter between the two brothers, but Izuna’s affinity for genjutsu was unrivaled. Right now, he wasn’t seeing much more than the paranoia on their allies’ faces at fighting an army of smoke and mirrors.

“These enemies are mostly illusions mixed in with the real bodies,” Izuna said. “I’ve never seen anything like it before. Whoever’s doing this is a master.”

“Madara!”

Izuna caught a glimpse of Haruka running toward them, her katana shimmering red with blood.
“Haruka,” Madara said. “What’s happening?”

“Kenshin just sent in the rear guard. We’re falling back.”

“No, we’re not. This isn’t the real enemy.”

“What’re you talking about?”

“Most of these shinobi are genjutsu,” Izuna explained. “Look.”

He charged a nearby shinobi, whose face was half covered in a black mask, and ripped it off while focusing his chakra. The shinobi’s face peeled away where his mask had been, revealing bloody muscle, bone, and finally ashes as he crumbled into nothing, as though he’d never been there at all.

“You can see the difference?” Haruka said. “Well, point ‘em out to my sword!”

“There,” Izuna said, crouching low and squinting into the night. “That’s where they’re coming from!”

Madara and Haruka followed their youngest brother’s gaze to an empty space that looked just like the rest of the oily night sky. But Izuna was sure of it. Whoever was doing this was channeling chakra through that dead space and spawning an endless army. Take it out, and they could reveal whoever was behind this.

“Haruka, Izuna, on my mark,” Madara ordered.

Izuna leaped back toward his siblings, already forming the necessary hand seals for the Uchiha clan’s trademark ninjutsu.

“Katon: Gōkakyū no jutsu!”

Izuna, Haruka, and Madara released a triple Great Fireball that streamlined into a concentrated sun flare. Izuna squeezed all the air out of his lungs and watched the fire pierce through the dead space, hitting it as though it were a solid wall of ice. Beside him, Madara forced more chakra into the technique, so Izuna mirrored his example.

Crunch.

Izuna gagged and fell to one knee, seeing stars from the lack of oxygen in his body. His grey mail and leather felt heavier than they had only moments ago. Panting, he looked to see that his and his siblings’ efforts had not been in vain.

A jagged crack severed the night sky, teeth opening to reveal mysterious depths within, and Izuna opened his mouth in a silent scream at the vision on the other side.

The world was silent save for the ringing in Mito’s ears as she got acquainted with the dry, cracked ground beneath her cheek. Her body ached, and she didn’t even want to count how many broken ribs she’d suffered, but she struggled to her feet. This opponent was strong. Inhuman, even.

“That all you got, little girl?”

Big, hairy, and mean. He wore barely any armor at all, but his skin was as thick and sinewy as tanned leather. Mito spit out blood from a hard punch the enemy shinobi had landed to her gut, the
one that had sent her hurtling to the ground out of nowhere just as she’d finished weeding through three of his allies. Mere shadows, genjutsu, as it turned out. There was no light in their eyes when they fell and vanished, turning to ash between her fingers. This one, however, was more real than any enemy Mito had faced all night.

And he was charging straight for her.

Mito had no time to be afraid, no time even to think, just react. She slammed a hand on the ground and sent a stream of chakra through the earth, imagining it twisting into ancient runes and stringing together.

“To me!” she shouted.

Out of nowhere, the air before Mito bent, refracted like light through a crystal, as the seals she’d lain on the ground glowed blue. The hefty shinobi’s fist curled into a ball and he punched the distorted air just as it thickened, darkened. Mito lost her breath.

Crunch!

A spiked, black turban shell sat just inches from Mito’s face dripping slime that seared the earth beneath it. Mito heaved a sigh of relief at the sight of two eyestalks peeking out at her from inside the diamond-hard shell, followed by a pale head striped in blue.

“Just in time,” Mito said.

“Are you injured, Lady Mito?” Sazae asked.

“Not any more than I was, thanks.”

On Sazae’s other side, Mito’s attacker had fallen back to shield himself from a counterattack. She hoped he’d broken his entire arm punching Sazae’s shell, the crazed brute. An explosion had Mito on edge and she jumped, searching for the source.

“General!” she shouted. “Sazae, let’s go.”

The large turban shell followed her summoner as Mito ran towards Satto, who was busy fending off more black-suited shinobi. Mito ignored the pain in her middle and whirled. She let loose a small seashell from up her sleeve and tossed it toward one of Satto’s attackers. It cracked on impact with the shinobi’s shoulder and burst into a splash of snail acid. He screamed and fell to the ground, crumbling to ash until only the acid was left to sear the ground where he’d been fighting.

Satto took advantage of the distraction to spin close to his attacker and hit her in the face with the heel of his hand, knocking her back. She barely had time to scream and claw at her face when it literally disintegrated with a thousand tiny pops, miniature explosions that peeled away her face and dropped her in half a second.

Out of nowhere, Mara tackled the remaining shadow enemy with a handaxe to the back of the neck, knocking him to the ground and falling through him as he vanished into thin air. She looked up and flashed Mito a grin despite the blood and swelling that had forced one of her eyes closed, and Mito returned it. There was little time to relish this momentary victory when seven more enemy shinobi converged upon their small group.

“Damnit,” Satto said, backing up toward Mito and Sazae. “There’s no end to them.”

“They’re controlled by genjutsu, sir,” Mara said, assuming a position beside Mito. “No one seems
to be able to track the source.”

“Then what the hell is Tajima doing? The Uchiha should be able to do that much, at least!”

The enemy executed rapid hand seals in sync, too fast for Mito to keep up with. She motioned for Sazae to prepare to shield their small group, but blocking all seven attackers could prove too much for the resilient turban shell. Mito racked her brain for a way out, anything at all.

Crack!

As though inhabited by an invisible force, the enemy shinobi ceased their jutsu and fell to the ground, clutching their heads in pain. Mito watched, horrified, as they came apart at the joints, like unraveling ragdolls, disintegrating and leaving no trace behind. All was still for a second or two as the Uzumaki processed what had just happened.

“Lucky break?” Mara asked, looking around for a possible culprit.

“Don’t bet on it,” Satto said, pointing. “Here comes the cavalry.”

In the distance, Mito could see a mob of people running towards Kenshin’s forces at full sprint. Some wore stylized green armor and wielded iron blades. Others wore much lighter, looser gi and moved their hands in the telltale formation of hand seals. Beast summons, both large and small, slithered, galloped, and flew along with their summoners. Kenshin’s harsh voice pierced through the din of battle and confusion, ordering another regrouping of soldiers from the rear guard to the front, and the samurai struggled to obey before the enemy was upon them. Tajima was among them, barking orders to his clansmen before launching a curling stream of yellow fire at the charging enemy. It stopped some, but not most.

“We have to help them,” Mito said, drawing her tantō.

“Aye,” Satto said, already taking off ahead of her and Mara.

“Mito, you’re hurt,” Mara said, eyeing Mito’s midsection.

“I’m fine. Let’s just hurry up and help them!” She ran off, Sazae slithering along behind her.

Mara bit her lip in worry, but there was nothing left to say. She broke into a run and followed her princess into the heat of another battle.

“**You**!” Haruka shouted. “You turncoat son of a bitch!”

Within the rippling remains of the illusory dead space, Tajitsu Uchiha stood with another man looking pleased as pie with himself. Izuna could only stare at his adoptive brother, incredulous that he would betray the clan like this. He’d never cared for Tajitsu and he even felt a bit sorry for the man, having been denied his natural birthright, but that was life. As far as Izuna was concerned, birthright was a fiction created by men afraid of their own inherent weakness who passed that terror off on those born less fortunate. He and Madara had subverted that effort and trampled it underfoot.

“You weren’t kidding about your sister’s foul mouth,” said the man standing next to Tajitsu.

He was slender and silken, as though there were no bones in his body and he moved simply with
the wind, snake-like, almost feminine. He smiled when Izuna’s eyes alighted on him, like he knew a secret. Izuna wasn’t sure he wanted to know.

“Who are you?” Madara demanded.

“I’m Saizō Kirigakaru,” the man said.

Izuna recognized the name, as would any trained shinobi with even a shred of knowledge about the world. Saizō Kirigakure was once a prominent member of Sanada’s Ten Heroes, the right hand of Sasuke Sarutobi and his opposite in every way. Hailed as a genjutsu master, he’d used his shadow tricks to sabotage the siege of Osaka Castle three years ago, a move that led to the deaths of over half of the Ten Heroes and Sasuke’s defection to the Senju clan. Izuna put the pieces together easily. Saizō had betrayed Sasuke on Sanada’s orders, the same Sanada suspected of launching this campaign against Kenshin and the Fire Country.

“I’ll fucking murder you,” Haruka said, advancing on Tajitsu.

“Haruka,” Madara said. “Stop.”

Haruka obeyed, but she shook with rage. Her sword itched to draw Tajitsu’s blood.

“Tajitsu,” Madara said, stepping forward. “Why did you betray us?”

Tajitsu’s smirk faded, replaced with a repulsion the likes of which Izuna had only seen before Tajima had adopted Madara and him.

“Us? Don’t you dare lump yourself together with the likes of my bloodline. You disgusting trash.”

Izuna shot his brother a glance, but Madara was implacable.

“So that’s what this is about.” He chuckled. “You’re upset because Father passed you over for me. You’re so pathetic. You couldn’t even outshine the bastard son of a whore.”

Tajitsu shook with rage, but it was Saizō who spoke in his stead.

“I think I’ve heard enough. Now, who wants to die first?”

“How about you!”

Haruka charged katana-first at Saizō. Her Sharingan swirled furiously, slowing time and giving her a head start as Saizō faced her. She slashed, and he backtracked, neatly avoiding each deadly slash.

“Izuna, help Haruka,” Madara said. “I’ll deal with the turncoat.”

He couldn’t even say Tajitsu’s name. Izuna wanted to stay with his brother, but he trusted Madara’s judgment. Tajitsu bared his teeth and welcomed the onslaught as Madara prepared to strike him with a fire jutsu. And then Izuna noticed the problem.

“No, Brother, wait! That’s another genjutsu!”

Tajitsu lunged and went for Madara’s throat. His face was dark, half obscured in the cover of night and the sickly light of the half moon above. Madara swore and swung his chokutō just as he completed the fire technique. Flames arced along the swing of his blade and slashed Tajitsu when he came in range. Shadow claws raked at Madara’s face and neck, and Madara turned his head just in time to avoid a fatal swipe. Izuna could only watch as the illusory Tajitsu ripped flesh and tendon from Madara’s neck and shoulder, like an animal. Madara plunged his flamed sword
through Tajitsu’s middle, slicing him in half in one fell swoop. They broke apart, Madara stumbling to one knee and Tajitsu crumbling to ashes, laughing.

“Where is he?” Madara asked no one in particular, ignoring his bleeding wound.

The real Tajitsu was far away, escaping the scene and heading toward the thick of battle in the distance. Madara growled and hauled himself up. Nearby, Haruka was busy fighting the real Saizō, who had surrounded her in genjutsu doubles. Izuna hesitated.

“Stay with her, Izuna!” Madara said as he took off toward the battle.

Izuna had no time to protest. Haruka’s cry brought him back to reality. Saizō had slashed her with a tantō in the lower back, though she couldn’t detect the extent of his genjutsu. Izuna paled and ran to aid his adoptive sister, forming seals as he ran.

“Raijin!”

Sparks crackled at Izuna’s fingertips as he molded his chakra, ignoring the pain in his hands. Lightning bolts, thick and yellow, shot forth from his hands and struck the genjutsu clones. The area lit up like fireworks, and Haruka took advantage of the distraction to dart away from the heart of danger. The real Saizō, however, had disappeared.

“Leaving so soon?” a voice echoed all around Izuna.

Hands burst from the earth, disconnected from any true bodies, and grabbed Izuna’s and Haruka’s ankles. Izuna was too slow and he was pulled down. Fingernails ripped into his skin, yanked at his armor to get to the soft flesh underneath. He cried out and struggled, angry, furious, seeing red, the blood, so much blood, his blood, and he screamed.

Thunder sparks crawled all over his body and spread to everything he touched, a disease of the light. They cut into the hands like a million razor blades, drawing phantom blood to water the earth. The hands twitched and crumbled to ashes, but the blood Izuna spilled gathered in pools on the ground. A thousand cuts hurt worse than a single stab wound, and Izuna struggled through the haze of pain to right himself.

“You have an annoying habit of seeing things you shouldn’t,” a voice said directly in his ear.

Izuna shook with fear and pain and rage, and he rolled away from the direction of that ghostly voice. Lightning was all that was left to him, so he called upon it again to shield him, body and soul, as he rolled to escape danger.

It followed.

Bleeding and shaking, Izuna opened his eyes and searched for the source of his demons, to see in the dark and find the Who’s There? that stalked him now.

“I think I’ll just take those precious eyes of yours!”

A hand, a real hand this time, reached for him and sent shadows his way. Fast, too fast. The last sight he would ever see.

But she was faster.

Haruka skidded in front of Izuna, bleeding from every visible patch of exposed skin and through her now shredded armor. She pushed Izuna back with one hand and he fell, the longest fall of his
life, as she took the punishment meant for him.

Her scream would haunt his dreams and steal sleep’s sweet release for the rest of his days.

Shadow claws ripped her apart, stealing the part that made her Uchiha, that made her a warrior. Haruka fell to her knees and covered her face, tore at it, thinking maybe if she dug deep enough, she could dig the shadows out. Izuna’s vision blurred.

“No, stop! Haruka, stop it!”

She screamed louder and dug deeper. The blood fell like rain, no end, and the barren earth at her feet sucked it dry. Izuna struggled to his feet and lunged at her, pushing her down and ripping her hands from her face. She was strong, almost stronger than him, but he was determined and still sane besides.

“Haruka!”

When he finally managed to lift her bloody hands from her face, there was not much of a face left upon which to gaze. Two gushing holes, sightless and seeing through him, stared back up at him. Bits of her dribbled down her cheeks like tears, and Izuna had the maddest idea to brush them away with his hands, gather them up as though he might be able to stuff them back inside her.

“Stupid woman,” Saizō said from a short distance away.

Izuna could barely see Haruka anymore, and he heard nothing. Her screams had fallen silent as she fell limp, passed out from the blood loss and shock. And yet, he could not look away even as she blurred red and black in his swimming vision. His hot tears fell upon her cheeks and mixed with what remained of her gouged out eyes, running red down her face.

“Haruka,” Izuna whimpered.

“Now then, I have a Bijuu to meet,” Saizō said.

Izuna turned on Saizō, who had the gall to walk away like nothing had happened. “Stop!” he shouted. “You monster, I’ll kill you!”

Saizō paused and chuckled. He had not a drop of blood on him, and his long, black hair fell perfectly about his shoulders, like he hadn’t even broken a sweat. Looking back at Izuna over his shoulder he said, “I highly doubt that.”

But Izuna heard the voice in his ear, a whisper, followed by pain in his back like none he’d ever felt before. A clone loomed over Izuna, its dagger nestled to the hilt in Izuna’s back, while the real Saizō merely looked on, mildly curious. Izuna slumped, but not before spinning and slashing the clone with his own tantō, dispelling it with the magic of his gifted eyes, eyes that had been spared Haruka’s fate.

“I’d love to stay, but I really must be going now. Until next time, little one.”

Saizō disappeared and Izuna fell over Haruka’s unmoving body. Only the rise and fall of her chest, shallow and shaky, kept him awake.

“Brother,” Izuna whimpered, wishing he was stronger.
It was no use. Even with Kenshin’s ingenious battle strategy, his army could not withstand the might of Sanada’s foot soldiers and shinobi combined. They had lasted this long on that strategy, but time was friend to none. As Mito spun and sealed the heart of yet another enemy shinobi, only to find two more ready to take his place, she knew in her heart that this was a losing battle.

*I’m not strong enough,* she thought to herself even as she twirled and twisted like water, agile, as though she felt none of the pain in her midsection or tasted the blood clawing its way up her throat.

Sazae was gone, having exhausted her chakra and suffered too many wounds to continue. Mito dismissed her to recover, and now she was alone without a shield to watch her back. She fended off whatever stragglers got past Mara, Satto, and the handful of Uchiha that had taken up position nearby. As her latest opponent fell with a dagger in his throat, Mito rolled and tossed another acid-filled shell toward an overwhelmed Uchiha soldier. It exploded upon impact with an enemy samurai’s ear, melting through half of his head. The runoff splashed the nearest enemy behind him, melting through his armor and eating through his chest. The Uchiha, a small kunoichi with short hair and a mean look, used the gory distraction to plunge her knife into the heart of her third attacker, use him as a stepping board, and launch a stream of fire from midair at the next opponent behind him. Mito watched a moment, awed at her quick thinking and improvisation, but a moment was more than she had before a meaty hand swung at her face.

She saw the blow coming in the nick of time and dipped backward. Using her hand as a springboard, Mito spun and twisted her legs around. She made contact with her attacker’s arm and shoulder, knocking him off-tilt, but it was an ineffective strategy against such a large, dense man.

He was the same one who’d punched her ribcage before. He came at her now with his left fist, the right balled and purple, disfigured from when it met Sazae’s diamond-hard shell. “Little girl,” he said, grinning silver and gold from too many fights and not enough teeth.

Mito bounded back, putting distance between herself and this superhuman. Sazae was not around this time to come between them, so Mito would have to improvise. Stall.

“Who are you?” she demanded, drawing her tantō and holding it before her.

“I’m your death,” he said.

Mito gritted her teeth. “Not today.”

He lunged and Mito charged. Watching his fist and his feet, Mito let him graze her shoulder, stifling a cry of pain, and wrapped around him. Using his shoulder for leverage, Mito plunged her tantō into the juncture between his neck and shoulder. He howled and shook, and before Mito could push away, he grabbed her over his shoulder and yanked her over his head. The ground rushed to meet Mito, and it was not happy to see her. Her chest exploded in pain, and she was sure he’d cracked whatever ribs he’d missed last time. She coughed up blood, thick and hot. Unbelievably, the brute was undeterred.

“Maybe not so little,” he grunted, pulling the knife out of his shoulder, “to hit Kosuke Anayama.”

Blood spurted from the open wound, but it didn’t faze him. Mito scrambled back in horror, slow and seeing double, barely breathing.

*Think.*

It was just a little blood.

Just a little bit of gravity crunch, crunch, crunching down on her ribs and turning her insides to
jelly.

But there was not even time enough to think. A blur of white and grey and strawberry blonde rushed between Mito and Kosuke, pushed him back and dragged him to his knees. Mara spun as though possessed, her enchanted hands swiping and searching for an opening that would put an end to this war machine.

“Mara,” Mito said, her voice garbled from too much blood in her mouth. She turned her head to cough it up.

Mara pushed him back, and Kosuke grunted, afraid to let her touch him where it counted, perhaps having learned his lesson with Mito before her. Blood dribbled to the ground, staining the brown grass with a liquid light that glowed under the half moon and Uchiha fire. A flash caught Mito’s eye, and she was more worried than she’d been before.

_Madara._

He ran like a man to his death, cutting down enemy shinobi who stood in his way with fire and blade alike, and he suffered retaliation along the way. Flying was a better way to describe his mad dash. He jumped over those who stood in his way, defying gravity, and burned them to cinders as he flew over them. Nothing slowed him down. She followed him with her eyes as he came upon his target, a face Mito recognized: Tajitsu.

“I’ll kill you for this!” Madara said, raising his sword against his own brother.

Mito had no time to think about what this meant or why. Mara continued to fend off Kosuke, who was nimbler than he looked. A vague memory from her studies returned to Mito, something about Sanada’s Ten Heroes.

_Kosuke Anayama._

Known alternatively as ‘The Hammer’.

Mito struggled to a sitting position, gasping in pain and regretting the action. Any constriction of her lungs sent lancing pain through her middle, a pain that traveled to her extremities and made simply existing an exercise in agony.

“Die!” Kosuke shouted.

Mara slapped his abdomen with her palm, finally connecting a hit, though not to a vital area. In return, she earned a swift punch to her jaw that snapped her neck on impact. She fell to the ground in a tangled heap of limbs, and Mito watched.

She watched as the light left Mara’s blue eyes, eyes whose last vision was of Mito, bleeding and beaten, gone before she even hit the ground. Just like that, in less time than it takes to breathe, to feel pain, to be sad. Kosuke heaved and clutched his abdomen where Mara had landed her last hit, and still he was not done. Terrible, bloodshot eyes turned once more on Mito as if to say, ‘Where were we?’

There was no time left.

He came at her, mangled hand shielding his ruined middle, and she struggled against the pain, the despair, the hatred born of revenge and regret pooling among her blended innards. It became her strength, those few precious seconds. For she had died in Mara’s eyes, and now all that was left was malice and chakra enough to put an end to this monster.
Mito kicked off her shoe, unable to stand in time and in pain, and Kosuke descended upon her with his fist. She met it with her bare foot at the knuckles, giving with her knee and rattling from the impact. Chakra could only cushion so much. She cried out and pushed with all her might, but not him, only the magic inside her.

He hung there, wide-eyed and staring, and she died all over again. Tiny explosions, cracks that broke him apart from the wrist to the arm to the shoulder where she’d wounded him before. *Sploosh, sploosh, sploosh*, blood bursting out of him with every slowing heartbeat. And he shattered, bones and body and soul, as Mito’s sealing magic shut him down, brought him down, and finally snuffed out the wild light in his eyes. He slumped to his knees, his fist still resting against her bare rune-covered foot. Mito panted shallow, frantic breaths as she looked into his dead eyes and saw only herself.

With a grunt of pain, she shoved him to the side and let him fall, the battle finally won. Mara lay a few feet away, and Mito crawled toward her on her elbows. She couldn’t say when the tears had started, time having blurred together. All she could do was smooth away the dirt and blood from Mara’s youthful face, too young to fight and too young to die for a princess she barely knew, barely loved.

“Damnit,” Mito sobbed, smoothing the pale flesh of Mara’s cold cheek. “I told you not to die for me.”

It hurt to cry, hurt to breathe, but nothing compared to this feeling, the emptiness of failure and loss, not for herself but for another.

“My life isn’t better than yours,” she said, blinking through her tears.

*Boom!*

The earth shook and Mito tensed up, looking around for an enemy attack she was sure would come.

“We’re saved!” called a samurai bearing Kenshin’s red sigil.

Mito looked to where he was pointing and saw a wave of samurai, a riptide flooding this barren shore to wash away the ashes. Kenshin’s reinforcements had finally arrived, and they got to work fast launching kerosene bombs and cutting down anyone who got too close.

“Madara!”

Tajima’s voice cut through the din, and Mito turned towards it. Madara and Tajima were back to back looking for something Mito couldn’t see. She blinked through her tears, a new sensation of dread boiling in the pit of her belly. Something wasn’t right.

Madara lunged at nothing at all, tearing at the air with his chokutō. Mito frowned, not understanding. Was it a genjutsu? Tajima, meanwhile, fought Tajitsu and a clone, though Mito could not discern which was the real Tajitsu. The three of them whirled around each other, Tajima slashing with his katana and Tajitsu merely dodging. Mito remembered Haruka commenting on Tajitsu’s lack of prowess as a shinobi, and she could see why. But that genjutsu...

Why were they fighting at all? Something was very wrong. The sun began to breach the eastern horizon in the distance. Mito gritted her teeth and pushed herself onto her knees. She saw stars and nearly vomited if not for her sheer willpower convincing her body that gagging would only intensify her pain. Through blurry eyes, she rested a moment and followed Madara’s and Tajima’s
battles.

Except Tajima was gone, and instead of only one clone, Tajitsu now had two. Tajima was nowhere to be seen. Bile and dread waged war in the back of her throat as she began to understand.

“Tajitsu! Show yourself, you craven!” Madara shouted.

“I’m here,” all three Tajitsu figures said.

Madara turned on them, red eyes mad with betrayal and inhuman fury, and he lunged.

“Die!”

“No!” Mito screamed.

Demons chewed at her insides as they propelled her voice to carry across the space between Madara and her, a warning that reached him too late. She gasped and raised herself up on shaky legs, reaching for Madara just as he was too late to turn back.

Madara’s flamed chokutō plunged through his target’s middle, ripping and cauterizing and too fast for much blood to escape. An impaled Tajitsu stared down at Madara, wide-eyed and silent, while Madara panted and shoved his blade deeper.

The illusion faded and reality came apart at the seams.

Mito watched as Tajitsu’s face warped, aged, and revealed that of another. She watched as the look of grim satisfaction in Madara’s eyes warped, too, to something of confusion, denial.

Fear.

“My son,” Tajima said, reaching out his hands to rest on Madara’s shoulders.

Red eyes grew impossibly wide, a child’s eyes, as seeing became feeling became believing.

“Who says illusions can’t win a war?” the real Tajitsu said from behind Tajima. He was bleeding from his left flank where Tajima had sliced him, but he was very much alive, and smiling.

Madara looked but saw nothing. “Father?”

Tajima convulsed and coughed up blood. His eyes had faded to their natural black color, bloodshot, as he focused his remaining energy on the son he had always wanted.

“Live,” he said.

“You’ve died many times.”

“Only if I can see the look in their eyes.”

Mito’s tears fell fresh and hot, cleaning the dirt and blood from her cheeks. She cried the tears Madara could not as he watched the reflection of his own death in Tajima’s fading eyes. And when Tajima fell, Madara fell with him, leaving only Tajitsu looming over them.

The fighting around them slowed to a halt as the Uchiha witnessed their fallen leader and the treachery of his trueborn son. A slender man stepped forward through the crowd and came to a stop next to Tajitsu.
“You Uchiha are so dramatic,” he said.

He held something in his hand, which he lifted before his eyes to examine. It shimmered violet and gold, like sands in a phantom wind, and Mito stared at it, mesmerized.

“Now finish him, too. We need more blood to lure the beast out of hiding.”

“I want to savor this moment, Saizō,” Tajitsu said.

While they talked, Madara continued to stare at his dead father, dead by his sword and his blindness for not seeing through Tajitsu’s genjutsu. He was still, too still, and Mito was torn between going to him and staying behind. Tajitsu and his ally, whoever he was, had the upper hand, and she was in no condition to keep fighting.

“Burn.”

It was so soft, a mere whisper on the wind, that Mito was sure she’d imagined it. Tajitsu drew his sword, pristine from lack of use, and brandished it over Madara. He bared his crooked teeth in a grin, the look of a man who’d made his dreams come true and now suffered the consequences of getting everything he wanted.

“What was that? Speak up, I can’t hear you with your face in the mud where it belongs,” Tajitsu said.

Madara fisted the dry earth, now damp with his father’s blood, and shook, like he’d been possessed by something not of this world.

“I said, burn!”

Madara looked up and Tajitsu stumbled backward, his face drained of blood and no longer grinning.

“Your eyes—”

Tajitsu stepped back and screamed. The earth where he’d stepped turned black and licked at his foot with searing hot tongues. He stumbled, and the same darkness attacked his other foot where he stepped. It crept up his legs and over his armor, ravenous.

Madara rose and advanced. The Uchiha and other soldiers watching scrambled backward, terrified of whatever power this was, Madara’s hatred and hurt personified.

It spread.

Black fire, so hot Mito found it hard to breathe even from a distance, as though she were looking directly into the heart of the flames. But these were like none she’d ever seen, blacker than the night sky and feeding on the encroaching light of day. Ghost fire summoned from a place far from this world. And it was moving faster.

Tajitsu’s serpentine ally cursed and leaped away from the stygian flames, dropping the shimmering trinket he held by accident. The fire ate it up, popping and crackling, and released a rancid stench like that of burning corpses, rotten and smoking. The fire caught up with the fleeing enemy, like phantom ropes that ensnared their prey and consumed both armor and flesh from their bodies.

Soon, Mito heard nothing but the howls of dying men and women. There was no further clang of steel, no crackle of elemental ninjutsu in the air. Only pain, heat, and Madara’s hatred.
Tajitsu ran and tore his armor from his body as he went, anything to escape the demonic fire chasing him and his allies.

“Saizō!” Tajitsu screamed, reaching to the sky all around him as though invisible hands would lift him from this ruined earth and carry him to safety.

But the man called Saizō had disappeared, and the shinobi and samurai he’d brought with him soon followed, retreating.

“Stop! I-I’m like you! I’m an Uchiha!”

“You are no one,” Madara said in a voice that seemed not his own.

For the first time in their acquaintance, Mito was afraid of him, this thing he’d become.

Tajitsu tripped and fell, and the black flames surrounded him. They attacked his hands and feet and drew wails Mito had never heard from another living creature. Madara stood over him, immune to the fire’s destruction, and looked down on him with transformed eyes that could see the truth now.

“Forged in fire,” Madara said, his eyes widening and commanding the flames to grow. “Entombed in ashes.”

Tajitsu’s screams croaked and cracked as the ghost fire entered his lungs and tore out his tongue. It spread through his veins and boiled his blood so he couldn’t even bleed out normally. Mito watched him shrivel and sink into the ground. Even his ashes burned, until, like the illusions he’d cast, they vanished without a trace. Only echoes of his screams remained, reverberating farther and farther away under the roar of Madara’s dark fire.

“Final push, men!” Kenshin’s voice rang out over the area. “Kick ‘em out of my land!”

Kenshin’s remaining samurai charged at the retreating enemy, eliminating any stragglers along the way. Whoever they missed, the black flames didn’t. They grew larger, hotter, and they weren’t stopping.

“Brother!”

Izuna ran toward his brother. The back of his armor was destroyed and damp with blood, like he’d been stabbed. It was all over his hands and arms, and Mito thought she might be sick again. Whatever had happened to Izuna, he’d gotten past it, perhaps with a medical ninja’s aid. None of it mattered, though, as he saw only Madara and fell upon him.

“Brother, stop this!” he cried out.

Madara continued to glare at the spot where Tajitsu had met his gruesome end, blind and deaf to the rest of world.

“Aahhh!”

A samurai in red, one of Kenshin’s, fell victim to the dark fire. It raged out of control, indiscriminatory in its hunt for flesh and blood to roast. The screams started anew as panic ensued.

“Izuna,” Madara said, focusing on his brother.

“Stop the fire,” Izuna implored his brother, having gotten through to him. “It’s out of control!”

Madara blinked and looked around. When he turned in Mito’s direction, she saw the blood
dribbling from his left eye, like tears.

“I don’t know,” Madara said, dazed as though in a dream.

“You must!”

The stygian wildfire extended in all directions, chasing bodies, both enemy and ally. It would kill them all if it wasn’t stopped.

I have to do something.

There was only one thing she could do. Pushing through the spike of pain that weakened her with every step, Mito ran toward the nexus of the phantom flames. From her hip she unlatched a scroll she carried with her at all times, blank, and held it between her teeth. Her fingers wove together in patterns she’d dreamed up on lonely nights alone, nights away from her life as a princess and a perpetual bride-to-be. Blue chakra seared her palms, raising ancient runes that melted into the scroll when she took it from her mouth and unclasped it. Grasping the end with both hands, she let the roll fly through the air and ran ahead of it. Eyes squeezed shut as if blindness would keep the pain at bay (it didn’t), she skidded to a halt and launched her hands over her head with all her might.

The empty scroll flew through the air, unrolling as it went and leaving a fluttering ribbon of paper behind it. It stretched across the battlefield, over the phantom flames, and fell upon them.

“Bind!” she shouted.

The scroll sucked up the black flames as it fell. Its edges crinkled under the extreme heat, blackening, but Mito’s chakra stopped them from burning and disintegrating. Her energy left her as though someone had turned on a faucet to her vitality. Her knees shook, but she fought to remain standing despite the burning in her fingers as she tried to control the trajectory of her chakra and the strength of the seal. The fire was unlike anything she’d ever worked with before, more volatile than even snail acid. The pain from her injuries and this final exertion was a blessing in disguise as it focused her concentration on the task at hand rather than the cries of fear from those all around.

As the scroll fell to the ground little by little, the flames disappeared underneath it. Mito yanked it back toward her and it rolled itself up, smoking as it traveled. Madara and Izuna watched it go, watched Mito finally stumble and crush her ribs all over again. It wasn’t until the scroll was back in her hand, searing to the touch but abating slowly, that she let herself hit the ground, too tired to wallow in pain. She clutched the scroll, blackened around the edges, to her chest. It was warm through her cracked whalebone armor, almost a comfort.

Madara’s fire.

Voices drifted to her ears, cries of victory and relief, ‘We won!’ and ‘We did it!’ Hands found their way to her shoulders and legs, pulling at her, lifting her up. Satto’s face, one eye fused shut with dried blood and soot.

“My lady, can you hear me? My lady...”

Two faces, two lonely boys who had lost more today than Mito had ever lost in all her life. Beautiful eyes, red eyes, full of hatred and love and something in between, no longer burning but too afraid to grieve. She couldn’t see them anymore, so tired—so tired—but she knew they would be there when she woke up. Eyes like that never sleep.

Mito clutched Madara’s hidden fire to her chest as the world faded and she faded with it,
dreamless.
Everyone is afraid of something.  

Most fear death in all its incarnations—insensitive, impartial, and always lonely. The unknown. More than the pain, perhaps, most people fear the loneliness at the end of this life. Dying with comrades in battle makes no difference; the darkness is yours alone, and everyone’s looks different.  

Mito had been alone all her life. Solitude did not frighten her.  

Pain was a shinobi’s currency. Those with more tended to live better than others, not because pain was a measure of wealth, but a measure of the soul and its resilience. Pain did not frighten Mito, either.  

But loneliness and pain together...  

She had never given much thought to how she would die, or when. Uzumaki lived longer than all others. Solitude was in their bones, doomed to outlive those they loved.  

Best not to love.  

Hatred was pain and solitude given a blade with which to cut. It meant to rip others to shreds and leave its wielder the last man standing. Blood and silence. The echo of a scream long extinguished.  

Death by fire.  

Fire was intangible, an ancient element, the stuff of magic older than the blood feud between Uchiha and Senju. It could rejuvenate, extinguish darkness and warm frozen fingers. The legendary phoenix was reborn of fire and ash, given life where only death awaited all others. But fire could also kill, evaporate and incinerate until nothing but tarnish remained. What of a fire that emitted no light and was so hot even that bird of lore could not stand its heat?  

Mito had never died in a dream, but in this one she died over and over again. Death by fire, ghost fire, fire that boiled her blood and bones. Sometimes it started at her feet, the way it had overtaken Tajitsu. Other times it began deep inside and burst out. Sometimes she saw Mara’s wide, brown eyes, with little flecks of gold in them, bright with tears and terror and seeing only Mito as she fell to the ground, gone before she hit. And Mito would fall upon her, wailing, as though the dead could hear, as though the dead could care for the troubles of the living. And she would see herself in those glassy eyes, eyes that reflected her and nothing else.  

Eyes that turned red with blood and hatred and spun, spun until Mito was dizzy, hypnotized, those red, red eyes. Eyes that called the fires of hell, hotter than any fire known to man, maybe hot enough to burn a hole in the future to fill it with the past. But once lit, there was no stopping the devil’s fire, not hatred and not love.  

Only Mito.  

Only in the dream she couldn’t stop it, no matter how many seals she carved into her flesh, no matter how much blood and chakra she spilled.
“Madara, stop!”

Only he didn’t stop. Not for her, not for anyone. He cried red tears, so thick and hot they blinded him to all but the blood. And he laughed, drunk on power, drunk on hatred.

“Burn.”

And she burned.

Waking up was an ordeal all its own. It was the sensation of knowing she was asleep and being trapped in her own body, unable to open her eyes or speak. Barely even breathe. Too long without breath and she was suffocating, her fingers turning blue, clawing at invisible demons weighing her down, threatening to send her back to the dream of fire and blood. But she wouldn’t go, not back there.

With a gasping breath, Mito shook awake. The world moved on rickety, wooden wheels and jostled her. Each dip sent lancing pain through her midsection, and she hissed. The sun was high in the sky, burning her eyes and making her sweat. Voices murmured around her, but they were far away, muted. The sky passed her by overhead.

It took only a moment or two to realize she must be in a wagon of some kind. How much time had passed since she’d been out? The last thing she could remember was Madara and the ruinous black fire he’d unleashed upon the battlefield. A surge of panic prompted Mito to jerk her arms and fumble about, searching. The scroll was lying just to her right, and a sigh of relief escaped her as she felt its steady heat in her palm.

There was something else to her right, but the sun was making it hard to see much of anything. She blinked hard, willing away the spots in her vision to get a better look.

“Haruka?”

The older woman still wore her Uchiha armor, emblazoned with the clan’s traditional fan on the shoulder. Blood coated her hands and leaked from small puncture holes in her armor, dry. She was breathing. Mito’s breaths were shallow, and any exertion could induce a cough that would feel like breaking every rib in her body all over again, but she just had to reach for Haruka. Transferring the scroll to her other side, Mito used her free hand to feel for Haruka’s. When she made contact, Haruka jerked.

“Haruka,” Mito rasped.

“Who’s there?”

Her throat was sandpaper, and every breath was a death rattle that would not end in death. Wherever the caravan was headed, Mito could only hope their destination was nearby.

“It’s Mito. Are you okay?”

“Mito?”

Clouds passed over the sun and shielded some of the light, mercifully. Mito blinked again, and her vision began to adjust. She could make out Haruka’s head, turned away from her. There was a bandage wrapped around her head, and Mito worried she was injured badly.
“I’m here,” Mito said.

Haruka shifted and slowly turned to face her companion. Mito didn’t comprehend what she was seeing right away, like it came in pieces, only coming together after several seconds, several breaths after which there was no mistaking it. She could only stare in shock at the horror that had befallen Haruka, a woman she admired and respected and considered a precious kindred spirit.

The bandage covered Haruka’s eyes, and it was soaked through with blood. Red rivers ran down her cheeks like tears over the ends of jagged rips in the skin, the rest of which were hidden beneath the bandages. Against her will, Mito began to cry for whatever it was she was seeing, whatever Haruka wasn’t seeing. She choked on a sob and gritted her teeth in pain as her chest flared in protest.

“I’m here,” Mito repeated, grabbing Haruka’s hand in hers. “I’m here.”

She couldn’t remember passing out again, her tears continuing to fall even in her sleep.

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Kenshin employed no medical ninja, and the few mixed in with the Uchiha and Uzumaki forces were exhausted. But civilian medics were competent enough to patch up even the worst wounds, at least until the injured could get shinobi treatment. Mito’s entire middle was wrapped tightly with bandages and sticky with ointment underneath for the pain. She had to marvel at the civilian medics’ knowledge and abilities. Like this, she could make the journey to Uzushiogakure and possibly stay conscious for the trip.

She hadn’t seen Madara since passing out on the battlefield, but memories of what had transpired reawakened in her, however unwilling. She wept for him in private, the thought of losing his father vicariously painful. For she could not imagine losing her own father, especially not by her own unwilling hand, and she’d seen how close Madara and his adoptive parent had been. But that wasn’t all of it. Haruka was blind, having gouged out her own eyes under the influence of an insidious genjutsu. And to make matters worse, Tajitsu was revealed to have been working with the enemy, a traitor who had sold out his own family. The Uchiha clan was in mourning, and they kept to themselves even more than before. Mito dared not approach any of them, even to ask after Madara.

Her heart went out to them. To have lost their leader, discovered a traitor in their ranks, and suffered Haruka’s loss of the Sharingan was a devastating blow. And it was her sympathy that made up her mind about what to do next.

“Are you sure, my lady?” Satto said as they spoke in private in Mito’s temporary chambers.

“I’ve never been more certain. This was our campaign, and we are partly responsible for Lord Kenshin’s decision to recruit the Uchiha for assistance,” Mito said.

“It isn’t that I have a problem with it, you know, but your lord father may not be as thrilled.”

“I will deal with my father if I must. In any case, I think it prudent to maintain a positive relationship with the Uchiha. My father wishes to avoid the conflicts of the mainland. How can we accomplish that if we make an enemy out of the Uchiha?”

Satto put up his hands in defeat. “Very well, then. But I suggest you discuss it with the Uchiha
“I plan to.”

A knock at the door admitted an armored samurai, one of Kenshin’s. “Excuse the intrusion, Lady Mito. My lord requests an audience.”

Mito nodded. “Thank you. I’ll be right out.”

The samurai excused himself, and Mito retrieved a green linen robe from her bed to wear over her clothes and bandages.

“I suggest we depart sooner rather than later,” Satto said, holding the door open for Mito. “If we plan to bring home guests, they’ll need treatment right away.”

“I agree. I won’t be long. Please assemble our party; I’d like to leave this afternoon.”

Mito parted ways with the General and followed the samurai, who’d been waiting at the end of the hall to escort her. Their walk was short, and Mito cast subtle glances at the Uchiha and samurai warriors throughout the castle, on the floor, leaning against walls, all either wounded or treating the wounded. She said nothing, however, until the samurai admitted her to a room to the west of the great hall. Kenshin was there, and so were Madara and Izuna, to Mito’s surprise.

“Ah, there she is,” Kenshin said, acknowledging Mito.

Mito dipped her head out of respect. “Lord Kenshin, you wished to see me.”

She tried to ignore Madara and Izuna, although it was easy enough when they barely seemed to notice her presence.

“Like I was telling the Uchiha here,” Kenshin said, “your payment will be sent over the next week. I already sent a bird to Lord Ensui.”

“That would be very agreeable.”

“Listen, er, Lady Mito,” Kenshin said. “I can’t say I’m looking forward to the next time I call on the Uzumaki, but at least I know now you’re worth the contract price. I guess my idiot brother had some sense in him, after all.”

“My lord is kind.”

Kenshin snorted. “I hate to say it, but I couldn’t have done this without you shinobi. Now, I don’t have any shinobi medics here. I suggest you get moving.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” Mito said. “We plan to depart this afternoon as soon as we’re ready.”

“Good.” Kenshin left to attend to his business, but before exiting he added, “You tell your lord father the next time he wants to send his daughter to do his job for him, I insist.”

Mito bit back a smile at Kenshin’s small praise. It faded, however, as soon as she realized she was alone with Madara and Izuna. They were making to leave.

“Wait!” she called, grabbing Madara’s wrist.

He didn’t turn to look at her, but Izuna did.
“My brother’s busy. We have a lot to do,” Izuna said.

A million thoughts raced through Mito’s mind. She wanted to apologize for their loss. She wanted to ask about the shift in leadership in the Uchiha clan, and how it would all pan out. She wanted to know about Haruka, if she was okay, if Madara was okay, and if she could do anything. But the one thing she thought might get through to Madara now beat out all the others.

“Come back to Uzushiogakure, please,” she pleaded. “We have many trained medical ninja who can treat your wounded. You’ll be welcome there.”

Madara spared Mito a glance, and she shivered at the emptiness in his gray eyes. He looked like he hadn’t slept in days. Dark circles rimmed his eyes, and his skin was pallid and drawn, like he was anemic. But he said nothing.

“We have many wounded,” Izuna spoke for his brother.

Mito shook her head. “Please, I beg you. I know the Uchiha don’t train many medical ninja, so use our resources. You’ll find a safe haven in Uzushiogakure for as long as you need. You have my word.”

Madara averted his gaze, but he didn’t pull away.

“Brother,” Izuna said.

“Fine,” Madara said. “I’ll make sure we’re ready to leave this afternoon.”

Mito released him, sensing that was all she would get from him for now. Madara exited the room, and Izuna followed. The younger Uchiha spared Mito a glance just before leaving, and Mito’s throat constricted. Izuna was gone before she could say anything further.

If there was any internal conflict over Uchiha leadership, Mito could not tell. Once the Uchiha and Uzumaki were on the road, the prospect of effective medical treatment and a safe place to rest seemed to be everyone’s shared motivation to move forward. But she had to wonder how long unity would last. With their leader dead and no trueborn male heir to succeed him, time would eventually reap the seeds of upheaval unless and until Madara could establish his legitimate claim. It wasn’t her business, but she worried for Madara and Izuna. She worried for Haruka, whom no one had been allowed to see once the group set out.

Satto had sent a bird ahead to Uzushiogakure, informing Ensui about the entourage he should expect in three days’ time. Kenshin had been generous enough to offer the shinobi caravans and wagons in which to transport those too weak to walk on their own. Uzumaki and Uchiha lay mixed together, though they did not complain in their injured states. Mito proceeded on foot, insisting it was her ribs that were mutilated, not her legs. She only hoped the treatment she’d received at Kenshin’s stronghold would stave off the pain until she could get home.

Progress was made largely in silence, even at night when the group stopped to rest and make camp. It was so different from the journey north, which had been filled with camaraderie, laughter, and an eagerness for battle. Now, they were an army of corpses marching south to their graves. Such was the mood of their troupe.

She looked for Madara, though it proved fruitless. She didn’t want to ask any of the Uchiha soldiers about him, either, not knowing the general sentiment towards him as acting leader. Soon,
all she could do was give up and turn in for the night. In a constant state of physical and mental
debilitation, they were the longest three days of her life.

The last night of the trip, Satto received a message from Ensui, which he immediately brought to
Mito’s attention.

“The Senju are currently your father’s guests. Not all of them, but a small garrison. Their leader,
Hashirama, is among them,” Satto whispered over an oil lamp in Mito’s tent.

Mito read her father’s letter slowly, absorbing the meaning of his flowing cursive and trying hard
not to let emotions overrule logic.

“It’s too late for us to turn back. I gave Madara my word, besides.”

“Aye, I’m not suggesting it. But this is a problem, regardless.”

“Tell my lord father we’ll be arriving tomorrow afternoon by boat. It’s not a lot of time, but he
should be able to make arrangements to separate the Senju from the Uchiha.”

“I’ll do that, but this is a delicate situation,” Satto reminded her. “The Uchiha just lost their leader.
There’s no telling what’ll happen.”

Mito was silent for a moment. She thought of Madara, how silent and empty he’d been when they
last spoke. The last thing he needed now was a possible confrontation with the Senju. It was a
disaster waiting to happen if the Uzumaki didn’t handle it the right way.

“I’ll speak with Madara now. This is too important to leave until morning. We must handle the
situation with care.”

Satto nodded. “I’ll send a response to Uzushiogakure as soon as we’ve had a word with the
Uchiha.”

“No, I can go alone. Please send the response now.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’m sure. I don’t want this to seem like a political talk. Politics are the last thing we need after
everything that’s happened.”

“Very well. Good night, my lady.”

Satto left and Mito followed. They parted ways outside, and Mito looked around. A few tents were
set up, but most of the Uchiha and Uzumaki soldiers slept under the stars. The crackle of campfires
was the only sound, save for a few whispers. The lack of energy was enough to make the night feel
darker despite the waxing gibbous moon overhead. Mito pulled her robe tighter around her
shoulders, ignoring the ache, and walked toward the Uchiha side of camp.

A young soldier stopped her. “Lady Mito,” he said, brown bangs obscuring one eye. “You
shouldn’t be here.”

“I have urgent business with Madara. It can’t wait until morning.”

The soldier straightened, increasing his height a couple inches, and peered down at Mito over his
nose. She held her ground, recognizing that tactic.

“Hikaku, let her pass,” Madara said from within the tent.
The soldier, Hikaku Uchiha, scowled. “You can’t be serious.”

“I’m about to get serious.”

Mito peered behind Hikaku, but the shadows of the tent hid Madara from sight. Hikaku grumbled something under his breath but stepped aside.

“Don’t try anything,” he said as she passed.

Mito paused and turned to regard Hikaku. She said nothing, but she didn’t have to. He met her gaze and blinked, pursed his lips, and she did not waver in her icy perusal. He looked away first, and it was all Mito needed to see. She let herself inside the tent.

Izuna was on the ground eating a plate of shredded chicken and bread with broth. He nodded to Mito when she entered. Madara stood at the opposite side of the tent, arms crossed and eyes glowing red with the Sharingan. She remembered the last time she’d seen red in his eyes, tears of blood fueling a fire not of this world. Something in him was different, and she had the sense to tread lightly.

It was just a dream, she reminded herself when images of him burning not Tajitsu, but her, resurfaced. He’s not like that.

“I’m sorry to disturb you at such a late hour,” Mito said. “I’ve just received some urgent news from my lord father that you should know.”

“What is it?” Izuna asked after swallowing a mouthful of food. “Something wrong?”

Mito wished she could breathe deep, shake the nerves from her body, but even shallow breathing was uncomfortable. “That depends.”

“Tell me,” Madara said.

“It’s...the Senju clan.” Mito paused, searching his eyes for some kind of reaction. “They’re currently guests in Uzushiogakure under my father’s protection.”

Madara let his arms fall to his sides, and he approached Mito. He stopped about a foot away, and it took all her strength not to avert her gaze.

“The Senju are in Uzushiogakure,” Madara repeated, low and guttural.

“A small garrison,” Mito clarified. “This changes nothing. You will still be welcome and receive the best medical treatment we can afford. I’ve already sent word to my father. You’ll be housed far from the Senju and have no contact with them—”

“I know you don’t believe that,” Madara interrupted. “You’re talking about hosting both the Uchiha and the Senju under one roof. We’ve just fought in a difficult battle and lost our leader. I can’t believe you’re even suggesting something so asinine.”

“The asinine thing to do would be to refuse your wounded adequate medical treatment when they’re less than a day from it,” Mito said, her tone clipped. “I understand that Uchiha and Senju have their differences—”

“No, you don’t understand.” Madara shot a hand out to grip her shoulder to make his point.

The flash of pain was enough to crumble Mito’s resolve, and she cried out in pain. She tried to
stifle the noise with a hand over her mouth, but the damage was done. Madara’s expression fell, and his eyes faded to black. He removed his hand and took a step back. Mito’s breath came in ragged gasps as she waited for the burn to pass, eyes squeezed shut.

No one said a word until she recovered, and she searched for Madara’s eyes once more. He was more composed, but gone was the freezing crevasse that had divided them only moments ago.

“No,” Mito said. “I don’t understand what it means to have a blood feud stretching back a millennium. But I do know that you need medical care and a safe place to recover. I’m offering that. Don’t turn it down for something as petty as bad company.”

Izuna stood up. “We won’t. But you have to make sure the Senju stay away from us.”

Mito nodded. “My father’s already making the necessary arrangements. But I expect the Uchiha not to pick any fights, either.”

She turned to excuse herself from the tent, but Madara’s voice stopped her. “They won’t. You have my word.”

She had the urge to look back at him, but decided against it. As much as it pained her to leave, whatever he was going through was his to reconcile with Izuna and the rest of the Uchiha.

“I’m truly sorry for your losses,” she said softly.

Mito clutched her aching side but remained as straight-backed as she could muster as she left. Madara had never been forthcoming about much of anything, and she could only imagine that an effort to get him to open up would end badly for everyone. Some things were better left to time.

She only hoped time would heal this wound instead of cause it to fester.

Madara watched her leave. His hand tingled, as though asleep. The hand he’d hurt her with. He didn’t know, he reasoned. She hid her pain well, perfectly, even. Princesses trained all their lives to hide their pain.

But I should have known.

His was so obvious to her, and yet he’d been totally blind to her suffering.

“Hashirama will be there,” Izuna said. “And Tobirama.”

Madara turned to his younger brother. “I know.”

“I don’t like it.”

“But you know we need those medics.”

“I know. The Uchiha always come first.”

Madara flexed his fingers, willing the tingle away, but it lingered.

“Madara,” Izuna said. “About Haruka—”

“Not now.”
Izuna hesitated, something he would never do in front of anyone else. “They’re listening now, but I don’t think it’ll last.”

Madara rubbed his eyes, wishing he could sleep but knowing it would never come. Perhaps never again. “I can’t think about that now. She needs treatment. Then...”

“Then, you’ll deal with the marriage,” Izuna said. “Without it—”

“I’m aware.”

A hand on Madara’s shoulder was almost comforting. He let out a tired breath. “I’m aware, Izuna.”

“Do you want me to tell the soldiers?”

“No. I’ll do it first thing in the morning. Stay with Haruka. I don’t want her to be without family.”

Izuna nodded and left the tent.

Alone, Madara merely stood still and focused on breathing.

“Father, give me strength,” he entreated the emptiness.

Give me the strength to keep my promises.

Sleep did not come easy these days. Every time Mito lay down for the night, she faced both physical and emotional agony. No position was comfortable with her insides ground to dust, and even if she did pass into the realm of slumber, only nightmares awaited her. She saw Mara dying, her neck snapping. She saw herself snapping Mara’s neck instead of the monster that had done the deed. Mito became the monster, and Mara’s screams were music, a symphony of violence only Mito could hear.

The one consolation was that they seemed not to last long, and she jerked awake in a cold sweat. The land of waking, however, awaited with fresh pain potent enough to stifle her whimpers. There was not much discerning the line between the two these past three days.

Now, as she returned from visiting Madara and Izuna, Mito extinguished the oil lamp and plunged her tent into darkness. settling onto her sleeping mat was an ordeal fraught with stabs of pain, sharper than usual thanks to Madara’s rough handling of her.

It was an accident, she chided herself.

The pain, however, was real enough. At least the night was warm and she wouldn’t have to bear the extra discomfort of shivers. Her hair was in a messy bun, but she let it down for the night. Red locks fell about her shoulders, shielding her from the night in a protective cocoon. Used to the perpetual ache somewhat, Mito began to doze. But a noise brought her back to reality, saved her from the recurring nightmare that had visited her every night. On instinct, Mito grabbed the kunai at her bedside.

“Who’s there?” she demanded.

The flap of her tent fluttered open and a person stepped inside. In the gloom, she could not make him or her out. Alarmed that she’d gotten no answer, Mito sat up straighter in bed, wincing at the pain but more concerned with her safety to care.
“Are you going to kill me with that?”

Madara’s voice was so soft that Mito almost thought she’d imagined it. But when he didn’t move, she relaxed and lowered her weapon.

“What are you doing here?”

Footsteps approached her bedside, and Madara crouched down next to her. This close, she could make out his face a little: the angle of his jaw, the line tracing his nose, and the demarcation between the whites of his eyes and the darkness at their centers. He remained silent, only his warm breath on her cheek a reminder that he was really here.

“Madara,” Mito said.

Tentative, she raised the hand that had abandoned the kunai and touched his cheek. The skin was smooth and taut, a reminder of his youth and hers. She ran her thumb just under his left eye, where his blood had flowed like tears. He let her.

“What is it?” she asked as his skin hummed under her touch. “The Uchiha?”

Madara didn’t answer right away, but the air around them grew heavy with pressure as he warred within himself over invisible demons. They haunted him, too.

“I don’t know if I can...” he trailed off.

Mito’s breath hitched in her throat. In the dark, she could barely see him, but she knew he could see her perfectly. Everything, his tragedy and his success, boiled down to those few simple words, words that had taken more effort for him to speak aloud than possibly any others ever had. Truth, doubt, fear, an entire lifetime in those six little words, and only Mito as his witness. If it were her, she wasn’t sure if she could have admitted to it at all.

But it wasn’t her; it as Madara.

“You can,” Mito said, leaning in close so their foreheads touched and his scent was all she knew of this world. “You must.”

His hand at her thigh, fisting the linen pants she wore. Anything to hold on to.

“I have faith in you,” she said.

Fingers found the shoulder he’d abused earlier, light as a butterfly’s wings. He said nothing, but he didn’t have to. They traveled to her long, long hair, wrapping themselves in its crimson aegis, and for the first time in her life Mito thought the length wasn’t so bad, after all. When he kissed her she saw stars, pain and pleasure, though he was careful not to make the same mistake twice. Madara never made the same mistake twice.

Gently, so as not to break her any more than the battle already had, he lowered her to the sleeping mat, angling her neck to rest over his arm. The combination of cushions and his body, caving to accommodate her, was enough to ease the ache just a little.

“Please stay,” Mito whispered.

He said nothing for the longest time, but it was fine with Mito. In his arms, she fancied the thought of evading the nightmares for just a few precious hours.
“Just for a while,” he said against the shell of her ear.

Whether dream or reality, Mito could not say. Sleep pulled her under, and she let it. Welcomed it. The last thing she could remember was the feel of his fingers tugging at her hair, gentle and lulling, like ocean waves.

“You have got to be kidding me,” Tobirama hissed as he paced back and forth in one of the palace gardens just outside the rooms Ensui had marked off for the visiting Senju clan.

“I wouldn’t kid about this,” Hashirama said. He sat on a stone bench, and his eyes followed his little brother’s pacing to and fro, to and fro. He grew dizzy.

“Well, the joke’s still on us, Hashi. The goddamned Uchiha and us under the same roof? You are crazy.”

“Ensui was very clear that he would be cordoning them off from us,” Tōka said. She sat on the ground watching a fat bumble bee attempt to suck the nectar from an exotic looking yellow flower, though it was having poor luck.

“Like boundaries mean anything.” Tobirama pinched the bridge of his nose. “I don’t like this. It smells like shit and you both know it.”

“Hey, calm down, Tobi. It’ll be fine so long as everyone heeds my request not to go near them or antagonize them, you know?” Hashirama spared his brother a smile.

Tobirama scowled. “It’s them I’m worried about, not us.”

“Is it true Tajima was killed in battle?” Tōka asked.

Hashirama sighed. “According to the correspondence Ensui got, yeah.”

“Which means Madara’s in charge now. Fantastic.” Tobirama threw up his arms. “As if this day couldn’t get any worse.”

“Tajitsu betrayed the Uchiha,” Hashirama went on, his eyes downcast. “He tricked Madara into killing Tajima.”

Tobirama paused in his pacing. “How’d he do that?”

“Genjutsu.”

Tobirama sighed and plopped down on the ground. “That’s dirty, even for an Uchiha.”

“Apparently, Tajitsu sold the Uchiha out to the feudal lord Yukimura Sanada,” Hashirama said. “You know what that means.”

“Saizō Kirigakure.”

The Senju cousins turned to the new voice that had joined them. Sasuke stood at the entrance of the small garden, his face impassive but hard. Hashirama rose.

“He got away, Sasuke.”
“Good. I’m the one who’s gonna kill that son of a bitch,” Sasuke spat.

“Do you have any idea why Saizō wanted to attack Kenshin’s territory?” Tōka asked. “I don’t believe he had irredentist motivations for a second.”

“I dunno,” Sasuke said. “But I’ll try to remember to ask him next time I see him. Before I rip his fucking throat out.”

Tobirama remained silent, and Hashirama cast him a curious glance. The younger Senju brother seemed deep in thought.

“Tobi?”

Tobirama shook his head. “Whatever it was, it didn’t succeed. Which means Saizō might try again.”

The silence between the garden’s four occupants was redolent with unsaid words, perhaps better left unspoken.

“It’s irrelevant so long as we don’t know what he was after,” Tōka said. “In any case, if Sanada’s forces lost the battle, they’ll be recovering. There should be no immediate threat for the time being.”

“I agree,” Hashirama said. “For now, let’s focus on getting ready to leave at the end of the week.”

“What about your treaty negotiation?” Sasuke asked. “No dice?”

“No. Ensui doesn’t want to forfeit the peace he’s created here. Can’t say I blame him.”

“It’s a sham,” Tobirama said. “He’s got to know that. Sooner or later, the fighting’ll spill over to this side of the continent. It always does.”

“I know that, but peace is tough to bet against when it’s done the Uzumaki well for so many years. They’re not involved in our feud.”

“They will be,” Tōka said, standing up and crossing her arms across her armored chest. “It’s only a matter of time. Better that they join us instead of the Uchiha.”

“Ensui’s not a stupid man,” Sasuke said. “He has to know you’re right.”

Hashirama shook his head. “The time isn’t right. I can’t do anything unless we force an alliance, but that would defeat the purpose entirely.”

“Maybe we should force it,” Tobirama said. “It’s for their own good.”

“No, it’ll never work. They have to believe in our cause. Whether it’s the Uzumaki or anyone else, they have to believe in the dream to make it come true. You can’t coerce the heart; you have to let it draw its own conclusions.”

Hashirama’s words hung in the air as thick as the scent of flower nectar all around them. The truth in them was hard even for him to accept. In the three years since his father’s death, Hashirama had lived by those words, coming to learn their truth the hard way. He didn’t mind, always patient enough to wait out storms, but even he was not immune to the frustrations of free will. Obstinacy. What good was a dream if the dreamers could not agree on how to make it a reality?

He thought of Madara, who’d just lost his father by his own unwilling hand and now shouldered
the pride of the Uchiha clan on his shoulders. Hashirama knew that weight, the burden it imposed, having lived it himself. He could say nothing to Tobirama, but Hashirama wanted to meet Madara when he arrived. Talk to him, the way they used to. And who knew? Maybe Uzushiogakure, a place of peaceful neutrality, could be the very forum they needed to see eye to eye. Hashirama could only hope and believe in the memory of the friend he’d made on the banks of the Naka River so many years ago.

One thing was certain: he had to try.

“My lord.”

A woman’s gentle voice drew Hashirama from his thoughts.

“Lena,” Sasuke said, smiling wide as though the previous conversation had never happened. “What brings you here?”

“I wanted to inform you all that the Uzumaki entourage has returned from the north. The Uchiha clan is with them. Lord Ensui is asking for you, Lord Hashirama.”

“That was fast,” Tobirama grumbled.

“I’ll be right there, thank you,” Hashirama said.

Sasuke approached the dark-skinned handmaiden and gestured toward the palace. “Let me walk you back inside. You’ll be at the homecoming feast tonight, right?”

Lena smiled shyly. “Yes, of course, but not to partake of the festivities. M’lord knows this well.”

“Just Sasuke, please. I’m no one’s lord, never have been, never will be.”

Tōka and Tobirama exchanged a knowing look, and Hashirama just smiled. “Excellent! I’m starving. I can’t wait for this feast!”

Never one to wait for food, Hashirama marched past Lena and Sasuke to look for Ensui.

When Mito had awoken the next morning, Madara was gone. She hadn’t even noticed his departure sometime in the night, but she had not slept so well in days. Smiling a little to herself, she didn’t even bother pinning her hair up for the morning’s boat ride to Uzushiogakure, content to let her wild, red tresses fly free in the sea breeze.

“My lady, perhaps you should rest,” Satto said on deck as he joined Mito at the starboard bow to gaze out over the seascape.

“I’ll have plenty of opportunity to rest when the medics get ahold of me, General. But thank you for your concern.”

Behind them, the barge carrying the Uchiha clan followed at a distance. It was funny, Mito thought. Clan lines separated them, and yet together they had been able to overcome the army of one of the most powerful warlords on the continent. She supposed it was of little consequence, but the idea stuck. Like the night Madara had trained with her. To fight with a shinobi trained in areas she could never even touch was exhilarating. Thinking of Madara drew heat to her cheeks.

“Mito, are you well? You look feverish,” Satto said.
Mito’s heart skipped a beat. “I—I’m fine! Just looking forward to being home again.”

Satto gave her a strange look, but he let it slide. They reached their destination in no time at all, it seemed to Mito. As soon as she disembarked, a team of medical ninja was on site to escort her and other wounded Uzumaki soldiers to the appropriate facilities.

“Please, the Uchiha need your skills more than we do,” Mito pleaded with them. “One of them has lost her eyes and needs immediate surgery. Prioritize her first.”

“Yes, my lady,” the head medic said as he escorted Mito and other Uzumaki soldiers to the infirmary. “I’ll oversee her surgery myself.”

“Thank you.”

She was able to watch the barge transporting the Uchiha dock and its passengers begin to disembark just before a medic put her under anesthesia to begin surgery on her mangled ribs. Dark heads filed off the barge to be greeted by medical ninja and Uzumaki officials. Mito wondered if her father would be among them, but having been rushed to treatment she didn’t get the chance to see for herself. Three sets of hands, glowing green and blue and purple with medical ninjutsu and ancient seals made to bind bones and skin, roved over Mito’s sleeping body, slowly reconstructing her. She felt none of it, remembered hardly any of it. And in the drug-induced sleep, the only dream that visited her was of the tide tugging at her hair, sweeping her out to sea where nightmares could not follow.

When Mito awoke the sun had disappeared from the sky, barely peeking over the horizon, though in her disorientation she could not tell east from west. Like coming back to life, Mito filled her lungs with air she could swear she had not breathed for a lifetime. It was too much at a time, though, and she ended up coughing.

To her relief, the pain in her chest was negligible. She poked at her ribs, which had been wrapped with fresh bandages for support, but was met with no excruciating spike of pain. She was back to normal. Sitting up in bed, Mito pulled back the curtain next to her bed and peered outside. Townspeople walked in the distance, though she couldn’t make out their faces. Boats were departing from docks along the rocky coast to spend the day at sea, fishing.

Morning, then.

Eager to see her father and ensure that there had been no problems thus far with the Uchiha and the Senju, Mito slipped out of bed and walked to the door. The early morning staff were few, and sneaking past them was child’s play. There was something about hospitals that did not sit well with Mito, and she could find no reason to linger. Not when there was so much to do. Wrapping the white linen robe someone had brought for her around her body and fastening the tie at her waist, she darted out the front door.

The trek to her family’s estate was not long. She breathed deeply, having missed the smell of salt in the air. There were times in the battle that she thought she’d never breathe this air again, but instead of lifting her spirits, the thought only dampened them. Mara would never walk along Uzushiogakure’s beaches again, never taste the air. Even though Mito had not been the one to snap Mara’s neck (as her nightmares were wont to impress upon her), she was still responsible for the woman’s death. The gifted Uzumaki medical ninjas could heal her broken body, but they could do nothing for her ailing heart.
Mito’s feet carried her to a side entrance in her father’s estate, and it was only a matter of minutes before she made it to her room. To her surprise, Lena was there going through her wardrobe.

“Lena,” Mito said approaching the older woman.

Startled, Lena had no warning before Mito all but tackled her in a fierce hug. The moment passed and Lena returned the ardent embrace, smoothing Mito’s long, loose hair down her back.

“Mito! I was just going to see you at the infirmary and bring you fresh clothing.” She pulled back and took Mito’s face in her hands, searching for any sign of illness. “My goodness.”

“I’m fine,” Mito said. “Nothing the medics couldn’t fix.”

Lena shook her head. “No, it’s not that.” She smiled. “You left here a child, but now I see a woman who’s learned something of the world outside these walls. What happened out there?”

An image of Mara’s shy smile flashed in her mind’s eye, but Mito forced a smile. “Much. We won the campaign.”

“I heard.” Lena leaned in closer and whispered, “And you brought the Uchiha clan back with you.”

“Yes, I wanted to speak with my father about that, make sure everything is going according to plan.”

“So far there have been no incidents. Your lord father has cordoned off the southern wing for the Senju clan’s exclusive use. The Uchiha will be in the north. Tents have been erected for their soldiers. There are so many of them!”

“Not as many as there were,” Mito said, averting her gaze.

Lena watched her young mistress, thoughtful. After a moment, she released Mito. “Well, I’ll draw a bath for you. It’s still early for breakfast, and your lord father hasn’t emerged from his chambers yet.”

“Thank you, Lena.”

“It’s good to have you back, m’lady. You were sorely missed.”

Lena left to prepare the bath and Mito walked to her bed, where Lena had laid out an outfit for her to wear. It was a silver and navy yukata, but Mito frowned at the clothing.

“Mito? The bath is ready for you!” Lena called from the attached bathroom.

“All right!”

Casting one last look at the fine clothes on her bed, Mito retreated to the bathroom to get cleaned up. About a half hour later, she was feeling refreshed and famished. Instead of the entire yukata ensemble, she dressed in pants and a light shirt, tying it all together with a thick, leather belt. She wore the yukata’s coat over it.

“Are you planning to fight again so soon?” Lena asked, eyeing Mito’s choice in clothing.

“With the company we’re keeping, anything’s possible.”

Lena combed Mito’s hair and used a towel to catch the excess water from the ends. “You’ll have to let it dry before I can put it up.”
“That’s okay. I don’t mind it down.”

Lena gave Mito a curious look. “Perhaps you’ve changed more than I thought.”

Mito shrugged. “I’m starving. I’ll go speak with my father now.”

“Good, I’ll walk you.”

The two women left Mito’s private chambers and headed for the Sunroom, where Ensui preferred to take his breakfast. Official business was forbidden in that room, which was open and overlooking a hanging garden, beyond which lay the ocean. When Mito arrived, Ensui was having breakfast alone. Lena bowed and excused herself to give the family some privacy.

Ensui rose at the sight of his only daughter and smiled. Abandoning formality, he pulled her into a warm embrace, and Mito let herself take comfort in his strong arms.

“Father, I’ve missed you.”

“Not as much as I’ve missed you.” He pulled back and surveyed her appearance. “It seems battle has made a few changes in you.”

Mito lowered her head. “More than a few.”

“I trust you did your duty and didn’t burden General Satto or the Uchiha?”

“Of course, Father. Though, the battle was difficult for everyone.”

Ensui frowned, and she knew he was not pleased about her fighting, not that he’d expected otherwise. “Let’s just not make this a habit. And no more outbursts in front of guests, am I understood?”

“Yes, Father.” Mito bit back the retort that sat upon her tongue. This was not the time.

“Good. Tell me, how was Kenshin?”

Mito sat opposite her father and began to recount the tale of her journey to him over breakfast. She told him everything, although she left out her personal association with Madara. When she got to the part about how they’d beaten back Sanada’s forces, Ensui’s expression became somber.

“I’m pleased the campaign was a success, but what you’re saying is worrisome. What do you mean by black flames? I’ve never seen such a thing.”

“I hardly know myself. Something in Madara changed when Tajima died. Whatever it was, it saved us all.”

“I want you to be careful around the Uchiha, Mito. You know they’re a proud clan, but with the death of their leader and no legitimate heir to assume the position, there’s no telling what they’ll do. It would be in our best interests to send them on their way once they’re well enough to make the journey.”

Mito fought to keep her emotions in check. “With all due respect, Madara can control the Uchiha. I know the situation is unique, but...”

“But what?”

She held her father’s gaze. “But he can do it. It doesn’t matter that he isn’t Tajima’s trueborn son.
He’s the only one who can lead the Uchiha now.”

“Whether or not that’s true is beside the point. We’ll send them on their way as soon as we can. Their internal affairs are their own, and I don’t plan on getting involved. I’ll need your help to keep them separated from our other guests. I don’t want any accidents.”

“I’ll do whatever I can.”

A knock at the door admitted General Satto, who wore none of his usual armor. “Ah, apologies. I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“Not at all, General,” Ensui said, rising. “Please, sit and have breakfast. I have business to attend to, but after I’ll need your assistance in managing our guests.”

Satto nodded. “Yes, sir.”

Ensui excused himself from the Sunroom and left Mito with Satto, who lingered.

“General, is something the matter?” Mito asked.

“No, my lady, I just heard you were back here and wanted to make sure you were all right.”

Mito smiled. “Thank you, but I’m just fine. The medics did an excellent job.”

Satto approached. “But something’s bothering you. It has been since the campaign. I never got a chance to ask.”

Mito’s gaze fell. He knew her so well. “It’s Mara.”

Satto put a hand on Mito’s shoulder. “I had a feeling. This was your first battle. Loss is new to you.”

Mito pulled away and stood at the edge of the porch, where the gardens began. “It’s my fault she’s dead. If I’d just been smarter, I could have killed that monster sooner.”

Satto did not join her at the edge of the porch, but she could sense his hesitation.

“There was nothing you could’ve done. What matters is that you’re alive.”

Mito frowned and turned to him. “What matters is that I could have prevented it. I wasn’t strong enough.”

Satto shook his head. “Mara was a true soldier, pledged to defend you in that campaign to her death. It wouldn’t have mattered if it’d been her or another to intervene on your behalf. She was just following orders.”

Understanding dawned like another punch to the middle that shattered Mito’s ribs all over again. “Are you saying you ordered her to give up her life for me if the need arose?”

“Mara died doing her duty. Her death was honorable, and she’ll be remembered.”

Mito was beside herself with fury. “How dare you.” Clenching her fists, the pressure in her chest burst. “How dare you!”

“Your life had to be preserved at all costs. Mito, you’re the princess of the Uzumaki clan—”
“My title does not make my life better than anyone else’s! My title is not worth the life of a soldier —”

“It’s worth the lives of a hundred soldiers!” Satto shouted.

Mito was shocked into silence. He had never raised his voice to her for as long as she’d known
him.

“You’re a foolish old man,” she said before she could stop herself. “You don’t even know what
you’re saying.”

It was Satto’s turn to be shocked, but he kept his emotions at bay. “Aye, I’m an old man. Far too
old perhaps to be your charge. But my age has opened my eyes to things I never would’ve noticed
at your age. I’ll be damned if I let you squander your chance at the life you were meant for.”

Mito could not listen anymore. She retreated to the garden so she would not have to walk past him.

“He’s wrong.

Mito repeated the mantra in her head as she ran among brambles and flowerbeds, under hanging
ivy and lilac bushes. She ran until the roar of the ocean drowned out that bitter voice in her head.
Atop Uzushiogakure’s rocky shores, she came to an abrupt halt at the edge of the sea. Unshed tears
stung her eyes, but they didn’t fall. Sea spray kissed her reddened cheeks and wove its airy fingers
through her loose, long hair.

Satto could not be right. Her father had raised her to believe that no one life was to held in higher
regard than another, lest Mito become arrogant. She could understand the desire to keep her alive
given her position, but it was no excuse to order a soldier to trade her life for Mito’s. As if she
didn’t hate herself enough for what had happened.

And yet, a small part of her regretted her attitude with Satto. They had always gotten along well,
and she respected him as much as she did her own father. He had trained her to be the warrior she
was today, now proven in battle. She believed him when he said she had potential, having always
had a flair for her clan’s fūinjutsu beyond that of other shinobi her age. Most of all, she regretted
her harsh words.

But he’d stepped out of line.
“He’s wrong,” she said aloud, as though hearing it would make it true.

“We men usually are.”

The unfamiliar voice startled Mito, and she whirled to face her unannounced companion. A young man with olive skin, dark hair tied back at his shoulders, and kind eyes stood a short distance behind her. He offered her a lazy smile, like it was so natural for him that he didn’t have to think about it. He wore no sigils or armor, nothing to denote his identity or rank, though she did not recognize him.

“What? No, never! I was just walking and, well, I happened to see you almost launch into the sea. I didn’t know you could swim here with the whirlpools so close and all.”

Mito frowned. “I wasn’t going to jump in. That would be suicide. These rocks extend into the sea for about twenty feet from here.”

He put a hand behind his head to scratch an imaginary itch. “Right, of course you weren’t. My mistake, haha!”

They watched each other a moment longer. Mito tucked her billowing hair behind an ear, but it was futile with the breeze disturbing it.

“So...who’s wrong?” he asked.

Mito’s thoughts went back to Satto, and she averted her gaze toward the seascape, her previous ire returning. “It’s not your concern.”

“Well, maybe he doesn’t know he’s wrong. You could try talking to him?”

Mito sighed, exasperated. “We don’t agree on the problem. It’s not even a problem for him, actually, and that’s just the problem.” She paused. “Why am I even telling you this? Who are you? What are you doing all the way out here?”

“Wait, the problem is that there’s no problem at all?”

“Oh, never mind.”

Mito hopped off the rock she was standing on, arriving on level ground with him. He was quite tall, now that she had a chance to see him on equal footing. He also didn’t press her for details and offered that lazy smile he’d worn when he’d first arrived.

“Oh! I’m sorry, that was rude.” He bowed low, and his ponytail slipped over his right shoulder. “I’m Hashirama, leader of the Senju clan.”

Mito gaped at him. Humiliation stung the back of her throat. She’d just complained like a child in front of the Hashirama Senju, world-renowned shinobi and her father’s honored guest. A part of her wished she could seal herself into one of the sea shells littering the shore, just to disappear and be
alone with this new ignominy.

When she didn’t respond, Hashirama chanced a look up from his bowed position, which made him wrinkle his forehead and hang open his mouth to see her right. Mito’s flush of embarrassment soon turned to confusion, then something closer to mystified curiosity. Like a child waiting to be pardoned, and she the scolding mother.

Hashirama’s eyes began to cross as he tried to look up at her while bent over. “Um... Is that okay with you?”

It was so ridiculous that she could not help but laugh. And still he continued to look up at her from that awkward angle, like he’d forgotten how to stand up properly. Mito covered her mouth with a hand to stifle the giggles.

The Hashirama Senju, looking like a nervous fish out of water. Her transient embarrassment was a thing of the past.

“Oh my god, just please stand up,” Mito said as she fought to calm down.

Hashirama stood, and he continued to stare openly at her, like he’d never dreamed a person like her was capable of laughter.

“I’m sorry,” Mito said, still fighting back a grin. “That was uncalled for.”

“No, never,” Hashirama said a little too quickly, his expression relaxing, almost dream-like. “It’s not a problem.” He paused. “I mean, it’s not a problem that there’s no problem.”

Her smile was proving difficult to shake, but she just shook her head.

“It’s not a problem at all,” she said.

“Good.” He gestured toward her. “And what’s your name?”

Mito dipped into a bow but made sure not to hold it long. “Mito Uzumaki.”

When she rose he was looking at her like she’d just told him he smelled of horse manure.

“Mito?”

Mito gave him an odd look. “I am,” she said tentatively, almost not believing it herself. “Is that okay?”

“Yeah, it’s just...wow.” He looked her up and down. “Your father’s just so, and you’re so...”

Mito was growing annoyed at not knowing what his complaint was. “So what?”

“So beautiful.”

As natural as his smile, his candor was so fluid that Mito would never have doubted it. It was all over his face, the way his gaze lingered but didn’t pierce, the way he was tempted to smile, like he was truly pleased. Men had called Mito beautiful before, many out of courtesy, some out of genuine feeling, and always because they thought it was what she wanted to hear. What woman didn’t want to know she was coveted? But never had the confession made her feel quite like this, like she’d embarrassed herself all over again and once more wished to shrink and disappear. And yet, the smile he’d unwittingly drawn out of her earlier refused to depart without a last word.
She bit the inside of her cheek. “Are you calling my father ugly?”

Hashirama’s air of relaxed admiration turned to abject horror at her words. “Whoa, wait, that’s not really what I meant.”

Mito watched him expectantly, but it only served to make him more apologetic.

“Hey, you’re not gonna tell him, right? I didn’t mean it that way…”

*How is this man one of the most feared shinobi on the continent?*

Appearances, however, could be very deceiving. Mito regretted the thought as soon as she had it. She of all people should have known better.

“It’ll be our little secret,” she said.

“Oh man, great. You’re a lifesaver.”

Mito spared him a smile and walked past him.

“Hey, wait!” Hashirama fell into step with her. “Where’re you going?”

Mito shrugged. “Somewhere to get my mind off that problem I was telling you about.”

“Oh, I see.” He furrowed his brow and nodded to himself. “I better go with you, then.”

“And why is that?”

“Well, how else will you get your mind off it?”

Mito shook her head. “That’s nice of you, but I’m perfectly capable of…”

She trailed off as he held a hand out to her, palm up. In its center, a single red rose grew, sprouting thorns and bursting from bud to full bloom, all in the span of a few seconds. Mito watched, entranced, at the life Hashirama held in the palm of his hand. He closed his fingers around it and handed it to her. She accepted it without a word, touching the flower’s fleshy petals with her fingers and marveling at its thick fragrance, almost heady.

“Capable of what?” he asked.

“Hm?”

She realized her slip too late, but Hashirama only grinned.

“See? Your mind’s already far away,” he said.

Perhaps if he were anyone else, she would find him a little cheesy. But everything about him, his smile, the look in his eyes, the way he spoke, was so sincere that she couldn’t imagine not taking him seriously.

It occurred to her that the Uchiha, that Madara, must hate this man. But even in just the few minutes they’d spent together, Mito was sure she never could.

“I guess it is,” she said. “All right. I wouldn’t mind some company.”

“Excellent! This is a perfect opportunity to tell you about the time my brother and I had to take on
the fearsome Fat Louie and his underlings...”

Mito twirled his rose between her fingers, content to listen to him take her far, far away from here if only for a little while.
The trick to convincing others of your value is to make your goals theirs. Saizō Kirigakure had lived his life by that philosophy, had manipulated even the greatest of men to his way of thinking simply by letting them think they had all the bright ideas. It had kept him alive and coveted no matter which way the tide flowed. Yukimura Sanada was a shrewd man immune to flattery and fancy, but even he had his weaknesses.

“You failed me, Saizō. I never lost a battle before this,” Sanada said as he poured himself a cup of hot sake but didn’t drink it.

Saizō couldn’t be sure whether the red flush in his face was due to anger or inebriation. Either way, it would make this go easier. When persuading, it was always best to have a partner who let his emotions cloud his judgment.

“You’re right, and I accept full responsibility. After all, I should have known the Uchiha would prove too much for just the Green Battalion.”

“Yes, you should have. And what’s worse, you came back empty-handed. I’m beginning to think you’ve outlasted your usefulness.”

Saizō stood by the window of Sanada’s private lounge in his vast estate in Water Country. It was dark out, well past midnight, and red lanterns glowed through the thick mists rolling in with the gentle waves upon the shore nearby. He didn’t look at his lord and commander, lest he give away his indifference.

“Perhaps,” Saizō allowed. “After all, I’m only human. Of course, so are the Uchiha.”

“I’m not in the mood for your riddles. If you’ve got something to say, out with it. Otherwise, I’m throwing you out.”

“No riddles, my lord. Just that there are two ways to look at this situation. Surely a man of your experience can recognize an opportunity this ripe for the taking?”

Sanada tapped the rim of his cup. “What do you mean, ‘opportunity’?”

Please, at least try to stand up for yourself.

“The Uchiha returned to Uzushiogakure for medical attention. They’re badly injured after the campaign.”

“I’ve no desire to engage the Uchiha,” Sanada grumbled. “Besides, my spies tell me the Senju are there, too. You don’t think I’ve lasted this long because I chased losing battles.”

“Of course not. But you just said it yourself: the Senju are also in Uzushiogakure. There is your opportunity to strike.”

“You’re not half as bright as you like to think you are.” Sanada sipped his sake and wiped his mouth on his sleeve, leaving a thin trail of saliva on the fabric. “My father was like you, you know. Thought the Uchiha and the Senju were his ticket to the shogunate. But shinobi are not like us samurai: you lot work for money, not loyalty. Eventually, both sides betrayed him, too caught up in
their own petty feuding. Do you know what happens to people who get in the middle of Uchiha and Senju?”

“Enlighten me.”

“Have you ever heard of my father?”

“I can’t say I have.”

“Exactly. Because he lost what matters most when he decided to get involved with the Uchiha and the Senju. His men abandoned him, even his own family. Not even his memory survived. It’s a fate worse than death. But not me. Those two, they’ll destroy each other one day. I’d rather sit back and let them. That kind of mindless battle lust is all you shinobi know.”

Saizō kneeled on the tatami mat and rested his hands on the low table. “It’s exactly that which I’m counting on. Uchiha and Senju gathered in one place. Doesn’t that intrigue you at all?”

“I want no part of their feud.”

Saizō shook his head. “Certainly not. And I’m sure the Uzumaki don’t, either. Such a shame, really.”

“What are you getting at?”

“The campaign may have been a bust, but I prefer to think of it as a first step. Shukaku didn’t appear, sadly. I suppose we didn’t shed enough blood. If we’d staged the battle somewhere more populous, though, maybe we could have lured the beast out.”

Sanada was silent a moment. “The Uchiha and Senju are in Uzushiogakure.”

“Which is a large settlement full of shinobi and civilians,” Saizō added.

“If I were to attack Uzushiogakure, maybe it would be enough to draw the beast out.”

Saizō poured himself a cup of Sanada’s expensive sake. “Now, there’s a thought.”

“The Uchiha and the Senju hate each other... They’ll be too busy fighting each other to deal with my forces. The Uzumaki are no fighters. It would be a bloody massacre.” Sanada turned red with glee, his eyes glazed and the cogs turning beneath his shiny, bald head. “I’ll be damned, it’s just sitting there waiting for me.”

Saizō said nothing, calculating his silence for Sanada to convince himself beyond the shadow of a doubt. He raised his cup. “Does this mean you’ve made a decision, my lord?”

Sanada bared his teeth in a grin and clinked his refilled cup with Saizō’s. “We march at dawn.”

Saizō smiled, his colorless lips twisting in a smirk that Sasuke had always told him gave him the creeps. “What an excellent idea.”

Hashirama hadn’t counted on spending the day with Mito, but he’d lost track of time and stopped caring. He still hadn’t figured out what had upset her when he ran into her, but whatever it was no longer mattered. She laughed around him, and he racked his brain for anything that would make her laugh some more.
“No, you must be joking. Your poor brother!” she said in between giggles.

“It’s true!” Hashirama said. “He’s really the best Suiton user I’ve ever known, but the guy can’t get anywhere near water. It’s pretty silly.”

“More like downright ridiculous.” She ran her fingers through her long hair, twisting it behind her back.

“You should’ve seen the boat ride here from the mainland. He couldn’t keep his lunch down. Aw, I felt a little bad about it.”

Mito snorted. “Please. Everyone gets their sea legs. Your brother will just have to make a more concerted effort.”

They had wandered into the garden outside the rooms Ensui had set aside for the visiting Senju clan. Hashirama led the way, walking backwards so he could see Mito.

“What’s this about your brother?”

Tōka stood in the doorway to the garden, having overheard Hashirama and Mito’s conversation and come out to see what was going on. Hashirama gave her a lopsided smile and waved, noting her loose yukata. Everyone was relaxing here. Something about this little place made him want to lie back and just stare at the blue sky. Perhaps it had a similar effect on the others.

“Tōka! Oh, you must meet Mito. Come on!” Hashirama took Mito by the hand and led her to the porch.

“Lady Mito, it’s my pleasure. Your father speaks very highly of you,” Tōka said.

“Please, just Mito. And the pleasure is all mine. I’m embarrassed to say I was in a mood this morning when Hashirama found me on the beach. I can hardly remember what had me so down.”

Tōka smirked. “He’s got that effect. I think he secretes something. No one’s figured it out.”

“Huh? What’s that supposed to mean?” Hashirama asked.

Mito and Tōka ignored his distress.

“Mito, you should join us for lunch. I’m sure the others will be happy to finally meet you now that you’ve recovered from the campaign up north.”

Mito smiled. “I’d be delighted, thank you.”

Tōka led Mito inside. Hashirama frowned and sniffed his shoulder, then his hands, then his armpit.

“I don’t think I secrete anything...” he mumbled. “Oh, hey, wait for me!”

He jogged after the two women and followed them to the small dining hall where Tobirama and Sasuke were already sitting down for the midday meal. Tōka was busy making the introductions when he slumped down next to Tobirama. The dining hall was more of a room with a long table taking up most of the space. Various dishes sat along the middle, already missing food. Hashirama rubbed his hands together and tried to decide what he wanted.

“So this is the famous Tobirama,” Mito said. “Your brother has told me so much about you.”

Tobirama frowned. “All terrible things, I’m sure.”
“Aw, don’t be like that, Tobi,” Hashirama said through a mouthful of crab and potato croquette.

“I hear you’re not much of a sailor,” Mito said with a teasing smile.

Tobirama rested his head in his hand as though it pained him to keep his head upright in the face of such gratuitous shame. “See what I mean?”

Sasuke patted Tobirama’s back. “Lighten up, kid. You gotta admit it’s pretty pathetic that you get as queasy as a newborn when you’re on a boat.”

“I hate all of you,” Tobirama grumbled sourly. “Mito, I apologize for my family and for everything they have ever done and ever will do to you.”

Mito laughed lightly.

“Say, Mito,” Hashirama said. “How’d the campaign go? You worked pretty closely with the Uchiha, I hear. What’d you think of them?”

Tōka gazed fixedly at her soup, which had become the most fascinating dish on the table to her, while Tobirama’s dour expression fell even more. Mito suppressed a shiver at the palpably chilly atmosphere mere mention of the Uchiha had brought out of the Senju family.

“I realize I’m not among any friends of the Uchiha here,” Mito began, “but nevertheless, I will say that they were highly professional and dependable in battle. I was grateful for their expertise and input, both in our political dealings and on the battlefield.”

Hashirama smiled, all but oblivious to the sourness his family members exuded. “I’m glad to hear that.”

Mito blinked, surprised at his candor and puzzling support. Her surprise must have shown because Hashirama had a thoughtful look on his face as he watched her.

“Listen, I’m not really involved in this family feud,” Sasuke said, “so I’ll say this for the Uchiha. They know how to fight, and you gotta give ‘em some credit for that. There’s a reason they can go toe to toe with the Senjū.”

“I think you’re severely overestimating their capabilities,” Tobirama interjected. “They only know one thing: the kill. It’s like giving a drunkard the keys to the liquor cabinet. Once they start, they just don’t stop. Before you know it, you got a mess of vomit and entrails to clean up and nothing to show for it but a headache.”

“Well, that’s pretty disgusting to think about,” Sasuke said.

“I agree,” Tōka said. “They’re fighting to defend themselves, true, but they go overboard. They always have.”

Tobirama and Tōka exchanged a look, but Hashirama thought little of it. He knew how close the two of them were, and he was happy to let them keep their secrets so long as they didn’t get in the way of the clan’s objectives.

“Still, don’t you guys think you’re being a little harsh?” Hashirama said. “At the end of the day, the Uchiha aren’t so different from us. We’ve wronged them just as much as they’ve wronged us. How can we sit here and look down on them when we’re no better?”

Tobirama said, “Because we’re right.”
“I just think there’s a better way,” Hashirama said more to himself than to his irascible brother. “There’s gotta be. It’s not about who’s right and who’s wrong. It’s about figuring out a compromise that’ll work for everyone.”

“And here we go again.” Tobirama crossed his arms. “You know, Hashi, a dream’s just a dream. And where the Uchiha are concerned, it’s a goddamned nightmare.”

“They will never forgive us, and we can never forgive them,” Tōka said. “There is too much blood between us.”

Hashirama sighed. As usual, he was outnumbered.

“What do you think, Mito?” Sasuke asked. “You just worked with them. Think there’s any hope?”

Hashirama watched their guest as she took a moment to contemplate Sasuke’s question.

“It’s not my place to say,” she began. “But, if one were speaking hypothetically, I suppose this sort of situation is historically dismal. Both sides have incurred tremendous losses, and both sides have a right to demand retribution. It’s a cycle that has repeated since time immemorial. But...I believe in the power of individuals to rise above the limitations of the group. If someone truly extraordinary were to demand change, others might listen. Traditions are not so easily broken, but that doesn’t mean they’re immutable.”

Her gaze was far away, as though she were remembering something. Her words resonated with Hashirama, like she’d read his mind and said everything he could not.

“Yeah, I think you’re exactly right,” he said. “I wanna believe that, too.”

Mito met his gaze and held it. She was young and green under the heavy weight of her title. But at the same time, her words carried a kind of wisdom he was sure he could never grasp. It was in the way she held herself, the way she walked, the way she smiled at just the right time. Everything, so perfectly planned and guarded. Leaving only that single moment of unguarded vulnerability that brought her to life, the truth underneath the layers of fine silk, and he couldn’t look away.

“Lena, join us!” Sasuke said.

Mito and Hashirama broke eye contact, and Hashirama noticed the kind serving maid, Lena, trying in vain to pull away from Sasuke, who had her by the hand.

“Oh, no, I couldn’t. I have so much work to do, m’lord.”

“Just Sasuke, please, I insist. And come on, you work so hard. Everyone’s gotta eat.”

“I don’t think I should...”

“Lena, please join us,” Mito said. “I won’t need your help this afternoon, so you’ve got the rest of the day off.”

Lena blushed. “Oh, well, that’s very kind, Lady Mito.”

“Perfect! Come on, you’ve gotta try this lobster pâté, I mean, I didn’t even know you could make lobster pâté. Amazing, right?” Sasuke said, scooting over to make room for Lena.

She laughed. “I’ve had it many times, m’lo—I mean, Sasuke. I make it myself.”

“No way! Really? Wait, what else can you make?”
“Like I said, apologies in advance,” Tobirama said to Mito across the table.

Mito and Tōka laughed, but Hashirama could only smile. It was so nice to have others join them. To remind him that there was more in the world than just the fight. That he was more than just the leader of a great shinobi clan. Sometimes, it was okay just to break bread with friends and family, forget the world. Smile.

He could really get used to this.

Like the tide that inevitably returns to shore, Hashirama could not help but think of Madara after a while. He watched the tide now as it rose and flooded the rocky beaches of Uzushiogakure, unrelenting, tireless, faithful. No matter how far he went, how high he rose, he always remembered Madara, whose memory flooded him like the tide coming in. Unrelenting, tireless, faithful. The last time they’d crossed swords had been some months before, and as usual it had ended in a bloody retreat. It was always the same, always a fight, but one neither of them could ever win. One Hashirama wasn’t sure he wanted to win.

But he couldn’t tell Tobirama that. He couldn’t tell anyone that.

Getting away from the Senju hall was so easy that he hadn’t even realized he was doing it. The night was young, the sun had barely set, and the edges of twilight still cast a low glow over the village. Moonflowers were just waking up to greet their pale god, their fleshy petals thick and white as milk. They bloomed brighter with Hashirama’s passing, though he paid them no mind. The air was warm and damp, too warm even for the summer yukata he wore, so he pulled his long hair back in a ponytail to fend off the heat. There was no one about.

“You there. Identify yourself.”

No one except the Uchiha, watchers in the night.

Hashirama stepped into the light and met the soldier’s gaze, but he said nothing. The Uchiha soldier, no older than Hashirama himself, backtracked a few steps and drew his sword. His eyes bled red with fear and confusion at the sight of his mortal enemy.

“Hashirama Senju,” he spat.

“This is neutral ground, Uchiha,” Hashirama said. “Think before you attack me.”

The Uchiha soldier snarled. “What do you want?”

“I only want a word with Madara.”

“He doesn’t want any words with you.”

“I’ll let Madara decide that.”

Footsteps.

“Hikaku? What’s going on?”

Another Uchiha emerged from the dwelling, one Hashirama recognized instantly.

“Izuna,” he said.
Izuna stiffened. “Hashirama. What brings you here?”

“I want to speak with your brother. Would that be all right with you?”

“Izuna, this is crazy. We can’t just let him in,” Hikaku hissed.

Izuna watched Hashirama, his gaze heavy. “We don’t have a choice. I’m not strong enough to defeat him, and neither are you.”

“I’m not here to fight you,” Hashirama said, taking a step forward.

Izuna chuckled. “Don’t you get it? We’re always fighting. It’s our nature.”

Hashirama’s expression fell. Izuna had always been harder to read than Madara. Tobirama was constantly complaining about how difficult he was, as an opponent on the battlefield and at the negotiating table, but Hashirama had never paid Izuna much attention when he could count on Tobirama to take care of the problem in his stead. Something told him that was a mistake, but he didn’t have the time to dwell on it now.

“I have no intention of fighting now. But I do intend to speak to your brother.”

“I can’t stop you,” Izuna said. “Follow me.”

Hashirama followed Izuna inside down a hardwood hallway, much like the corridors the Senju occupied. They passed several closed doors until finally arriving at the one at the end of the hall on the left.

“I’ll wait here,” Izuna said.

The warning was clear: try anything, and Hashirama would have to deal with Izuna personally.

“Thank you,” he said, pulling back the sliding door and entering the room.

It was sparsely furnished, but what was present was lavish. The dresser was carved of pure mahogany, and a low table sat in the center of the room with a porcelain tea set, hand painted. A balcony opened up overlooking a garden brimming with moonflowers and begonias. Lightning bugs had just begun to wander the shadows, searching for mates with their scintillating patterns. A light breeze filtered in from outside.

Madara sat on the porch. The Uchiha fan stared back at Hashirama from his back.

“What do you want?” he asked.

Hashirama approached and took a seat next to Madara. The last rays of daylight were slowly disappearing below the horizon, and the moon was rising in the east.

“You know what I want.”

Madara chuckled. “You never change.”

His hair was longer, unruly. It suited him. So young, and Hashirama felt like they were old men reminiscing about a lifetime past. Perhaps they were, in a way. But so much had changed. They just didn’t want to admit it.

“But you have. I heard about Tajima. I’m sorry.”
Madara stared steadfastly ahead, his jaw set and his gaze hard. He said nothing.

“You lead the Uchiha now,” Hashirama went on. “You did it, just like you said you would.”

“Is that what you told yourself when you watched your father die in your arms?”

Hashirama frowned at Madara’s barely concealed hostility. “You know what I mean.”

“No, I’m sure I don’t.”

Madara stood up, and Hashirama rose to meet him.

“If you mean you know what it’s like to murder your own father because you were too weak to see the difference, then yes, I have an idea of what you mean.”

“Madara,” Hashirama tried.

“Stop, you don’t know what it’s like. You don’t. Why are you even here? Are you ready to die?”

Hashirama laid his hands on Madara’s shoulders and gripped him firmly. “Stop this. I’m here because I know how difficult this is for you.”

Madara shoved him away. “What the hell do you know? Do you have any idea what I went through? What it did to me?”

Hashirama slumped. He was a generous three inches taller than Madara, and even slouching didn’t make up for the difference.

“I know what it’s like to lose a father,” Hashirama said softly. “And more importantly, I know you’re my friend. You shouldn’t have to go through it alone.”

Madara sneered. “Don’t patronize me. As soon as I’ve legitimized my succession, I’m coming for you. And besides, I’m not alone. You forget that you’re not the only one with a brother.”

*But your brother doesn’t understand!* he wanted to say.

*My brother doesn’t understand*...

The words never came. There was never any convincing Madara.

“And what about our dream? Have you forgotten it?” Hashirama said.

Madara turned away. “No, I haven’t. But it’s not possible right now. Don’t be so naïve.”

Hashirama chuckled. “I guess I am naïve for wishing for peace. For a place where even Uchiha and Senju can coexist without bloodshed.” He gestured to the garden and the ocean beyond. “A place like this.”

“It’s not that simple, Hashirama. You know that.”

“Why can’t it be?” Hashirama showed Madara his palms, imploring. “Why can’t we do it? Don’t lie to me. I know you want peace as much as I do. So why don’t we just do it?”

“Because my father’s dead!” Madara shouted. “Because Haruka’s blind and she’ll never fight again. Because your brothers are dead.” He paused a moment to rein in his temper. “How can we build anything when their ghosts are haunting us? How I can possibly let you live when they’re
dead?"

“I don’t know. But we have to try, don’t we? We made a promise that day by the Naka River. I haven’t forgotten it. Have you?”

Madara didn’t answer. It was no use. For years they had clashed in battle, driven by a blood inheritance and old grudges. Hashirama could not deny that there was a part of him that wanted to kill Madara for his part in the slaughter of countless Senju, good men and women. But the better man in him knew further violence wasn’t the answer. The better man in him remembered being a child. Remembered his first friend and the promise they’d made to each other. The good in them both.

“I believe in the power of individuals to rise above the limitations of the group,” Mito had declared only hours ago.

Hashirama believed it, too. But the heart is not so easily persuaded. He turned to leave. There would be no talking to Madara like this. Just as Hashirama reached the door, Madara’s voice stopped him.

“I haven’t forgotten, but I made my father a promise, too. I can’t put you before them. I won’t. I’m... I’m all they have now.”

Hashirama gripped the door frame and forced himself not to look back. “I know. That’s why you’ll make a great leader. Peace can wait.”

*Your family can’t.*

“Thank you,” Madara said softly.

Hashirama smiled sadly and nodded to himself. He left without another word.

Like a child, Mito avoided Satto all day, content to get to know the Senju and keep to herself. She took dinner in her room alone so Lena could have the evening off, just as she’d promised. She wasn’t *hiding*, she was just not ready to make amends.

“I should apologize,” she admitted to the empty space in front of her dresser mirror.

She and Satto rarely fought, and Mito had never been the type to hold a grudge. But she had her pride, and he wasn’t *right*, besides. There was no way she could abide sacrificing the innocent lives of others just so she could live another day, princess or not. There had to be another way to do things.

“You can’t change the rules of the game,” her father would say. “But you can learn them and win.”

“People’s lives aren’t a game,” Mito said to her reflection.

*Aren’t they?*

With all the senseless death she’d seen in only one battle, it was easy to feel disgusted. But what about the battles she hadn’t been in? The ones Hashirama had won to earn his reputation? The ones Madara had fought as a child soldier? Wasn’t this life, this world where children fought the wars of
men and a name was all the difference between murder and justice just a race to the bottom?

Mito’s hair hung about her shoulders, loose, and she wore a simple summer yukata. The windows overlooking the garden outside were open, and she could make out the waning moon in the sky. It was late, but the air was warm and crisp with salt. One whiff and her room was suddenly too stuffy, too cramped. She rubbed her arms to dispel the sensation of crawling bugs on her skin, but nothing helped. She had to get out.

Her feet carried her over the grass and cobblestone walkways far away. The night lanterns offered a rutilant glow, casting their light on the ground and the blooming moonflowers. She picked up speed and ran with the wind in her hair, breathing deeper as though starved of air all this time. Lightning bugs danced at her feet and lit her silent path. It was easy to fool herself into thinking this was an accident, she hadn’t been thinking, hadn’t been looking where she was going, it was just a coincidence. But when Mito arrived at the porch surrounding Madara’s garden-view quarters, she stopped pretending.

Out of breath, Mito stood among the flowers and the flickering fireflies. Now that she was here, there was no way she was turning back. She took the first step onto the porch.

“You’re up late.”

Another step. The glow of Madara’s Sharingan appeared somewhere inside beyond where the light of the moon could not reach.

“Couldn’t sleep,” she said.

“So you’re back to your old self, I gather.”

Another step.

“Not at all. I don’t think I could ever go back to that.”

“No,” Madara said. “I suppose none of us can.”

Mito reached the top step of the porch, but she lingered just outside beyond the cover of darkness within. Only shadows divided Madara and her now, but he reached across the threshold and held a hand out for her. Moonlight bathed his offered hand in white light.

“Come with me,” he said.

His words were so soft that had she not been so close to the edge of him, she would not have heard his entreaty at all. Her body ached with something she had never known, something his words had awakened in her, and she wanted nothing more than to cross the divide and go with him to wherever he was, a place far away from here.

And why not? Why not...

She took his hand and stepped into the shadows of his room, swathed herself in him and the night and the salty air that made her breathe deeper with every breath. His hands were in her hair, pulling at it as she pulled at him, down onto soft sheets and a place for just them. He kissed like a dying man, sad and divinely beautiful as he held onto something precious that might disappear, smoke through his fingers. Full of both longing and remorse for the things that awaited them beyond this velvet night, that had not yet happened.

He ran his hands down the length of her, clothes forgotten on the floor at their feet, and she was
flooded in a kind of death that was more beautiful than all the life she’d lived until this moment.

It wasn’t the sun that woke Mito.

In fact, it was a distinct lack of warmth that stirred her from a deep, languid sleep the likes of which he had not known in a long time. She pushed back her long mane of hair and sat up in bed. The sheets fell to her hips, but in the darkness there was no point in hiding her bare form. Cool, night breeze raised gooseflesh on her arms, but she resisted the urge to rub them. The lightning bugs had long since extinguished their fires, plunging the island into a vortex of moonlight and crashing waves with only shadows to meet them in between.

Madara stood at the doorway to the garden. His long hair reached his bare mid-back, and he had pulled on a pair of black, cotton pants. His back was to her.

“Madara,” she called softly.

“What if I’m wrong?” he asked in a small voice, unsure, uncertain like he never was in front of others. “What if everything I’ve done is wrong?”

“It’s not,” Mito said with quiet confidence.

“You don’t know that.”

Mito rose from the bed to join him. She embraced him from behind and breathed him in deeply. He smelled of the night chill, of salt, of smoke, of her.

“The dream you told me about,” Mito said. “Do you really think it’s possible? To change the world and make our own rules?”

He covered her hands around his waist with his. Dark eyes looked past the garden to the ocean beyond, to the ominous whirlpools with their black, depthless centers.

“I think it’s all in the timing,” he admitted at length. “If you don’t have that perfect moment, then you have nothing at all.”

She rested her head on his strong shoulder blades and kissed him softly. “The time isn’t right yet. Be patient. The world can’t change overnight.”

He turned to face her and wrapped an arm around her waist. The worry lines on his brow were plain to see so close even in the dark, and she was rendered speechless by his vulnerable candor with her. “But it can fall apart,” he said. “You would be surprised at what can perish in just one night.”

Mito touched a hand to his temple and traced the outline of his dark eye, the one that had bled tears when he’d summoned the black, demonic fires that had eaten his adoptive brother alive. The flames that had changed the tide of the campaign.

“Even if the world falls apart, those who remain can put the pieces back together.”

Madara sighed tiredly and slouched. Mito held him up, and he ran his fingers through her hair. His shoulder sat just under her chin, and she left butterfly kisses along the side of his neck. Madara tensed and pulled back. He gripped the sides of her face in both hands and held her gaze, searching,
remembering, longing. He gritted his teeth, like he wanted to say something, but the stubborn words never came. Mito smiled and traced his lips with her fingers, chapped but warm.

“I know,” she said, drawing him back to those soft sheets and shadows.

They didn’t fall asleep again until dawn.

When she woke for a second time, it was to men shouting somewhere far away. She sat up in bed, but Madara remained prostrate with an arm over his eyes.

“Now what?” he grumbled.

Mito strained her hearing. “Madara, I think something’s wrong.”

He sat up in bed next to her and activated the Sharingan. “It’s the Uchiha. They’re breaking formation.”

He got out of bed and pulled on some pants before heading to the door. Mito dressed quickly and jogged after him. Outside in the hall, the usual guard was gone. Madara looked up and down the hall and spotted someone.

“Hikaku,” he called. “What’s going on?”

Hikaku jogged toward Madara and Mito, his shoes clicking and clacking against the hardwood floor. Mito frowned. Why was he wearing shoes inside?

“I was just going to wake you,” Hikaku said. “One of our scouts spotted ships heading this way. Not supply ships.”

“And Izuna?” Madara asked.

“I’ll fetch him.”

“No, I will. What are we dealing with?”

“No one knows yet, but they’re coming fast.”

“What did the ships look like?” Mito asked.

Hikaku spared her a glance but immediately looked away. A faint blush dusted his tanned cheeks. Of course, seeing her sleep tousled so early in the morning coming out of Madara’s room would lead him to the obvious conclusion. She remembered him from the time she’d tried to see Madara on the way back to Uzushiogakure, and he had blocked her way. At least he had the courtesy not to ask aloud why she was here now.

“That’s just it,” Hikaku said. “They all looked different. Doesn’t mean anything.”

“It means something,” Mito insisted. “What did they look like?”

“Hikaku, answer her,” Madara ordered.

Hikaku gritted his teeth. “Some had red sails. Others had blue. They all bore six black circles, stacked three on three, with square holes.”
Mito paled. “That’s Yukimura Sanada’s sigil. He must be launching a counter strike. But we just fought him!”

“That’s exactly the point,” Madara said. “Strike while we’re weak and injured. Damnit, the Senju are here, too.”

Mito put the picture together faster than he could explain it. “Oh no, Madara, you have to make sure the Uchiha don’t turn this into a feud with the Senju. This is my family’s home. We have to work together to protect it!”

“I know, I know,” he hissed, already headed back to his room to find more appropriate attire.

“Hey, for all we know, the Senju could be working with Sanada,” Hikaku said, joining the two of them in Madara’s room.

“They’re not,” Madara said.

“But how do you know—”

“Because I know!”

Hikaku snarled and marched straight up to Madara, taking him by the shoulder. “Listen, Madara. I defer to you, and I respect you. But don’t treat me like I’m beneath you. You were the runt in my age group, don’t forget.”

Madara grabbed Hikaku’s wrist and brought it down with a twist. “I haven’t forgotten. But the Senju don’t have anything to do with this, believe me.”

Hikaku wrested out of Madara’s grip and glared. “It’s not about getting me to believe you; it’s about the others. This timing’s too convenient, and you know it. What the hell’re we gonna do?”

“I’m going to find my brother. You’re going to take her back to her father.”

“What?” Mito said, aghast. “You can’t be serious. I’m staying with you.”

“No, you’re not.” Madara pulled linen and leather from his dresser, threw it on the floor, and opened up the armoire that stored his painted red armor. “This isn’t a discussion.”

Mito pushed him against the wall all of a sudden with a strength he was surprised she possessed. In his shock, he didn’t fight her.

“It’s a discussion if I have a potential coup on my hands that you can’t get under control,” Mito said. “We have a common enemy here, yes, but I don’t know if all the Uchiha can see that.”

Madara wrapped his hands around her wrists and lowered his voice. “I’ll deal with that. You need to get back to your father and make sure he’s dealing with it, too. Sanada isn’t here to trade words; he’s here to trade swords. Trust me, this is my element.”

Mito glared at him, hating that he was right and hating herself even more for letting her emotions cloud her judgment. But the Uchiha had a reputation for a reason, and one man, no matter how visionary or powerful, could not possibly stand against an entire clan if bloodlust won them over. She had to find Hashirama, warn him, make sure he was ready just in case. And she had to prepare herself, as well. This was not a negotiation; it was a declaration of war.

“Fine,” she said. “Just...be careful, please.”
Hikaku shot Madara a deprecating look over his shoulder as he followed Mito out.

As soon as Mito and Hikaku were gone, Madara quickly dressed and ran to Izuna’s room, but Izuna was nowhere to be found. Outside, Uchiha soldiers ran about relaying news, asking about orders, and generally getting nothing done in the chaos of what was shaping up to be a bloody invasion. Madara spotted three of Tajima’s most respected generals gathered to discuss the situation and approached.

“They’re coming from the north. I counted at least ten on the horizon when I was patrolling this morning,” said Yurima, a middle-aged man with slick, silver hair and a thin nose.

“So what the hell’re we doing here?” asked Risa, the lone female of the group. “It’s time to get off this island. We’re sitting ducks.” She was a severe woman with her brown hair wound tightly in a bun at the base of her skull, narrow eyes, and a papercut mouth. She was decked out in thick armor from head to toe and an enormous battle axe strapped to her back.

“No, it’s those damned Senju. I bet you they’re working together with the invaders,” said Goro, the third Uchiha general. He was a bald man with a thick beard and mustache and only one eye. An eye patch covered the hollow hole where his other eye had been ripped out years ago in his soldier days.

“The invaders are the rest of Yukimura Sanada’s army,” Madara said, drawing their attention. “My guess is they’re taking advantage of our vulnerable position to attack. The Senju have nothing to do with this.”

Risa snarled. “All the more reason to get off this godforsaken island. We still have many wounded. We can’t fight all these enemies on our own.”

“We owe the Uzumaki a debt for their hospitality,” Madara said.

Goro grumbled something under his breath, and Madara turned on him. “What was that, General Goro?”

Goro puffed out his chest and crossed his thickset arms. “I said, why should we listen to you? We went along with everything because Lord Tajima was one of the greatest leaders the Uchiha have ever produced. But you’re a lowborn bastard. Maybe he thought he was doing you a favor, but we know better.”

“Do you, now,” Madara said softly.

“Yes, we do. You’re no more the leader of this clan than I am. Who’s to say you didn’t kill Tajima of your own free will just to make a grab for the title and played it off like his only trueborn son betrayed him?”

Madara moved faster than the eye could see and savagely hit Goro square in the solar plexus. The bald man fell, and Madara pinned him on the ground. The Sharingan glowed angry and unseeing.

“How dare you,” Madara said.

Goro’s eyes activated his own Sharingan. Despite the portly General’s compromising position, he showed no fear. “It’s too convenient. All of a sudden, we’re supposed to bow down to you? A fucking sewer rat? Not on your life, kid.”
Chakra stretched the optical nerves in Madara’s eyes to the point of rupture. The world came alive in colors the normal eye could not perceive, a kaleidoscope of power and pain, born of hatred and wielded with honor. Madara’s eyes changed, and Goro could only stare, petrified, as the fear finally found him.

“This sewer rat is the best of all of you,” Madara said. “I carry this burden for my father, rest his soul. For all of you. Brutes like you only respect power, so show me some fucking respect.”

There was a moment of tense silence as Risa and Yurima looked on, unsure whether to help their comrade or back off. Madara’s transformed Sharingan gave them pause, having seen the chaos and destruction its black flames had wrought for themselves. Goro swallowed hard and began to sweat, his bald head flushing a fantastic shade of crimson, ready to pop. To be this close to whatever this power was, fable or no, was enough to get anyone’s attention. He remembered what it had done during Kenshin’s campaign, and he had no desire to be on the receiving end of it the way Tajitsu had been.

“F-Forgive me,” he said, swallowing more as his mouth produced too much saliva in his nervousness. “I don’t want to fight you.”

Madara pushed off him and glanced at the other two. They didn’t look happy, but no one made a fuss.

“If we’re going to win this, I need your help rallying anyone who can fight. I want a perimeter at the shoreline. No one gets inland. And no one attacks the Senju. Am I clear?”

Risa nodded, but she avoided direct eye contact.

Yurima said, “If they attack us, surely you don’t expect us not to fight back.”

“I expect you to focus on the true enemy here.” He pointed in the direction of the sea. “Any issues you have with me or with the Senju can wait until after we secure the island.”

They acknowledged their understanding of Madara’s orders and took off to do his bidding. Goro pulled himself up and gave Madara a wide berth. “What’ll you do?”

Madara didn’t linger. He could only hope his puffery had cowed Goro and the others into submission enough to see reason. For now, if they did not focus their attacks on the invaders, there may not be an Uchiha clan left to deal with the Senju after.

The hospital where Haruka and other wounded Uchiha clansmen were recovering was on a grassy knoll near the shore, and Madara wasn’t taking any chances with its proximity to the water. He ran the entire way, noting the eerie silence despite the morning hour. Only the waves broke in the distance, like bells tolling a tide that would overflow and slowly drown this island.

Madara drew his katana. Izuna was already at the hospital talking to one of the staff. One of his tantō was bloody.

“Izuna,” Madara said as he joined his brother.

“Good, you’re here,” Izuna said. “I was visiting Haruka earlier this morning when we were attacked here. The invaders sent an assassin group ahead of the ships.”

Madara’s anger made his hands shake. The gall. “Is she all right?”
“She’s fine. The others are, too. I was here, and the Uzumaki medical ninja helped me fight off the enemy.”

Madara looked around. “I don’t see many bodies.”

A few shinobi lay in bleeding heaps outside the hospital, but he could count them on one hand.

Izuna shook his head. “Some got away. I think there might be more. I don’t know for sure—”

*Boom!*

Madara and Izuna ducked to the ground, and the Uzumaki doctor backtracked inside the hospital.

“What was that?” Izuna asked.

“I don’t know. But whatever it is, it’s coming, Izuna.”

“Yes?”

“Go to the shoreline. The generals still don’t accept me as their leader. I need you there to ensure nothing goes wrong.”

“What do you mean, ‘wrong’?”

“Some of them think the Senju might be in on this.”

Izuna’s eyes flashed red. Though smaller than Madara in height and in temper, the Senju were one of the few and true avenues to Izuna’s fiery rage befitting of any Uchiha. “Are they? It’s convenient timing, especially with many of our kin injured.”

“No. Hashirama fights fair. If you can’t trust him, then trust me.”

Izuna did not look appeased, but he nodded. “I trust you, brother. You know that.”

Madara put a hand on Izuna’s head and touched their foreheads together in a sign of affection. “Then make sure everyone at the shoreline stays focused on the real enemy, no matter what happens.”

Izuna sighed. He was not thrilled about the prospect, but he would never betray Madara’s trust in him. “You have my word.”

“Good.”

“What about you?”

Madara stood up and eyed the bodies Izuna had dealt with earlier. “I’m staying here. There enemy is too numerous. I’ll stop them before they can get to our wounded.”

“Alone? But you can’t—”

“I’m not alone. I have you stopping them before they can even dock. You and I are one, never forget that.”

Izuna shook his head. “Never.”

“Go.”
Izuna took off toward the shoreline, and Madara watched him go through the lurid filter of the Sharingan. Others were still here, shadow assassins skulking about somewhere. But they couldn’t hide from his eyes.

“No one gets through,” he whispered to himself. “No one.”

Mito and Hikaku ran along tortuous paths through gardens and around buildings towards the private Uzumaki family chambers. It was quiet despite the onslaught of invasion on the horizon. They didn’t have much time.

Hikaku, however, lagged behind as he continued to scan the area, searching for something that would not escape his gifted eyes. His dark, chestnut hair hung in his face where his topknot failed to hold it back. He was breathing through his teeth, the tension he radiated almost palpable at the height of paranoia.

“Keep up if you’re coming,” Mito said as she fell into step with him. “The faster we get there, the faster you can get back to Madara.”

“Something’s not right,” Hikaku said. “It’s too quiet.”

“Mornings are always quiet,” Mito said as they ran.

The sound of steel scraping against leather drew her attention. Hikaku had drawn his chokutō and slowed to a walk. Mito saw no one around. There was hardly a sound.

“Hikaku, what is it?” she pressed, some of his paranoia rubbing off on her before she could help it.

The air shifted, compressed to a fine line next to Mito’s ear. Hikaku lunged and she fell to the right, reacting without thinking. The clang of metal sent a spike of adrenaline to Mito’s heart, and she landed on shaking hands and feet, eyes wide and searching for what she’d been blind to see before. A kunai lay embedded in the ground near Hikaku’s feet, narrowly deflected, and his Sharingan blazed as he stared into the thick of lavender bushes up ahead.

All at once, a barrage of kunai flew from the bushes and headed straight for Mito and Hikaku. Hikaku twisted with his sword and deflected them, one by two by three, in a display of swordsmanship that would have left Mito in awe if she’d bothered to remain useless on the ground and watch. While Hikaku was busy not getting impaled, Mito rolled to the side and flung a seashell toward the bushes, one of the ones she always carried on her person no matter the occasion or company. It exploded on contact and released a wave of snail acid that burned through the lavender bush as though it were made of tissue paper. Someone screamed and ran from the fast-decomposing bush. Some of the acid had gotten on his arm, the pain crippling, as Mito knew from personal experience. She sprinted after him just as Hikaku recovered from the hail of kunai.

The enemy saw her coming, but he was too slow with his new injury. Mito whirled in midair and, in a display of fluid misdirection that was the cornerstone of the Whirlpool technique, she drew his attention away from her leg that clocked him under the jaw with showy twirls and spins. As he fell, she swung her elbow around and hit him in the back of the neck. He was out before he reached the ground.

“What the hell what that?! He could’ve killed you when you jumped the gun like that!” Hikaku said.
“But he didn’t, and now he won’t be ambushing anybody else. Let’s keep moving, there’re probably more if he got this far.”

Hikaku grumbled some indecent curse under his breath, but followed Mito as she resumed their flight to the Uzumaki palace. On their way, two more invaders caught their tail and gave chase. Hikaku warned Mito when he noticed them long before she did, and he skidded to a halt and executed a round of hand seals.

“Go!” he called to Mito.

Mito hesitated, unwilling to leave someone Madara trusted behind. Hikaku released a Great Fireball that slammed into their dogged pursuers. Mito shied away from the heat and skipped backward along the path. If it hadn’t killed them, it had surely slowed them down. Her father’s garden was just up ahead, so she made a break for it. No one was in the lounge, and without bothering to kick off her shoes, Mito sprinted out the door and down the hall toward her room. Her armor sat in a chest at the foot of a full-length mirror, and she hastily strapped it on: arm guards, leg bracers, chest plate, pants, the works. Her loose, long hair she didn’t bother with; there was no time, and this was no beauty pageant she was about to jump into.

Dashing out again, she tried her father’s private receiving chambers, hoping to run into him and either inform him of what was happening or get an update on what the Uzumaki were doing to counter it. Luck was on her side, and he was there with her young cousin, Inari.

Hashirama was also there.

“Of course, we’ll help in any way we can,” Hashirama was saying in a haste. “I’ve already sent my brother and others to the shoreline to greet the intruders. But we’re going to need more manpower.”

“I’ll lead my soldiers myself,” Ensui said as he quickly but carefully strapped on his arm guards. He wore a full suit of whalebone and leather armor emblazoned with the Uzumaki clan’s sigil.

“Father,” Mito said, winded. “There are infiltrators that have already breached the island. I think they were sent ahead as assassins.”

Inari ran to Mito and grabbed her flowing pant leg. He looked up at her with big, wet, blue eyes. Scared. She patted his head and offered him a small smile.

“Mito, there are you,” Ensui said. “Take Inari to the safehouses. I want you two safe while we deal with this insurrection.”

Mito gaped. “What? But Father, I have to help you fight. I have no idea how many more stealth agents have penetrated the island, but I know they’re still out there. And once Sanada’s army docks, we’ll be overwhelmed in numbers.”

“We need all the strength we can get if we’re going to stop this level of invasion with as few casualties as possible,” Hashirama said.

Emboldened by Hashirama’s tacit support, Mito said, “Please, Father. I’m not a weak little girl hiding behind you. This is my home, too, and I can’t stand by to watch its people die for a cause that isn’t theirs. I can fight, so let me help you.”

Ensui was taken aback by his daughter’s vehemence, but she stood her ground under his withering gaze. Hashirama said nothing further, but to have his support was a greater comfort than Mito would have expected. Realizing he was outnumbered and without the luxury to argue at a time like this, Ensui unhappily relented.
“Fine, but take Inari to safety first. Report to me when you’re finished. If you’re fighting, then you’re fighting under my command. Am I understood?”

Mito bowed in respect. “Yes, Father.”

“Hashirama, I thank you and the Senju for your support. We’ll need every bit of it.”

Hashirama nodded. “Of course. You have it.”

Ensui left and Mito made to follow with Inari. Before she left, however, she spared Hashirama a smile.

“Thank you. Your support meant a lot back there.”

He put a hand on her shoulder, but he didn’t return her smile. “Don’t thank me. If you can fight, then fight. Don’t let anyone stand in your way.”

Maybe it was the moment, or the depth in his eyes that seemed to see something she could not. Maybe it was just him, whatever power possessed him that made him Hashirama Senju, the leader and the man and an ally she never knew she wanted until this moment. But she believed him, every word, every muscle in her body, like this was what she had been wanting to express for so long and had never found a way around the life that others had laid out for her.

“I can fight,” she said, softly but with confidence.

He did smile this time. “Then maybe you can watch my back out there. I wouldn’t mind having an Uzumaki on my team.”

He left to attend to the Senju and their part in the fight. Inari, just seven years old, only reached her waist in height, and he clutched her hand in his. Mito ruffled his curly, red hair.

“Mito?” he whispered in a tinny, child’s voice. “I’m scared.”

“I know, but that’s why I’m here to keep you safe, okay?”

Inari nodded numbly, bravely holding back his tears, and she led him out the back toward the safe houses.

Somewhere far away, the first ship of Sanada’s naval fleet weighed anchor onshore, having bypassed the whirlpools safely. Saizō Kirigakure took his first step onto Uzumaki land, his small feet sinking into the wet sand. He took a deep breath, refreshed.

“Now,” he said to the shinobi and kunoichi who disembarked behind him, armed to the teeth with jutsu and blade alike. “Let’s go wake up a god.”
Legendary

Tobirama was not in a good mood. Waking up to an ambush had that effect on him.

“I can’t believe him sometimes,” Tobirama said to Tōka as they led a group of Senju warriors in full military regalia to Uzushiogakure’s northwestern beach. “If it wasn’t for me sensing the bastards, we’d all be dead. And how does my dear brother reward me? By sending me to the goddamned ocean.”

“I think you’re overreacting a bit,” Tōka said. “Hashirama’s sending us ahead because he trusts our ability.”

“He knows I don’t like being in places like this. I’m telling you, he’s doing it on purpose.”

Tōka rolled her eyes and dropped the argument. Tobirama liked having the last word, and it wasn’t worth wasting her breath over, anyway. More importantly, the enemy ships were close to docking, and the Senju were late to the party.

“Oh no, you’ve gotta be kidding me!”

Tobirama signaled for his soldiers to stop as he observed the scene on the rocky beach up ahead. Enemy shinobi and samurai piled out of the long warships, which were much bigger up close and probably carried up to thirty soldiers each. The Uchiha and some Uzumaki were already engaging them.

“Well, I suppose the Uchiha aren’t in league with these guys, after all,” Tōka said.

“No,” Tobirama said, red eyes scanning the crowd for the energy he’d sensed on the way here. “I suppose not.”

“You remember what Hashirama said.”

*I know you’re down there,* Tobirama thought to himself.

He gritted his teeth. There was no way out of this with those invaders breathing down their necks. “All right,” he addressed the Senju shinobi awaiting orders. “For the record, I can’t believe I’m saying this, but the Uchiha are not the enemy here. Our objective is to keep those invaders from taking another step inland. Got that?”

The Senju soldiers muttered their acknowledgment, but one look at their ranks and Tobirama could tell they were not happy about this. He looked to Tōka for assistance, and she patted him on the back.

“Let’s show the Uchiha how it’s done, boys and girls,” she called to the soldiers, grinning.

They whooped and shouted, craving the fight now. Tōka took off toward the shoreline where the battle was thickest.

Tobirama frowned. “I should’ve said it like that...”
The only sound Izuna heard was his own breathing. He moved in time with his breaths, his gifted eyes foretelling his fate and guiding him around it. An enemy shinobi dressed in blue armor attacked from the left with a short sword, and Izuna jumped and twisted to catch the blade between his two tantō. His legs were soaked to the knees from sea spray and crashing waves. Rolling his shoulders, Izuna swerved his attacker’s blade to the left, throwing him off balance. He ended up behind the shinobi and rammed his daggers between the man’s shoulder blades, like two bleeding wing stubs. The enemy grunted and fell to the ground, unmoving. Izuna breathed.

Behind him, a kunoichi came running with throwing knives. Izuna skidded over the pebble-strewn beach to avoid them, but one embedded in his shoulder between the armor joints. Her aim was incredible, but so was his. Instead of dodging, Izuna lunged at her. The kunoichi hesitated and tried to change her tactic, but Izuna gave her no time. Metal screeched as they clashed, and Izuna held her gaze with his Sharingan. She tried to look away, and it was her undoing. Izuna flipped the grip on his tantō and punched her with the butt of it. She went down, and he followed. Using the momentum of gravity and his weight, he smashed her head into the rocky shore with enough force to crack her skull. She was dead in an instant.

Izuna breathed. The waters lapped at her prone body and washed her blood and brain matter away with the tide. He moved on to the next target without hesitation.

The boats kept coming. Some docked nearby, which was why the Uchiha had chosen to intercept them here, but Izuna could see that even met with resistance, many invaders managed to slip through the cracks. Izuna could only trust that Madara could handle himself. That black fire, however, had him worried. They still didn’t know what it was or what it meant. Only the Uchiha Tablet Tajima had mentioned could shed light on the mystery. For now, they were fighting in the dark, and the risk of Madara lapsing into a dead zone of black hatred was not altogether remote.

I trust him, Izuna thought stubbornly as he brought down a hulking samurai armed with two katana.

All of a sudden, the tide of battle shifted. Fresh bodies appeared on the scene, and they seemed to be helping the Uchiha and Uzumaki forces already fighting. But when Izuna caught sight of their sigil, his first instinct was to attack.

“It’s the Senju!” a nearby Uchiha soldier shouted.

“Stay calm!” Izuna shouted over the crowd. “The Senju aren’t the enemy!”

Few heard him, and fewer listened. Swearing, he ran to intercept some Uchiha before they could turn this into a bloodbath and hand victory to the true enemy.

“Stand down!” General Risa Uchiha yelled at the spooked soldiers as she brandished her immense battle axe, slick with blood. “Our goal is those ships and the shitholes coming off of them!”

Nearby, General Yurima Uchiha drew his sword and pointed it at his own men. “You heard the General. Stick to the objective. That’s an order. The Senju are fighting alongside us today.”

Even General Goro Uchiha, a man who’d very vocally disapproved of Tajima’s adoption of two lowborn bastard boys, stood with his colleagues. “Move your asses! This ain’t happy hour, it’s killing hour! No one gets past the shore!”

Izuna was so shocked that he could only gape dumbly. It was a miracle, and one he was sure his brother had orchestrated. The Uchiha soldiers in his own unit waited for his word, and Izuna turned back to the fray.
“Madara’s risking himself protecting our injured,” he called to them, finding his confidence once again. “Let’s make sure he’s got an easy time of it. The Uchiha come first!”

The soldiers raised their swords and shouted ‘Uchiha! Uchiha!’ as they turned their blades away from the encroaching Senju. Izuna returned to the fray as well, but he kept an eye on the Senju, searching for the source of his elevated nerves, the one person who could ruin all this if things took a turn for the worst. Tobirama was nowhere to be seen from Izuna’s vantage point, but he knew he was here. Like a phantom pain, a ghost that never stayed buried, he knew. It was only a matter of time.

Madara was alone defending the hospital, and the silence was grating on his nerves. Waiting for death had never suited him; he preferred to meet it head on. The first wave of assassins was gone. They were nothing special. But now, with the daunting numbers the island’s defenders faced, there would surely be those that slipped by the first line of defense and attempted to breach inland, attack civilians and the wounded.

_They’ll have to get through me, first._

For the Uchiha. And for the Uzumaki, too, who had offered nothing but kindness and hospitality. The Uchiha owed them. And Madara owed her.

_For Mito._

One by one the enemy came, until they came two by two, three by three, ten by ten. Madara hacked and slashed with his katana and fired off flame techniques to fend off the attackers, but many they slipped by, penetrated the village proper, and slaughtered the innocents in their path. Madara couldn’t abandon his post to give chase, though. The Uchiha came first.

A kunoichi clad in dark green armor lunged for his blind spot, thinking he had one despite his Sharingan, but Madara was too slow to avoid a blade that cut through the joints in his armor. His left shoulder split open and bled. Acting on instinct, he kicked in her shins and brought his katana down upon her when she staggered, cleaving her helmet and cracking her skull. In his distraction, he failed to notice the two enemy shinobi converging on him while their comrades attempted to sneak inside the hospital. But the ambushers never made it to Madara. Kunai to the backs of their heads stopped them in their tracks, and they collided as they fell to the ground, dead on impact.

“Hikaku,” Madara said.

“Bet you’re glad to see me, huh?” Hikaku grinned and assumed a position at Madara’s back.

“Is she safe?”

“Safe is a relative term.”

“Hikaku,” Madara said in a warning tone.

“Yeah, yeah, she made it to her father’s. I dunno what happened after. I came back as soon as I could.”

She was fine, she had to be. Mito was strong, and she would no doubt be surrounded by her fellow Whirlpool nin. Right now, Madara couldn’t worry about her or anyone else.
“They went inside. Let’s go,” Hikaku said, disappearing inside the hospital.

Madara unleashed a Great Fireball at the trees surrounding the small hospital. Invaders running to get deeper inland screamed as the flames burned them. Small fires popped up around the wooded area, and Madara was satisfied that for a short time, at least, no one would come sniffing around. He followed Hikaku inside.

The hospital’s corridors were narrow and dark for midday. Madara’s Sharingan offered a clearer view, but the space was claustrophobic, oppressive, like a living thing was weighing down on him, breathing down his neck.

Movement up ahead.

“There!” Hikaku shouted.

He lunged and slashed at the shadowy enemy, but he missed. The shinobi slammed against the wall to avoid Hikaku’s blade, and the wall cracked on impact. Madara ran at him, katana poised, but the bastard unleashed a hellish jet of water that slammed Madara in the chest and pushed him back. Water filled the hallway nearly to his waist, and Madara, knocked over, gasped for air as his abused lungs screamed in protest. He lost his katana in the chaos. The water dissipated and Madara coughed, but he knew this was the crucial moment. Any time now and—

\textit{Crack!}

A long sword bit into the hardwood floor where Madara had been standing just a moment ago. The enemy had used the water technique as a distraction to disarm his enemies, but Madara’s eyes could see him coming. Unarmed, Madara dodged the enemy’s sword by using the cramped space to his advantage. Channeling chakra to his hands and feet, Madara stuck to the slick walls and ceiling and pushed backwards, away from the slashing blade. The enemy was good. He sliced off the tips of Madara’s bangs just as Madara was in transition from the floor to the wall. Hikaku, however, was hot on their tail.

Hikaku and Madara made eye contact, and they reached a silent agreement. They breathed deeply and unleashed twin Great Fireball techniques in tandem, each approaching from either end of the corridor. The enemy was trapped, and his screams died in seconds as the extreme heat cooked him alive. The walls of the hospital steamed and hissed as the water slicking them evaporated.

When the flames died down, a charred body crumpled to the blackened floor. A grey-black ooze of guts and blood slipped under Madara’s boot as he stepped over the body and ran down the corridor after Hikaku. Even the smell of cooked human flesh or burning entrails squelching underfoot no longer bothered him. He’d gotten accustomed to it years ago.

It was bad.

Uchiha, Uzumaki, and civilians lay bleeding in their hospital beds, slaughtered in their sleep. Madara shook with otherworldly rage at the sight of them, brethren or not. To slay the defenseless and the wounded in their sick beds was the cornerstone of cowardice, but in warfare there was only victory or death. The ends justified the means. Even so, Madara could barely contain his volatile emotions, black with rage over such a monstrous strategy. Nearby, Hikaku shared his outrage as he examined the bleeding bodies and checked for pulses in vain. There was another enemy inside, and this was his doing. The hospital was small, but not too small. When Madara found him, he would give the man a death as cruel and dishonorable as befit such a craven.

\textit{Bang!}
Madara and Hikaku exchanged a worried look before taking off in the direction of the clamor. They passed open and closed rooms. Many patients were still alive and crying for help. Those still in possession of their motor skills struggled to stand and meet their silent assassin in battle. To these, Hikaku offered hushed order to stay hidden and silent while he and Madara dealt with the intruder.

Madara led the way around a tight corner, and the sight that greeted him stopped him in his tracks. An enemy shinobi splattered with blood that did not belong to him slammed against the wall, thrown out of a hospital room. Haruka, blindfolded and wearing a thin hospital gown, slowly emerged from the doorway, her hands up and ready to strike anything in range.

“Haruka,” Madara said, rushing to her side and beside himself with fury that the assassin had reached her and could easily have killed her.

Haruka whirled, shaking in her blindness. “Madara? Is that you?”

“Yes, it’s me and Hikaku.” He tried hard to stifle the fury in his voice for her sake. “What happened?”

Haruka shook her head. “I heard something, so I got up to check it out. I don’t know, I just heard him coming, and I knew I didn’t know him. So I fought him. Where did he go?”

Madara turned on the enemy shinobi, who was busy trying to pull himself up. Hikaku drew his sword and stabbed him through the stomach. The enemy groaned in agony as he tried to pull his spilling blood and guts back inside the jagged hole Hikaku had opened up, but it was an exercise in futility. Whimpering and clammy with perspiration and the blood of the patients he’d slaughtered, his dark eyes glazed over as pain washed over him. Stomach acid sizzled as it came into contact with his insides. His death would be slow and painful. Hikaku spit on him for good measure.

“Fucking craven,” he said.

“What was that noise?” Haruka said, raising her hands in a defensive position and shaking with adrenaline.

“He’s dead,” Madara said, tempted to give the enemy a swift kick to his bleeding stomach. “Or will be soon. You need to rest.”

Haruka bared her teeth in a snarl. “Fuck that,” she spat. “Something’s happening, and I want to fight.”

“Haruka, you can’t,” Hikaku insisted. “You already know your condition.”

“I can’t just sit around while my clansmen are dying!”

The bandage over her eyes soaked with tears. Madara rested his hands on her shoulders to steady her. Her long, black hair hung loose and lush, accenting her unhealthy, pale pallor and the gauntness of her face and neck from days of bedrest. She did not look like herself at all, and it pained Madara to see her like this.

“You’re blind,” he whispered to her. “You know that.”

Haruka covered her mouth to hold back a sob.

“Haruka,” Madara said as gently as he could, taking her arms and pulling her close.
“No!” she shouted, wrenching away from him. “I want to fight! I fought him, didn’t I?”

The black hatred that had awoken within him upon finding out Tajitsu had betrayed the Uchiha returned, but not directed at Haruka. Directed at himself. How could he let this happen?

“You did,” Madara allowed. “But all the same, you can’t see.”

“You can’t fight,” Hikaku said. “Madara won’t say it, so I will. Without your eyes, you’d just get in the way.”

Haruka was deathly still with her bony hands over her mouth and her bare, freezing feet. So frail. Madara had never seen her like this, and it sickened him. It sickened him to see her feeling so useless, like she was nothing and never had been anything at all even though they both knew it was not true.

“Haruka,” he tried.

“No,” she snapped. “Leave me alone. If I’m such a burden, then leave me alone!”

One of the best of their generation. A promising career as a kunoichi, and the crown jewel of the Uchiha clan. Reduced to this. He could have killed the enemy shinobi already bleeding out on the floor all over again just to fill this hole growing inside and filling with things he’d never thought he’d live long enough to hate.

“Stay here,” Madara said. “Whatever you can do, do it. But don’t leave. That’s an order.”

Haruka said nothing, and Madara signaled for Hikaku to move out. They had work to do. But as Madara passed the threshold, he hesitated.

“I’m sorry,” he said softly.

“Get out,” Haruka said.

The enemy shinobi’s blood seeped into the floor of Haruka’s hospital room, cold.

More and more of the enemy were slipping past the shoreline defense and penetrating the island proper. Hashirama, with the help of five other Senju soldiers, took it upon himself to protect the Uzumaki civilian population that had not yet evacuated to the safe houses in the innermost part of the island.

A young father carrying a baby in his arms tripped when an enemy shinobi cut off his escape and launched a lightning-based attack at him. The man screamed and ducked to protect the child. Hashirama slammed a hand on the ground and summoned gnarled tree roots from the earth that twisted together to form a protective barrier. The lightning hit the wooden wall and went no further, sparing father and child. With a simple manipulation of chakra, Hashirama redirected the branches to unwind and attack the enemy. They impaled him five times over, nailing him to the ground and an early grave. Hashirama ran to assist the civilians.

“Are you all right?” he asked, helping the young man up.

“Y-Yes, thank you! Thank you so much!”

There were tears in the man’s dark eyes, and his child wailed in his arms.
“Where is the mother?”

He looked down. “Mari, she... She didn’t make it. They came out of nowhere, and—and I couldn’t
do anything!”

Hashirama put a hand on the man’s shoulder. “It’s all right. Lady Mito is overseeing operations at
the safe houses. She’ll help you.”

The man nodded. “Thank you. I owe you my life and my daughter’s.”

“Just get to safety. That’ll be thanks enough.”

The man ran off with his wailing daughter, and Hashirama focused once more on the battle at
hand. More and more enemies were appearing, and they were beginning to overwhelm his small
squadron. Ensui had gone to the shoreline to reinforce the Uzumaki already fighting there, taking
his best shinobi and kunoichi with him. Hashirama looked around for something to give him an
edge.

“Look out!”

The voice came from somewhere to his left, and Hashirama lunged away from it on instinct. An
axe longer than his arm cleaved the ground where he’d stood just seconds ago. A kunoichi in green
armor and flowing, blonde hair hoisted the axe up and readjusted her aim. She didn’t give
Hashirama an inch even to counterattack. Her axe sliced the soft flesh of his thigh when he was too
slow to dodge her relentless assault, and she grinned. It was all the distraction Hashirama needed.
As she swung her axe back for a destructive blow, Hashirama lunged and grasped the axe’s handle
over her hands. For a few breaths, they were locked in a game of tug of war, each trying to get a
grip on the axe. Until Hashirama released medical chakra through his palms and severed the
tendons in her wrist.

The kunoichi cried out and faltered. Hashirama didn’t let go. He struck her in the chest with the
heel of his palm and pushed her to the ground, where chakra previously channeled through his foot
pulled roots from the earth that burst through her heart, her spine, out her mouth and eyes. She was
dead before the pain could even register.

The rest of the Senju, however, weren’t having as much luck as Hashirama. The enemy
outnumbered them, and with civilians in the mix, fighting at full capacity became ever more
dangerous. The enemy, of course, did not have such a handicap. One Senju kunoichi took a punch
to the gut to save a civilian child who was in the wrong place at the wrong time, but the enemy
followed up with a devastating earth-based technique that claimed the child’s life and the lives of
several other civilians fleeing the scene and unlucky enough to get caught up in the earthquake.

“Damnit,” Hashirama swore.

He searched around for some way to even the playing field, but all that was around were people’s
houses, some of them on fire, churned earth, and a Ginkgo tree tunnel leading to the hillside.

“That’s it,” he said, dark eyes scanning the tunnel.

“Lord Hashirama!”

General Satto Uzumaki arrived on the scene with a legion of soldiers at his back. They were still
outnumbered, but the odds looked better. Hashirama waved him over.

“General Satto, am I glad to see you! Listen, I’ve got a plan, but I’ll need your help.”
Hashirama gestured to the tree tunnel and briefly explained. Satto was quick on the uptake and barked orders at his soldiers to round up the enemy with any means necessary. Water and wind jutsu popped and flooded the area. Enemy shinobi and kunoichi raced to avoid getting caught up in the dual elemental barrage, too fast to take much damage. Hashirama ordered the Senju to help any remaining civilian stragglers to safety. Blood mixed with the summoned water. They’d lost about half this area’s population. But there was no time to think about that.

Hashirama sprinted to the heart of the Ginkgo tree tunnel and dug his bare hands into the earth. Water sluiced by his feet, powered along by chakra-infused winds that cut into his cheeks and left scratches in his armor. He ignored the pain.

“Hashirama!” a Senju shinobi cried out in worry for his leader.

_Just a little more._

The Uzumaki pushed the enemy deeper into the Ginkgo tree tunnel, and some of them wandered too deep. Hashirama began to sweat.

_No, get out!_

There was no time. Wars were never won without casualties. Kawarama and Itama had taught him that the hard way, and it was a lesson he was never going to forget. So he summoned his chakra and released it into the earth, felt it slither out in all directions, merge with the ancient Ginkgo trees and bring them to life. Thick, splintered branches groaned and grew, reaching to the ground like fat leeches in search of blood to feast upon.

They blocked out the sun. They blocked out the screams. Sanada’s fighters fell under their greedy caresses that aimed for bodies, it did not matter where. Once caught, there was no escaping the death trap. The Ginkgo tree tunnel fell dark and became impassable, swallowing anyone caught inside like a hungry, black whale that snapped its jaws shut. Hashirama forced himself to look, but there was hardly anything left to see. The trees themselves, deracinated and warped beyond recognition, blocked everything out. Anyone caught inside was never getting out.

Blood and piss and liquefied innards seeped over the ground in a slow-moving ooze, between the twisted branches. Whose blood? There was no telling. Hashirama backed away. The putrid smell of death and fear was overpowering. This was the price of war. The price of hatred. He tried not to think about any Uzumaki who may have gotten caught up in his attack as he ran for the opposite exit of the tunnel to rejoin his soldiers and move on to the next fight.

_“Kuchiyose no jutsu!”_  

Mito held Inari back with one arm while she performed the summoning technique. Sazae appeared from a cloud of thick smoke, towering over Mito several feet. The hot, afternoon sun reflected off her ebony shell, blinding.

_“Sazae! I need your help to secure the safe houses! We cannot let the enemy get through!”_ Mito ordered.

_“Right away!”_ Sazae said.

Mito took Inari by the hand again. “Come on, I have to get you inside.”
They ran up the hill toward the safe houses, which were underground. Civilians ran with them, frantic and anxious to get to safety, while other Uzumaki soldiers herded them to the entrance. The enemy launched elemental attacks, fire, lightning, earth, and the bodies piled up at Mito’s feet. People she knew, people she didn’t. Electrocuted, incinerated, buried at the threshold of safety. Inari whimpered at her side, too frightened even to speak, and she yanked him to her and threw them both to the ground, covering him with her body.

But the onslaught of pain never came. Shifting, Mito chanced a look over her shoulder only to spot a giant, humanoid beast deflecting a bolt of lightning with a long, metal rod. Inari tugged at her collar, and she wrapped a hand around his head.

“M-Mito,” he sobbed.

“Shh, it’s okay,” she whispered. “We’re okay...somehow.”

The beast pushed back the attackers and spun his rod. It glowed, aflame, and he released a devastating fire-based attack that swept the hill and licked at the trees farther down.

“Mashira! Good work, but let’s keep moving!”

Mito spotted Sasuke Sarutobi and Lena, who had a young islander girl by the hand, running toward them. She rose and pulled Inari up with her.

“Sasuke,” she said. “And Lena. Thank god you’re all right.”

The beast summon, Mashira, was a giant monkey taller even than Sasuke. His rust-red fur stood on end, and he leaned on his staff with enormous, chapped hands. Though his expression was mean and surly, he’d just saved Mito’s and Inari’s lives.

“Thank you for your help,” Mito addressed the large summon.

“It’s fine,” Mashira said.

“Come on, we can’t just hang around here. You have to get to safety,” Sasuke told Lena.

“Yes, all right.”

They reached the entrance to the safehouse, and Mito sent Inari in first, followed by Lena and the young girl she’d picked up. Lena grabbed Mito’s hand.

“My lady, aren’t you coming?”

“I have to help my father and the others fight,” Mito explained. “Stay here. Look after Inari, please.”


Mito smiled. ‘I’m going to fight the bad men so they can’t get you, okay?’

“Okay...”

“Be brave. You’ll lead the clan one day, so you have to be strong for everyone, all right?”

Inari wiped his nose, his blue eyes wide with fear. But he nodded. Lena reached for Sasuke before they closed the door to the safe house once more, and he held her tenderly. Mito looked away, not wanting to intrude.
“Be careful,” she whispered.

“I haven’t stayed alive this long ‘cause I’m careful,” Sasuke said.

Mito scanned the area below the hill. Sazae was nearby providing cover for more fleeing Uzumaki civilians. Blood and bodies littered the hillside, enemy and ally alike. Mito’s hands shook. This wasn’t right. This wasn’t right.

“So many,” she said, counting the dead but losing track.

What was happening at the shoreline? Was the defense holding up? How could so many enemy forces slip through? She had to get there. She had to help Madara and Hashirama and her father and everyone else fighting to save this little island before it was too late.

“Mito, where are you headed?” Sasuke asked, drawing up beside her.

“I have to get to the shoreline. Something’s not right. There shouldn’t be so many of the enemy here.”

“I’m going with you.”

“I’ll be glad for the help. Sazae!” she called to her snail summon. “Stay here and make sure the safe houses remain secure!”

“Yes!” the large turban shell said from her post.

“That’s a good idea,” Sasuke said. “You stay, too, Mashira. There’re some Uzumaki here still fighting, but they’ll need all the help they can get.”

“If you insist,” Mashira said, dutifully running off to assist Sazae and the soldiers defend the safe houses.


Mito took a deep breath. They would have to fight their way to the other side of the island, and there was no telling how long that might take. There was no telling what might happen in the meantime. The sun was already high in the sky. Less than half a day of sunlight left.

“Let’s try to move quickly,” she said, taking off.

Sasuke followed, and the two of them launched themselves at the enemies standing in their way.

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**Boom!**

Tōka slammed into Tobirama and flung them both several yards backward. They tumbled over each other, and Tobirama wounded his head on the rocks as they went. But this was a minor concern in comparison to the cannonball from which Tōka had just saved them. It exploded on impact with the rocky shoreline, taking several lives with it. Uchiha, Senju, Uzumaki, they all blended together in the face of an enemy whose numbers outclassed them. Even with Ensui’s reinforcements, there was little stopping the inundation of enemy shinobi and samurai onto the island.

“Ow,” Tobirama said as Tōka shoved off of him.
“You’re welcome,” she said.

“Aaah, this is *stupid*!” Tobirama complained. “We’re not making any headway at all like this! There’s gotta be a better way!”

Nearby, an Uchiha kunoichi was taking a beating from an enemy who pushed her back until she ran smack into a Senju shinobi, causing him to trip and fall under the enemy’s sword. Two more Senju soldiers witnessed the attack and converged on the Uchiha kunoichi. Tōka swore and shouted for them to stop, but she was too late. Bad blood and old grudges were bared for all to see as the Senju opened up the Uchiha kunoichi’s flesh through her armor. In retaliation, five Uchiha soldiers abandoned their enemies to reap retribution from the Senju.

Tōka ran into the fray, her hands flying through various seals. “Enough!”

All bodies in the vicinity, Senju, Uchiha, and Sanada’s men alike, froze in place as though restrained by some unseen force, invisible chains binding them to the narrow spaces around them. Their pupils dilated and saliva dripped from their slack jawed mouths. Tobirama gaped.

“Holy crap.” He waved a hand before one of the Senju soldier’s faces, but he got no response. “What’d you do?”

“Genjutsu,” Tōka said grimly.

Those caught in the illusion convulsed under its powerful neural effects, hallucinating most likely. Tobirama really didn’t want to know. Tōka was the best in genjutsu of their clan by a long shot, and even the Sharingan was no guarantee of besting her skills. She finally released the illusion, and those caught in it staggered. Some fell to their knees and vomited. All of them glowered at Tōka with varying degrees of anger and hatred. She returned their glares.

“Senju, let’s get back to work,” she said.

Tobirama crossed his arms but said nothing. The Uchiha did not look like they were backing down, however, and he began to worry that he might have to take the more blunt approach. Just then, a tall, silver-haired Uchiha appeared. He was dressed in gleaming gray armor, a nobleman or a general judging by his regal looks. He didn’t say a word, but the Uchiha returned to their fights with the real enemy without a fuss. Tobirama could not believe his eyes.

“Senju,” the silver fox said, nodding to Tobirama and Tōka before passing them by to rejoin his brethren.

“Uchiha,” Tōka returned.

“This is all kinds of fucked up,” Tobirama said to himself.

“Come on,” Tōka said. “We have to do something about those cannons.”

“What do you mean, ‘something’? They’re all the way out in the water! It’s not like we can *do* anything from here.”

Tōka reached the shoreline and kept going. Chakra kept her balanced atop the water as she jumped over breaking waves and headed out to sea. Tobirama stared forlornly after her.

“This is the *worst* day of my life.”

But he couldn’t let Tōka go out there all by herself. Condemning whatever gods had cursed him
with a touch of thalassophobia, Tobirama took a deep breath and raced after her. The water was uneven under his feet, and he instantly disliked it. The sun was beginning to sink on the horizon, casting a shadowy glow over the water and hiding whatever lurked in its depths. Maybe nothing at all but a cold, bottomless grave.

Another cannonball launched into the air and nearly hit Tobirama, but he rolled out of the way in time. A wave crashed and soaked him through his armor. Cursing, he powered up his chakra and quickly flew through the hand seals for the Suiryūdan technique. It took him only three hand seals instead of the usual forty-four after years of training in chakra control—an exercise in self-torture that would pay off today. A ship with blue sails adjusted its course to ram him.

A great, fat column of water rose from the depths of the darkening sea and opened its maw in a howl. Watery scales and horns rose upon the water column, carving it into the shape of a dragon more terrible than any true sea monsters he imagined could be lurking in the deep. Tobirama ran with it straight for the ship with the blue sails.

“I’m the only sea monster here!” he bellowed. “And you’re not getting through me!”

The dragon slammed into the ship’s port bow, cracking the wood and passing clean through it out the other side. It roared and sank back to the sea. The ship sank with it, and shinobi and samurai jumped overboard to avoid drowning. The ones who could manipulate chakra to run on water came at Tobirama with fire and venom in their veins. He recalled the water dragon, pumped more chakra into it, and let it fly.

Nearby, Tōka was dealing with her own ship. Some shinobi jumped overboard to take her out before she could cause any damage, but she stopped them in their tracks with a crippling genjutsu that cut off their chakra output and sank them to the bottom of the sea like so many stones, never to be heard from again. Invisible hands only she could see clawed their way up the ship’s hull, creeping over the deck to possess the sailors controlling it. And with a concentrated burst of chakra, she directed it to sail directly over a nearby whirlpool.

The churning waters groaned against the ship’s wooden body, bending it beyond its capacity until finally, the wood gave in to the current. Planks splintered and water filled the interior. Bow first, it plunged into the center of the whirlpool’s dark eye, which swallowed it down so fast that Tōka unconsciously took a few steps back for fear of getting sucked in with it. The waters frothed with flotsam and jetsam, but nothing escaped the whirlpool’s gravity. In moments, there was no trace of the ship having been there at all.

Tobirama had a clear advantage in the water despite his disdain for the environment. Earth and fire techniques were useless on the open ocean. The enemy’s water-based jutsu could not compare to his own. Only a group of three shinobi working in tandem using wind-based techniques were holding their own.

They fired off a wind scythe so large that it cleaved Tobirama’s water dragon in half and dispersed the chakra powering it. The razor wind sped toward him, even picking up speed.

“Shit!” he swore as he turned tail and ran for his life.

Even the fastest shinobi of the Senju clan could not always be fast enough.

“Katon: Ryūendan!”

A thin stream of fire soared over Tobirama’s head and collided with the deadly wind scythe, infecting it with molten chakra. The fire consumed the air and transformed into the shape of a
dragon, which then twisted and turned on its original makers. With a roar, it slammed into the sea at their feet, releasing a hissing cloud of superheated steam that could melt flesh and desiccate bones. If the fire hadn’t killed them, the steam surely had.

Tōka ran to Tobirama’s side and helped him up where he’d fallen into the water in fear of his life. Once again, he was soaked from head to toe and shivering. Great.

“Are you all right? Where did that even come from?” Tōka asked, giving him her arm to regain his balance.

Tobirama coughed and leaned on her for support. “Izuna,” he spat.

He looked over his shoulder and spotted the chakra signature he’d felt pop up just as the razor wind attack was upon him. Izuna Uchiha jogged toward the Senju cousins, his expression smug.

“You looked like you could use a hand, Tobirama. Not that I’m surprised.”

Tobirama wrested out of Tōka’s hold and advanced on his bitter enemy, dripping water. “Go to hell. No one asked you for anything.”

“So, I should’ve just let that attack rip you limb from limb? As appealing as that sounds, I’d rather do the deed myself,” Izuna said.

Tobirama dashed at Izuna faster than the eye could see, startling him. He grabbed Izuna by the front of his armor and lifted him off the ocean’s surface, murder in his eyes. He was several inches taller than Izuna and broader in the shoulders. Suspended in midair, Izuna appeared almost fragile, younger than their shared fifteen years. “I should just kill you now,” Tobirama said venomously.

Izuna dug his fingers into the joints between Tobirama’s arm bracers, drawing blood. His eyes widened with chakra and bled red. Fragile? Yeah, right. Tobirama cursed and released him, knowing full well the consequences of looking into those accursed Sharingan eyes.

“You can try,” Izuna said. “Or you could thank me for saving you back there.”

“Tobirama,” Tōka said, getting in between the two of them. “Izuna. If you two are finished, we have bigger problems.”

They followed her gaze to the warships still floating in the waters, all of which had rerouted their courses to converge on the three of them. Shinobi and kunoichi abandoned their posts to attack them en masse, and samurai reloaded the cannons. An armada against three kids.

“Fuck me,” Tobirama said. “Tell me this isn’t happening!”

“What the matter? Don’t think you can handle it?” Izuna said. Sharingan eyes swept the area, carefully assessing the situation in contrast to his petty taunting.

“If we’re going to stop them, we have to work together,” Tōka said. “Izuna, will you help us?”

“Doesn’t look like I’ve got a choice. I’m not letting another invader set foot on that island when Madara’s fighting on his own.”

There were so many enemy ships. There was no way one water dragon was going to take them out quickly enough to stop the cannons from firing. The shinobi advancing by foot only exacerbated the problem. They needed something massive that would handle everything at once, something the fast war galleys could not escape or overcome with sheer numbers. Something terrible.
“Tobirama?” Tōka asked.

“I think I have an idea,” he said slowly. “But I need time.”

“Make it fast, Tobirama,” Izuna said as he dashed toward the advancing shinobi.

“I’m going, too,” Tōka said. “Hurry.”

She followed Izuna and caught up to him. “I’m assuming you can keep up?"

He grinned. “Speak for yourself.”

Tōka initiated a genjutsu to give them cover. The enemy shinobi caught in it began to scream as visions of a giant whirlpool clawed at their feet and tried to pull them under where they balanced atop the waves. Some lost control of their chakra output and sank below the water’s surface. Others broke out of the illusion and raised counterattacks. Izuna was ready with an illusion of his own.

Building off the hallucination Tōka had woven, he projected himself within the genjutsu, cutting down any soldier in range of his technique. Under the pretense of mortal wounding, the enemy soldiers lost control of their chakra flows and sank into the sea. A vortex of undercurrents created by the multitude of whirlpools in the area made it nearly impossible to resurface. In a matter of seconds, half of the shinobi invaders charging on foot were reduced to nothing but bubbles. Tōka and Izuna had barely moved from their positions.

“Not bad!” Tōka called. “For an Uchiha.”

Meanwhile, Tobirama was busy gathering as much chakra as he could for one sweeping attack. He crouched upon the water’s surface, hands submerged and trying to concentrate over the growing sense of nausea building in the pit of his stomach with every tidal undulation. This was it, do or die, and if he didn’t come through, all would be lost.

His chakra seeped into the ocean depths, carried along the rip tide and eddying around the nearby whirlpools’ dark eyes. Hashirama was always telling him that the greatest force of all was the energy in the world around them. That if somehow, some way, one could harness that energy, then surely he would become a splendid shinobi, even legendary.

Well, Tobirama didn’t know or care much about the energy of life in general when he was fighting to save his own. But Hashirama did have a point about manipulating the environment to do the work for him. The sun had set, leaving behind the purples and pinks and blues of twilight on the water. But Tobirama didn’t need his eyes to see like those damned Uchiha. He reached down as far as his senses could touch, past silky predators cruising in the deep, delicate jellyfish that twinkled with bioluminescence where the sun could not reach them, down and down to the silty, sandy bottom, and deeper still. An entire ocean, twenty-thousand leagues, nine-thousand pounds per square inch, and he was as Atlas, shouldering it all because hell if he would die here today.

Tobirama rose and raised the sea along with him.

Izuna cut down two enemy shinobi with his blades. Tōka was at his back, her breathing steady, like she’d done this a thousand times before, and he knew she had. She was a Senju, after all, and our enemies are only at least as good as we are. Otherwise, they would not live long enough to earn the title.
She bumped him from behind, but when he looked she already was gone, soaring over his head away from an enemy that had gotten too close. Tōka landed on the water with a soft splash and rammed her chokutō just past Izuna’s left ear to catch the enemy shinobi behind him through the eye. He sputtered behind them, and Izuna felt the splash of warm blood on the back of his neck catching on his ponytail.

Tōka’s brilliant, green eyes narrowed as she pulled back her chokutō and accidentally nicked Izuna’s ear, he was so close to the steel. His blood trickled down his neck from the cut she’d given him. An enemy, indeed.

“Not bad,” he said. “For a Senju.”

A flash of surprised passed through those luminous, green eyes. Tōka opened her mouth to say something, but the roar of water and compressed air drew her attention somewhere over Izuna’s shoulder. He followed her gaze. Behind them, defying all sense and reason, the ocean itself rose in the sky. Whirlpools, dozens of them, lifted off the water’s surface slowly but steadily. They were inverted waterspouts held up by a power stronger than gravity and the laws of man. Tobirama stood at the center of the maelstrom among frothing waves, carrying it all on his shoulders.

“Oh my god,” Tōka said. “He actually did it!”

Izuna narrowed his eyes and looked back at Sanada’s remaining naval fleet. They were scattering, as were the remaining grounded shinobi, to avoid Tobirama’s monstrous attack. If they dispersed too far, Tobirama would miss and all of this would have been for naught.

“Not yet, he hasn’t,” Izuna said. “Come on, we don’t want to be anywhere near this storm.”

They ran to join Tobirama, jumping over the sizeable waves his technique had caused. As they ran, Tobirama launched one of the raised whirlpools at a ship, where it crashed into the ship’s hull. Those aboard abandoned ship with more shinobi and samurai taking to the water to join the ranks already fighting on foot. Tobirama swore.

“It’s not enough. They’re too spread out!” Tōka shouted over the roaring wind and water.

“Then stop them!” Tobirama shouted back. “It’s not like I can hold this forever, for your information!”

Tōka tried to focus on just one step at a time, to compartmentalize, to forget about the fact that they were just three teenagers facing down a naval power, the only defense between here and their clansmen fighting valiantly on shore. She summoned her chakra and prepared to execute a genjutsu large enough to cut off the enemy’s escape. Yes, come on, she could do this, goddamnit. Tobirama was the speedy sensor and Sasuke the ace in the hole and Hashirama the unmatched genius, but this she could do better than any of them on their best days. Chakra gave her imagination form, pulling from the nightmares she carefully cultivated and tucked away for inspiration. The genjutsu she unleashed projected images of more water spouts rising from the ocean’s depths, caging in the escaping ships and shinobi and squeezing them in. It stretched for miles, a continuous illusion made real and populating a world where she was the god exacting her vengeance upon the mortals trapped inside. The scale was staggering, larger than any genjutsu she had ever conjured, but she pulled it off all the same. Her nose began to bleed from the extreme exertion.

“By all means, take your time,” Tōka said, her breathing ragged as she drifted in and out of phantasmagoria.

“If I launch them all at once, I’ll only have one shot,” Tobirama said.
Izuna looked back at the shore where the rest of their clansmen were still fighting for their lives. Only the enemy stood ahead of them. Tōka’s genjutsu was frightening, on a scale beyond any he had ever seen or heard of. But it would not last, and they only had one shot. This was going to hurt.

“Well, let’s make it count,” he said.

“What the hell’re you gonna do?” Tobirama said, as though the very thought of ‘we’ offended him.

“Make sure you don’t miss.”

Izuna crouched down on the water’s surface at Tobirama’s feet and submerged his hands. Drawing upon all the chakra he could muster in one prolonged stream, he watched it swim along the currents Tobirama was manipulating at a speed the naked eye alone could not detect. Faster than the darkness of the impending twilight, faster than the density of the supercharged water Tobirama had hypnotized into doing his bidding.

“Do it now, Tobirama!” Izuna shouted.

Tobirama let out a battle cry and let loose the chakra holding back the sentient whirlpools. By the twos and threes and fours, they hurtled through the air in swooping arcs and took aim at both the enemy ships and shinobi entrapped by Tōka’s nightmare genjutsu. Izuna’s palms split under the pressure of his chakra and bled into the dark salt water. Flesh and muscles parted and shredded to the bone as his electrifying chakra roasted him from the inside out. He screamed, but he did not relent.

Lightning, brilliant and yellow, raced along the vast seascape and chased Tobirama’s flying whirlpools. It climbed up their trunks, evaporating some of the water as it went and releasing a horrendous, spitting steam. The waterspouts whorled with scintillating light, searing the retinas, the hands of some old gods woken in a terrible rage. Tōka released her genjutsu just a breath before impact, just enough time for the enemy to distinguish reality from fantasy.

The collision was almighty, like the sea and sky themselves had decided to unleash havoc upon the earth and the poor souls upon it. Where Tobirama’s water didn’t reach, Izuna’s lightning jumped and engulfed the targets in fearsome flashes that burned and charred and obliterated. The whirlpools smashed into ships and shinobi alike, plunging them to the darkest depths of the cruel sea and its crisscrossing currents, death traps hidden under the pristine, glittering surface.

Tobirama collapsed on his hands and knees. Izuna slumped next to him. The waves tossed them about, but they managed to stay afloat, barely. Tōka, who was having a hard time standing on her own as it was, nevertheless hauled them both up and leaned them on her shoulders.

Izuna’s hands were ripped to shreds and growing ugly boils where the lightning had fried his flesh. The electric burns extended up his arms, but his armor concealed his wounds from sight. Only his blood dripped into the dark ocean, sparking with latent static electricity. He leaned his weight on Tōka, too tired to protest, and she held up his small, lithe frame easily. His eyes had fallen dark, and he squinted into the distance at their handiwork.

“Did we get them?” Tobirama asked, voice hoarse.

“Yeah,” Tōka said. “Every last one.”

Tobirama let his head fall back. “Thank god. Now I don’t have to work with you ever again.”

Izuna chuckled. “This may be the first time we’ve ever agreed on anything.”
“At least it’s over,” Tōka said, dragging them both back to shore.

“Seriously. That sucked balls,” Tobirama said. “I’m never lifting up the goddamned ocean ever again, I don’t care how totally boss it was.”

Tōka bit back a smile. “Whatever you say, Tobirama.”

“Well, it was.”

Madara grunted as he swung his katana with both hands and decapitated an enemy samurai outside the hospital. But every time he killed one enemy, two more showed up his place. What the hell was Izuna doing? This many enemies should not have been getting past him and the brunt of the Uchiha forces fighting at the beach. Perhaps there was trouble with the Senju. The thought only fueled Madara’s anger, and he powered up a Great Fireball that incinerated half the forest in front of the hospital. Hikaku landed behind him and they stood back to back, assessing the area and the space beyond with their heightened sight. After hours of fighting, twilight was encroaching from the eastern horizon, but the night had no effect on Madara’s vision. Bodies piled upon bodies for miles. Their blood stood out to him on the grass, bright under the moon’s light and filling his nostrils as the wind carried its scent across the island.

In the distance, a roar like thunder reverberated through the island followed by the pungent smell of ozone carried upon the breeze. But a look at the sky showed no sign of a thunderstorm. Madara’s first thought was of Izuna, whose Lightning Release was among the most powerful in the Uchiha clan. But Izuna could take care of himself. Madara had other things to worry about as he and Hikaku teamed up against the newest wave of enemy invaders passing through to get to the inner island sanctuary.

Hikaku blew a stream of fire that spread out before Madara and him like a dividing rope between them and the enemies. Madara completed a round of ten hand seals, swung his sword in a low arc at Hikaku’s feet, and released a deadly blade of wind. It fed Hikaku’s fire technique with so much energy that the fire exploded into a wall of flames, hurtling over itself as it descended upon the enemies.

One kunoichi attempted to counter with a water-based technique, but the fire was too hot, and her attack evaporated on contact. The wall of fire crashed to the ground as though it were a solid, tangible thing, crushing anyone in its path and leaving nothing but charred devastation in its wake. When it dissipated, those who weren’t dead were on their way. Their moans carried around the space. Madara walked forward without a word and adjusted his grip on his katana. Approaching the nearest suffering shinobi, he aimed the katana’s blade at the man’s skull. The skin on the entire left half of his face was burned off to the bone. There was no blood, the fire having cauterized the blood vessels and evaporated any that escaped. Madara brought the blade down in a clean sweep, painless. Nearby, Hikaku performed the same ritual on others barely holding on.

Madara stared down at the life he’d taken. It was no better or worse than the countless others he’d killed today or any other day. Still, he couldn’t help but give it a moment, listening to the way the world hushed.

And then, he saw it. An outpouring of red, faint in the dying sunlight of dusk but clearly there. It leaked from the corpse’s oozing wounds, a miasma of unknown origin and purpose. Madara watched it rise in wisps, and he noticed small, electric currents sparking within it. Chakra, though he’d never seen a corpse react to death in such a manner.
“Madara, are you seeing this?” Hikaku asked.

Madara followed the floating mixture of blood and chakra as it curled in the breeze like so many ribbons lost to the sky. It drifted away in the direction of the shoreline.

“Yes,” he said, intrigued. “I’m going after it.”

“What? But what about the hospital?”

“There aren’t any more enemies in the vicinity. Stay here, make sure that doesn’t change.”

“What’re you gonna do?”

Madara reached out a hand to touch the floating chakra, enthralled. It burned his skin. “I’m going to find out what’s really going on here.”

In all honesty, Sasuke had expected to be the one doing most of the work as he and Mito made their way across the island given his near decade of experience on top of hers. But Mito’s taijutsu skills more than surprised him. She moved just like the other Uzumaki soldiers, her diligent training plain to see despite her sex and privilege. She could handle herself, and all the better; there were too many enemy invaders to be worried about protecting anyone but himself.

Samurai attacked with chakra-infused swords that could cut through even the thick rock walls Sasuke summoned from the earth as moving shields. One slice and he’d be done for. Meanwhile, Mito was busy slipping past enemy blows with an elegance he had never thought possible for taijutsu. It looked exhausting, but she moved with such caprice that the enemy couldn’t quite keep up. One by one, they fell as she delivered blow after bone-crushing blow to throat, back, gut.

Sasuke narrowly avoided a charging samurai. The edge of his blade sliced through Sasuke’s cheek, forcing him to turn with the blade to avoid decapitation. His long ponytail ended up smacking the samurai in the face, and Sasuke used the opportunity to twist the samurai’s wrist back so far that his arm snapped. Howling in pain, the samurai fell and Sasuke claimed his katana to fend off the others coming to his aid.

Hours of this.

Hours of knocking out one enemy only to find a fresh face in his place. And at some point, Sasuke lost track of Mito. The sinuous garden paths created a maze to one unfamiliar with the geography, and he was soon completely lost. Without much time to look for her due to the constant influx of enemy shinobi and samurai lying in wait for the unwary, there was no telling when or where they’d gotten separated.

“Damnit,” he muttered after slitting an enemy shinobi’s throat with a dagger.

He dropped the corpse without a second thought and wiped the grime from his brow. The cut on his cheek had scabbed up and begun to itch, but he ignored it. Looking around, Sasuke found himself near a main street in the center of town. Dwellings and shops dotted the edges, their doors hanging open, abandoned. Bodies littered the area, bleeding out. The flies had descended upon them, their soft buzzing a moribund symphony, skin-crawling. Sasuke spit, wincing at the bitter taste in his mouth from too much fighting and lack of hydration. His brown, leather armor was slashed and scuffed in places. Twilight had set in. At least he didn’t have to look at the bodies around him.
“Sasuke,” a voice called.

Satto Uzumaki and a small group of Uzumaki shinobi approached from the north. They looked worse for wear.

“General,” Sasuke greeted. “Good to see you holding up.”

“We’re all right. I heard you were fighting at the safe houses. Did everyone make it inside all right?”

Sasuke nodded. “Yeah. I left my summon behind to help out. Mito’s slug’s there, too. The civilians should be safe.”

“Lady Mito,” Satto said, worry creasing his withered brow. “Did you see her? Is she safe?”

“Dunno. Last I saw her, we were fighting our way to the shoreline, but we got separated.”

Satto glazed over, and the Uzumaki shinobi whispered among themselves. Sasuke regretted his words.

“Uh, I mean, hey, she’s pretty competent. Seriously, I don’t think you have to worry about her. I’m sure she’s just fine.”

“I hope so. I have confidence in Lady Mito’s capabilities, but this situation is unusual,” Satto said.

Sasuke put a comforting hand on Satto’s shoulder. “It’s gonna be okay. She was headed for the shoreline, so we can just meet her there. You don’t mind if I join your squadron for now, do you?”

“Please do.”

“Well, well, well. Look at you, being kind to the elderly. Someone ought to give you a merit badge for that.”

Sasuke froze at the sound of that voice. As though someone had flipped a switch, he forgot all about the Uzumaki soldiers before him. Every muscle in his body tensed, ready to run. But he had no intention of fleeing from this fight.

“Kirigakure,” he spat. The name was like broken glass caught in his teeth. “Look what the tide dragged in. Trash.”

Saizō Kirigakure stood a short ways away flanked by several shinobi that Sasuke recognized as his private guard from their dress. He counted nine. Saizō smiled and spread his arms.

“Look, now I’m the leader of Sanada’s Ten Heroes.”

“The Ten Heroes are over. You killed them, you fucking turncoat. And now, I’m gonna kill you.”

Saizō’s smile fell. “We’ll see about that.”

“Sasuke,” Satto said. “You know this man?”

“Oh,” Sasuke said, though he kept his attention focused carefully on Saizō, not trusting the man not to play dirty and attack during parley. “Saizō Kirigakure. He’s the one responsible for all this.”

Satto stepped forward. His gray hair was pulled back in a low ponytail, giving him a severe expression. “In that case, he’s not leaving here with his life. Men.”
The Uzumaki soldiers spread out, and Saizō’s companions mimicked their movements, ready to spring at a moment’s notice. Sasuke sneered upon seeing two more familiar faces among Saizō’s ranks.

“Kakei, Nezu,” he said, old wounds of betrayal flayed open anew at the sight of them beside Saizō. “When I’m done with him, I’ll take your scalps for trophies.”

Saizō tsked him. “There’s no need for rudeness, Sarutobi. Your arrogance always was your weakness.”

“I’m with the Senju now. I’m not the same man you knew. You’re not leaving here, I swear it on my comrades’ graves. The ones you killed.”

Saizō said nothing, but something caught his eye. He bared his teeth in a twisted smile. “Oh goody, it’s already happening.”

Sasuke frowned. “What’re you on about now? Enough talk! Let’s end this.”

Saizō nudged a nearby corpse with his foot. Thick, red mist emanated from a deep gash in the corpse’s abdomen. Blood? It was too gaseous, though. It drifted on the wind towards the shoreline. More pockets of the red mist rose from other corpses in the area, all traveling in the same direction.

Saizō laughed. “Excellent. It’s going exactly according to plan.”

Sasuke advanced, not understanding but knowing his old partner’s penchant for the supernaturally cruel better than most. “What the hell did you do?”

“Slow as usual, old friend. It’s not what I’ve done. It’s what you’ve done. All of you.”

In the distance, clouds swirled in the sky where before there had been none at all, thick and dull red under the light of the rising moon.

What the hell is that?

“So, let’s do this quickly. I have somewhere to be,” Saizō said, lunging.

Sasuke crouched to defend, the strange phenomenon forgotten as the battle of his life, the moment he’d dreamed of all these years, finally began.

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“Sasuke!” Mito shouted.

Her yelling drew out an enemy shinobi from a ransacked house and assaulted her with a powerful water technique. Mito held out the tantō she carried and faced the water head on. In her free hand she sped through practiced hand seals, and chakra jumped from her hand to the dagger. The water hit her weapon, but it went no further as the tantō absorbed it. The enemy shinobi hesitated, dumbfounded. Mito spun and swung the dagger in a wide arc toward the enemy. The same burst of water gushed forth from the space where the dagger sliced the air. It careened toward the enemy shinobi and pummeled him to the ground. Mito followed the trajectory and brought the dagger down across his throat. His blood mixed with the remains of his own water technique and she pulled herself up, wiping the sweat from her forehead. Her long hair dripped water and blood and dirt, but there was no helping it.
She looked around. The sun had disappeared below the horizon, and she was alone by the Ginkgo tree tunnel’s entrance. Through it was a shortcut to the shoreline, so she followed it. But she didn’t get far. Something, or someone, had somehow forced the trees to grow rapidly and rabidly, fast enough to trap people inside and doom them to a painful, slow death. Blood dried on the ground, and Mito covered her mouth. She prayed that the people inside were the intruders and not her allies.

“Mito.”

Hashirama spotted her from the entrance to the tunnel. His face was smeared with a bit of blood and dirt, and his armor looked dented and scuffed. No better than she looked, she supposed.

“Hashirama, thank god,” Mito said, feeling herself relax a little at the sight of him. “I was heading to the shoreline with Sasuke, but we were separated. I don’t know where he went.”

Hashirama looked at the devastation behind her, his gaze far away. “Sasuke can take care of himself. I was headed to the shoreline too, but I got held up by the invaders here. They just kept coming.”

“There are so many,” Mito said, shaking her head. “How can there be so many? My father’s supposed to be fighting at the beach. I hope he’s okay.”

“Tobirama and Tōka are there with some of my best soldiers. I’m sure your father is fine.”

He smiled a little, and she wanted to believe him. It was easy to believe him, a comfort. She reached for him, but refrained at the last minute.

*Madara went off by himself, too. I hope he’s okay...*

Not knowing was killing her.

“Hey, do you see that?”

Mito looked to where Hashirama was pointing. From between the twisted tree branches turned guillotines, a thick, red, fog-like substance floated out and passed Mito and Hashirama by. Hashirama reached out to touch it and hissed in pain.

“Ouch! It burns,” he said.

Mito peered at the stuff. It smelled like blood, but she’d never seen blood behave in such a manner. It floated in the air out of the tunnel, where the wind picked up and carried it in the vague direction of the shoreline. It was more than just a little bit. Pockets of it melded together to form dense clouds heavy with blood that didn’t fall.

“What is it?” she asked, her voice barely a whisper.

Hashirama studied the burn on his fingers as his chakra healed it. “Chakra,” he said. “Extremely concentrated chakra. It’s the only thing that burns like this. But I’ve never seen anything like this before.”

“It’s heading for the beach.” Mito grabbed Hashirama’s hand. “Come on, we should follow it.”

Hashirama nodded. “Yeah, I think we should. I have a bad feeling about this.”

*The beach.*
That was where she’d get her answers about Sasuke, her father, the invaders, and Madara. As she and Hashirama ran, the night grew darker. Mito kept an eye on the red miasma hovering above them. The closer they got to the beach, the thicker it became.

“It’s coming from all over the island,” Hashirama said as they ran.

Slender ribbons of chakra converged from all directions, merging and descending somewhere up ahead. Mito couldn’t make out whatever it was due to the tall forest trees on this side of the island and the incline of a hill that led to a cliff overlooking the shore below. But with every passing moment, the foreboding in her heart as to what they might find festered and carved holes inside her.

And then they heard it. A roar so loud, Mito was sure the earth was splitting in two. It was louder than any thunderclap, any raging sea storm. *Something* was out there, something big. Something mean. The red mist that had been following them had rushed on ahead, and none was left. Like something had drunk it up, all that burning, raw energy.

“What was that?” she asked.

Hashirama said nothing, but he picked up the pace and sprinted the rest of the way. Mito was hot on his tail, trepidation turning to a deep-seated dread that physically hurt her bones. That roar was not of this earth, she was sure of it. They reached the edge of the forest and the cliff’s rocky face overlooking a sheltered cove, and they skidded to a halt together. What they saw below was a sight that would haunt Mito’s dreams for the rest of her too-long life.

The red chakra mist had gathered into a condensed, roiling cloud taller than the cliff itself. The Uchiha, Senju, and Uzumaki forces that had been fighting at the beach were slowly trickling into the cove, possibly drawn by the same signs as Mito and Hashirama. The mist was too thick to see through, but Mito didn’t need eyes to get the idea.

*Monster.*

Like breathing, this fear was instinctual. Full-body. There was no escaping it. It was like the dreams she sometimes had of drowning in the pits of the dark, cold whirlpools that entrapped Uzushiogakure on all sides, except this was real. Stare too long, and they would stare into her, too.

But she could not look away. She couldn’t look away when a taloned paw, larger than a house, reached out from the depths of the mist and flexed and slashed the rocky shore under razor-sharp claws. Frozen in fear, Mito could barely think, let alone take any action. What could she do against this thing? Whatever *this* was?

“That’s...” Hashirama trailed off, equally august.

It roared again, but this time Mito could make out a bright glow from somewhere within the fog. The light *popped* and extinguished, and another paw appeared, this time with incredible celerity, as though chasing something.

“Madara!” she screamed.

Madara flew backwards, limp, and the colossal paw swiped at him, wounding him further. He crashed on the rocky beach like a lifeless doll, rolling several yards. He didn’t get up.

Hashirama had gone pale at the sight, deathly silent, as Mito began to sob uncontrollably. The creature, whatever had done this to Madara, bellowed its rage. Long fingers, or maybe tails of some sort, rose from the red smoke, swishing it in hateful lashes. Mito sank to her knees as the
image of Madara flying backwards, totally lifeless, replayed in her mind’s eye over and over and over. He just lay there on the rocky beach where he’d landed.

“One day, I’ll lead the Uchiha clan.”

He didn’t get up. He didn’t even move.

“No, no, no,” she wailed.

“This world is ours for the taking. We can turn our dreams into reality.”

Hashirama stepped forward, his eyes trained on Madara. He still said nothing, the shock of what had just happened too overwhelming.

“I can see everything.”

Every touch, every look, every whispered name. When did she grow to love her name so much? Gone.

“Come with me.”

She screamed with the will to wake the dead, and they woke. Their phantoms grew inside her, tore her apart, and she let them. But she didn’t break, not as the tears fell fat and hot on her cheeks, blurred her vision. Not as the thought that she’d never hold Madara again tempted her to a dark place. This was not the end.

“Madara!” she screamed again.

All the pain, all the anger, all the beauty and tragedy of him gathered in the pit of her heart and burst. This heart that had led her here, to him, under the light of the moon and those eyes that could see her best in the dark. All of it bursting, clawing, free.

“Mito!” Hashirama called to her.

Mito barely heard him over the beating of her heart, whole and strong because someone had to be. She ran, one foot in front of the other, her hair a wild mess behind her, as bloody as the demonic fog hiding the monster within—over the edge.

Hashirama watched her fall and never hit the ground. A dozen golden chains burst from her back and swooped around her. They crashed into the rocky beach at wicked points, stopping her fall and giving her wings. They sped towards the chakra-heavy cloud, the knives at their ends searching for an entrance, anywhere. The creature’s tails continued to sweep the mist away, revealing more and more of its true form.

Mito flew through the air, carried upon the wings of an ancient power and fueled by the heart she’d ripped open to summon them. Her tears continued to fall, but she didn’t care. All that mattered was stopping this thing from finishing its kill, if it hadn’t already. She shot an arm forward, unsure how to command the scintillating, golden chains but trusting her instincts. Four chains flew ahead of her, pierced the fog, and latched onto something solid. It resisted and pulled back, taking her with it.

“No,” she spat. “You’re not getting past me!”

The creature roared, perhaps sensing her bold defiance.
Hashirama sprinted down the cliff face with the aid of chakra, having snapped out of his previous stupor. There was no time to question anything. Not why Mito knew Madara. Not what this strange power was. Not even the monster that was the cause of all this. There was only Madara bleeding out into the sea, broken. Hashirama reached his side and hauled him into his lap. His hands shook.

“Madara, come on! Stay with me, buddy!” he pleaded.

Green chakra flared to life in Hashirama’s palms as he assessed the damage. Multiple puncture wounds that reached out the other side of him. Countless fractures. Heart failure in thirty seconds. His vision blurred, and Hashirama blinked the tears away.

“You can’t die on me, idiot. I won’t let you!”

Mito continued attacking the creature hidden in the bloody mist. She grabbed onto one of the chakra chains, surprised at its cold solidity despite its intangible nature. Seals flickered upon its length.

*That’s it, she thought. That’s what I have to do.*

Manipulating the chains as best she could, she directed numerous chakra seals through the chains, hoping to hinder her target and sap its energy.

Hashirama continued to pump healing chakra into Madara. The process was too slow, but it was working. Other shinobi, Uchiha, Senju, and Uzumaki, drew closer but were loath to get in range of whatever this hell-beast was.

“Ha...Hashirama,” Madara groaned.

“Haha!” Hashirama laughed through his tears. “You bastard, I thought you’d died there for a minute!”

Madara coughed, and Hashirama continued to heal the worst of his injuries. Madara soon pushed himself up on his elbows as the pain ebbed and his strength returned. He winced in pain as he put weight on his shoulders. Hashirama hadn’t healed everything.

“What’s going on?” he demanded.

Then, he spotted Mito doing battle with the creature. A surge of hatred forced a change in his eyes from Sharingan to the next level, which he hadn’t used since awakening it in the campaign.

“Get up,” he said to Hashirama. “She can’t fight it alone, damnit. Mito!”

Mito landed on the ground. At least twelve golden chains extended from her back, half of which had disappeared into the miasma, while the other half kept her grounded. They glowed with ancient runes, seals Madara didn’t recognize. But whatever she was doing, he knew it wouldn’t be enough. Not against this thing. Not after he’d already tried and failed.

Mito sent a final burst of chakra through her awakened chains to subdue the beast, but in the end, she only managed to anger it further. A light crackled to life somewhere within the fog, and she gasped. It was just like what had happened to Madara. Acting quickly, she manipulated her chakra chains and lifted off the ground once more. They propelled her backwards at high speed and formed a protective shield in front of her. Not seconds later, a fearsome burst of raw energy torpedoed through the mist and crashed into the cliff face. It exploded on impact, so loud that Mito heard only ringing. The entire cliff came apart at the seams. Giants slabs of rock and uprooted trees crashed to the shore below.
Fearing for Hashirama and Madara, Mito looked back and searched for them. Her heart soared and her tears fell anew at the sight of them dashing toward her. Madara reached her first and skidded to a halt in the loose rubble at their feet.

“Mito,” he said, breathless.

“You’re okay,” she sobbed. “I... I thought I’d lost you.”

He took her hands in his and helped her up. Hashirama joined them and lent Madara an arm to lean on. The golden chakra chains floated behind Mito, their sharpened points aimed once more at the bloody mist and the creature within.

“I’m a medical ninja,” Hashirama said to Mito as he lent Madara more of his healing chakra. “I’m just glad I got to him in time.”

Hashirama and Madara exchanged a look, but Mito didn’t care about whatever their feud may be as Senju and Uchiha. All that mattered was that Madara was alive. That Hashirama had saved him. She wiped her tears and stood on her own once more.

By now the mist was all but cleared up, and the monster was finally revealed for all to see. Dark fur, a deep, rich auburn, coarse. Paws with talons thicker around than a man. It towered taller than the highest cliff on the island, which it had also just destroyed. And its nine, slender tails slashed back and forth like blades, cutting the air and generating chakra like electricity. It hurt to breathe the air around it.

“Kyuubi,” Hashirama said. “It’s just like the legend.”

“It’s a monster,” Madara scoffed. “And monsters can be killed.”

Its feral hatred was so palpable that Mito could taste it on her tongue. Familiar, she thought. The Kyuubi loomed over the three of them, brought together by its terrible power and the threat it posed to the island they’d been fighting so hard to protect. Senju, Uchiha, and Uzumaki.

“So let’s kill this one,” Mito said grimly. “It’s not taking another step.”
Bonds of Fate

There was no courtesy between men who had nothing to say to each other. Sasuke dashed at Saizō, while Satto and his Uzumaki soldiers spread out to handle Saizō’s teammates. Sasuke began with two exploding kunai, throwing one directly at Saizō and the other behind himself. The tags detonated, and Sasuke jumped high into the air. Saizō was neither in his original position nor in the genjutsu trap Sasuke knew from experience he liked to set at the start of battles. The sky opened in a wet smile in front of Sasuke’s face and dripped something black and viscous, darker than the night. Saizō’s pale hand reached out from the illusory dimensional warp.

“You know me so well,” his voice echoed in Sasuke’s ear.

Drawing two tantō from his hips, Sasuke channeled chakra through his body and spun, faster and faster. The daggers’ edges sliced the wind around him, powered by elemental chakra, and Saizō withdrew his genjutsu. Sasuke landed on his feet.

“But I know you, too,” the real Saizō said.

Sasuke didn’t give him an inch, knowing that time was Saizō’s greatest advantage in battle. Time to think, to prepare, to sneak up on his target under the cover of darkness. There could be no rules when fighting him, and no victory was dirty. Sasuke readied his daggers and prepared to change his course at a moment’s notice. If he could just get close enough to Saizō to engage him in tajutsu, he could win this.

Saizō ran to meet him, but as he drew closer, he changed into something else. His smile widened, reaching his ears and opening up to reveal a gaping maw with rows of serrated teeth and a salivating, red tongue. His hands grew into talons, and he slashed at Sasuke. Fighting the urge to recoil—it’s only an illusion!—Sasuke rammed his daggers into the creature’s forehead. Blood spurted from the wound, but Sasuke didn’t let up. His momentum carried him high into the air once more, and he quickly ran through a round of hand seals.

He rubbed his hands together and birthed flames and burning ash, which grew to an enormous size as he flew. They coiled together in the shape of a fat, serpentine creature, which crawled through the air toward Saizō’s apparition. The sentient cinders slammed into the apparition and collided with the earth, burrowing underground. The superheated air was enough to break Saizō’s genjutsu and reveal his true location—directly behind Sasuke with a kunai ready to slit his throat.

Sasuke twisted and grabbed the kunai with his bare hand, ignoring the pain as it slashed his palm, and yanked as hard as he could. Saizō grunted in surprise and lost his balance. It was just enough for Sasuke to land a hard kick to his stomach. Saizō flew backwards and crashed through the wall of a nearby dwelling.

Meanwhile, Satto and his men were all over the place dealing with Saizō’s team. Both sides suffered losses, but the Uzumaki worked together to double-team the enemy whenever possible. Sasuke wanted to help, but he had to worry about Saizō first. Emerging from the damaged building, Saizō spat blood and hung on a split piece of wood for balance. There was poison in his eyes.

“All right,” he said. “Let’s play.”
Saizō disappeared and took the moon with him as Sasuke was plunged into yet another terrifying genjutsu.

Madara stood in between Hashirama and Mito as the three of them faced the monstrous Kyuubi. “Hashirama, Mito,” he said. “We have to restrain it first. If it fires off another of those giant chakra blasts and hits us, we’re dead.”

“On it,” Mito said. She raced ahead and flung her chakra chains at the beast, latching onto its neck and paws, piercing its rough hide.

Hashirama fell to one knee and dug into the earth with his fingers. Chakra surged through his body and connected with the earth until dozens of roots rose from underground and ramified in all directions in search of something to strangle.

“Go!” he shouted to Madara. “I’ll cover you!”

He followed Madara with his eyes as Madara ran toward the nearest moving branch and jumped atop it, racing higher and closer to the Kyuubi’s maw. Hashirama directed his chakra to give Madara a clear path to where he needed to be while manipulating the rising branches to attack the Kyuubi itself.

The beast snapped its massive jaws and struggled against its new chakra chain shackles. Mito rose into the air, but Hashirama sent a thick branch in her direction. A few of her chakra chains looped around it and steadied her before the Kyuubi could reel her in too close. The Kyuubi’s hide crackled with foreign chakra wherever Mito had it in her chains’ clutches, sapping its chakra and trapping it in place. Sensing the threat of their teamwork, it crunched down on one of Hashirama’s branches, ripped the branch apart, and uprooted several others, including the hold Hashirama had on Mito.

She went flying.

“Mito!” he shouted in fright.

Hashirama leaped into the sky, where more branches raced to meet him and carry him higher. Two of her chakra chains, which had previously tethered her to the now splintered branch, swung by him, and he made a grab for them. They burned his palms, as though sucking all the life out of his fingers, but he could not let go or he would fall and the Kyuubi would pull her in. Mito jerked to a halt in midair, gasping as she attempted to control this new power.

“I’ve got you!” he called to her.

She nodded grimly and channeled more chakra through the chains still connected to the Kyuubi, causing it to double over as she sealed off its chakra pathways and blood flow, anything her chains could reach.

Meanwhile, Madara used their distraction to launch an attack of his own. He jumped high into the air until he was face to face with the Kyuubi. He took a deep breath and spit out a molten stream of fire at the Kyuubi’s maw and continued to weave hand seals. Wind-laced chakra melded with the fire and engorged it. The combination of two elements popped and exploded, like a hundred bombs going off at once. When it hit the Kyuubi, it consumed the beast’s head and neck. Madara didn’t let up even as he began to fall.
Mito saw what Madara was doing and redirected her chains to strangle the Kyuubi while it was blind and burning. But it wasn’t meant to be. The Kyuubi howled and reared up on its hind legs to escape the fire. It hauled Mito high into the air along with it, and for a moment gravity and time abandoned her as she flew so close to the Kyuubi that she could have reached out and run her fingers through its fur.

There was a moment just before gravity clawed her back to the earth, that split second of suspension when she hovered just opposite the Kyuubi’s golden eye. She could see its sinister, red chakra healing the massive burns Madara’s technique had inflicted, evaporating its blood and sealing up its hide. But the look in the beast’s eye as it saw her trying to hold on and entrap it was enough to paralyze her. She couldn’t even scream. Never in her life had she seen so much hatred and anger projected upon her as she saw her reflection in its eye, like it knew her intimately and wanted nothing more than to rip her apart until there was nothing left, not even a memory.

And then the world picked up where it had left off. The Kyuubi fell back on all fours. It jerked its head so hard that Mito lost control of her chakra chains and came loose. She and Hashirama flew backwards together and crash-landed on the ground about a hundred yards away, saved only by Hashirama’s quick reflexes. He summoned an enormous plant from underground with thick, fleshy leaves strong enough to cushion their impact and save them a few broken bones.

Hashirama coughed as he pulled himself up and crawled toward Mito. “You okay?”

Mito rolled over on the thick leaves and fell to the ground on her knees. “I’ve been better. Thank you for this.”

The Kyuubi snarled as Madara continued to launch devastating wind-enhanced fire techniques at it from the ground. But when it threw its head back and inhaled deeply, Hashirama knew they were out of time.

“It’s gonna fire off another of those chakra blasts!” he shouted. “Madara!”

But Madara couldn’t hear him from so far away. Mito stood up.

“I’ve got him!”

Two golden chakra chains raced across the night sky toward Madara. He’d noticed what was about to happen and began to run, but he would never make it in time to avoid the blast. Mito’s chains descended upon him.

“Madara!” she screamed.

He saw the chains hurtling toward him and jumped to meet them. They wrapped around each of his arms, and Mito yanked back on them as hard as she could. Madara soared through the air just as the Kyuubi’s jaws began to glow with otherworldly power.

Hashirama crouched down on the ground and slashed his palm on a sharp rock. Blood dripped on the ground and he slammed his hand down and prayed for a miracle. “Kuchiyose: Gojū Rashōmon!”

Massive gates decorated with snarling demon faces and thicker than fifteen men lined up at arm’s length sprang up from the earth, towering higher even than the Kyuubi itself. One after another, they were raised from the earth in succession. Madara soared over them as Mito brought him closer and closer. Just as the final gate rose in front of Hashirama, Mito pulled Madara down to the ground beside them, where he landed with a grunt. She released him from her chains, and his arms
smoked through his armor. They locked eyes, and a split second later the world erupted in a symphony of light and sound as the Kyuubi fired its massive attack through Hashirama’s demon gates.

Sasuke clutched his bleeding side, his breathing grown ragged. It wasn’t deep enough to render him useless per se, but if he let the battle drag out for much longer, he would lose too much blood to keep up. Saizō walked toward him, dripping blood with every step where Sasuke had stabbed him in the back after worming his way out of a genjutsu. It wasn’t enough to deter Saizō.

“Well, well. I suppose you weren’t the leader of the Ten Heroes for no reason. But you still can’t beat me with your old tricks, Sarutobi,” Saizō said. “Perhaps taking up arms with the Senju has only made you even more obsolete than you were before.”

“Keep talkin’, asshole. I’m still gonna kill you.”

Saizō laughed. “Not with that wound, you won’t. Look at you. You can barely stand up straight.”

Saizō drew the short sword at his hip and channeled wind-nature chakra through its blade. It hummed, sharp enough to slice through bone like it was made of paper. Sasuke racked his brain for a plan, thinking back on the times he’d trained with the Senju cousins. He needed something fresh, something Saizō would never see coming, something he couldn’t counter. Something not his.

“Genjutsu has one weakness,” Tōka had explained to Sasuke during a training session some years ago. “It only blinds the intended victim.”

“So much for the great Flying Monkey,” Saizō said. He lifted his sword and prepared to launch a wind scythe from close range, a sure hit.

That’s it, Sasuke thought to himself. He can only blind me.

All of a sudden, someone ran in between them and attacked Saizō directly, taking him by surprise. Steel clanged at close range, and the sizzle of chakra made the air in the vicinity pop.

“General!” Sasuke said, rising to his feet.

Satto had just finished with one of Saizō’s lackeys, pleased that the Uzumaki were gaining the upper hand. But one glance at Sasuke’s battle sank his spirits. Saizō had a blade raised, ready to deliver the killing blow, and Sasuke merely sat there in shock. Sensing an opportunity to buy his ally some time, Satto intervened. He drew his sword and channeled water-based chakra to the blade. Clashing with Saizō, he was able to prevent his blade from cracking under powerful air pressure and pushed Saizō back.

“Sasuke! Get up!” Satto called. “I’ll hold him!”

Sasuke swore and pushed himself up, ignoring the pain in his side. Satto wouldn’t be able to hold off Saizō for long on his own.

“Stupid old man,” Saizō spat. “You’re in my way!”

Satto’s elbows shook as he caught Saizō’s sharpened blade on his own. “Old? Hah! We Uzumaki live twice as long as you mainlanders. I’m young enough to handle the likes of you!”
Saizō spun, and when he turned back around he had four arms instead of two, each wielding a chakra-infused sword. Satto grimaced and adjusted his stance to defend against the new blades. Saizō began to push him back.

“Damn genjutsu,” Satto said through gritted teeth as he expertly outmaneuvered the four blades.

Saizō grinned and his teeth began to grow into long, dripping fangs. He increased his pace, relentless in his attacks as he forced Satto backwards. From afar, Sasuke watched as whatever genjutsu Saizō had cast wrought its terrible havoc. Satto was sweating, and his movements grew more sluggish as he wove his sword in beautifully fluid but tiring formations to counter what could have been four or five enemies at once. The real Saizō, however, slipped behind him and prepared to cut him down from behind while Satto continued to hallucinate.

“I don’t think so,” Sasuke said as he readied his next attack. “Kirigakure!”

Saizō paused just long enough for Sasuke’s attack to connect. The earth split apart, and giant slabs of rock burst from the ground, intent on gobbling up Saizō where he stood. He swore and jumped to avoid them, but Sasuke gave chase. A column of rock caught him underfoot and shot him into the sky, all but flying as his moniker suggested. With one eye on Satto, who continued to fight within Saizō’s illusion, Sasuke spat out a spray of molten ash that collided with a fleeing Saizō and melted the earth around him to lava.

But just when Sasuke was sure he’d outwitted his betrayer, the ash and lava mixture churned and rose of its own accord in the shape of a great bird, talons outstretched and shedding cinders with each terrible flap of its wings. Sasuke didn’t have time to be terrified.

Genjutsu! But when?!

The real Saizō passed behind him, but he didn’t bother slashing Sasuke. They locked eyes in midair and Saizō bared his teeth in a sinister grin. Sasuke fell and the firebird caught him. He screamed as the magma flayed his skin to the bone. Illusion or not, Saizō’s genjutsu was powerful enough to override logic and reason and replace them with nothing but the horror. Sasuke screamed, and Saizō dove for his true target: Satto.

“General!” Sasuke screamed, jamming fingers into the wound at his side to disrupt his chakra flow and break the illusion before he truly believed he was being immolated. The pain disappeared and the bird along with it, leaving only a large pool of soupy ashes from Sasuke’s earlier combination attack. But he was too late.

Satto heard his cry of warning, but it was his undoing. The genjutsu holding him disappeared as Saizō drove his blade clean through Satto’s chest.

“No!” Sasuke struggled to his feet and raced toward them.

Saizō’s dark eyes were alight with mad glee as he withdrew the sword, now dripping with Satto’s blood. He said nothing as the old General stared up at him, slack-jawed and incredulous. Satto sputtered and clutched a hand over the gaping hole in his chest. Blood spurted through his fingers in time with his fading heartbeat. In those moments of realization, he seemed to age twenty years as his expression warped from one of calm resolution to abject horror. Saizō kicked him hard in the chest and he landed face-first in the ground. He didn’t get up.

“No, it’s your turn,” Saizō said as he prepared to initiate another genjutsu.

Sasuke shook with rage. No way, there was no way he’d give Saizō the chance. He held his bloody
hands together in the seal for the most rudimentary ninjutsu technique known to the world. The first one he’d ever learned as a child. The one that had made him the legend he was today.

“Tajū: Kage Bunshin no jutsu!” he bellowed.

Smoke filled the area, obscuring Sasuke from view just before Saizō could complete his genjutsu. A hundred voices joined together in a battle cry as copies of Sasuke emerged from the smokescreen and converged on Saizō. Most shinobi could create clones of themselves, generally between one and three. And yet, somehow Sasuke had learned to copy himself a hundred times over. It was madness, unheard of. A waste of chakra, surely. But now, an army of Flying Monkeys converged on Saizō the way they had once descended on the enemies of Sanada’s Ten Heroes, and he had no choice but to cut them down. He stepped back and unleashed his genjutsu, dark eyes shifting around in search of the real Sasuke among the replicas.

Clones dropped like flies. The genjutsu tore into their skin like a cancer, tearing it open to expose bleeding muscle. Those that got caught up in it wailed in agony before popping, their chakra stores devoured by the illusion. But where one disappeared, two more filled its place.

“Coward! Hiding behind your clones!” Saizō said.

The closest clones landed in range of Saizō and engaged him in high-speed taijutsu that had him recoiling. They were every bit as skilled as the original, and Saizō was no match for their hand-to-hand combat. He flipped backwards on his good arm and quickly performed a round of hand seals with his injured one. Once righted Sasuke’s clones were upon him, but Saizō was ready. He took a deep breath and expelled a pressurized blast of air that cut through the group of clones that was closest, tearing them limb from limb as it passed.

He immediately launched another genjutsu on the tailwind, this one wide enough to encompass nearly all the remaining clones. They dropped to the ground, writhing, before poofing into nothingness once their stored chakra was depleted. One remained, and it ran with the molten ash Sasuke had created earlier, manipulating it with chakra and flinging it toward Saizō in a hail of bullets.

“Enough!” Saizō shouted.

He put everything he had into a genjutsu that crippled the last clone and teleported himself out of the lava bullets’ path.

“You missed a few,” Sasuke said from behind him.

Saizō whirled with his blade and slashed, dispelling the clone. Another clone appeared before him and punched, but Saizō caught the clone’s wrist and twisted it until he heard a crack.

“No, I didn’t,” he said. “That’s one hundred.”

Scree!

Saizō gagged and looked down. The tip of a sword protruded from his stomach, coated in blood. The clone he had by the wrist still hadn’t disappeared.

“Wrong,” Sasuke said. “I’m the real one.”

Behind Saizō, the clone that had stabbed him disintegrated, leaving only the blade embedded in his stomach. Saizō coughed, the color already draining from his face. Impossible. Impossible. How had he not seen through Sasuke’s rudimentary trick? What had he missed?
“Clever,” he wheezed. “But you... You always were clever, old friend.”

Sasuke gripped a kunai in his hand and lifted it for Saizō to see. “It’s true. You were my friend, the best I ever had.” He blinked to keep any treacherous tears at bay. “But you threw it all away, you stupid son of a bitch. I wanna know why.”

Saizō heaved, and it took Sasuke a moment to realize he was laughing. “Poor S-Sarutobi. Still so slow. You’ll never... Never understand why because you don’t have what it takes to appreciate true power. I had the world at my f-feet, and you... You were in my way. It’s that s-simple.”

Even gasping for breath and shaking under the enervating pain of his grievous wounds, Saizō was defiant and cruel to the bitter end. How had Sasuke never seen it before? This insidious hatred that had taken root in Saizō long ago and festered, blossomed, until it was too late. The illusions had become the new reality, no longer just shapeless fears and suspicions. How had he missed it? Where had he gone wrong? This man had once been his friend, a brother in all but blood, and Sasuke had never seen him slowly mutating over the years.

“I see,” Sasuke said, his throat closing up as the violence of his emotions—guilt, despair, and most of all, regret—threatened to overwhelm him even now, after everything.

Saizō used the last of his energy to spit in Sasuke’s face, bloody spittle, sticky and foul. It ran down Sasuke’s scarred cheek, and he wiped it away on his sooty fingers, hands trembling.

“You’re not the man I knew anymore.

Sasuke jammed the kunai through Saizō’s heart, the heart of a man he did not recognize anymore. “I’ll never be in your way again.”

Saizō choked on his own blood, and Sasuke held his gaze as he faded, so full of anger and hatred. It was over in a matter of moments. Saizō’s eyes rolled back in his head as his corpse slumped in Sasuke’s grasp. Ripping the kunai out, he let Saizō fall to the ground. Exhaustion and blood loss got the better of Sasuke, and he fell to his knees. Saizō’s face, relaxed in death, lost the edge of mad hatred and anger, and there, just there, Sasuke could see the face of the man he’d loved and trusted.

Sasuke’s shoulders shook, and the sobs swept through him like a tsunami, full-body and crippling, and he held his face in his bloody hands helpless to do little else.

Hashirama’s hands burned as he channeled more and more chakra to support the demon gates, anything to reinforce them against this monster, but the Kyuubi’s attack obliterated the first and second gates effortlessly. Madara pulled Mito toward him and shoved her to the ground, shielding her body with his, as Hashirama’s ultimate defense crumbled before them. The third gate fell, then the fourth. All in the blink of an eye.

But death never came. Mito opened her eyes, and all Madara could see was her, stormy green eyes turbulent under the light of the moon. Still alive. How were they still alive?

“Madara,” she said, barely a whisper.

He swallowed hard and touched his forehead to hers, incredulous that they were still here. That for the second time that night, he’d evaded death. His arms burned where her chakra chains had dragged him through the sky and cut off circulation and chakra flow, but he was still here. Because
of her.

“Mito, you saved me,” he said.

Her breath was cool against his lips as he hovered over her, content to just breathe for a moment. “Yeah.”

Nearby, Hashirama stood up and walked toward the fifth gate in awe. It was charred black and cracking, but it had withstood the Kyuubi’s attack. He reached out a hand to touch it.

“Whoa,” he said.

Madara got up and pulled Mito up after him. She smiled at Hashirama. “But he saved us all,” she said.

Madara followed her gaze, still reeling from the brush with death he’d so narrowly escaped. Yeah, he thought to himself, he really did this time.

They joined Hashirama, and Mito felt the ruined fifth gate with her palms. Her chakra chains floated behind her and shed light on the damage. It had taken a beating, but it was still standing.

“I’ll be damned,” Madara said. “So you are good for something.”

“Hey, I’m pretty sure you’d be dead without these mystical palms.” He waggled his outspread fingers.

“...I’m going to pretend you didn’t say that. For your benefit.”

Mito watched them, smiling softly. But the moment soon ended when the Kyuubi roared once more. The earth began to shake as it paced closer. Other Senju, Uchiha, and Uzumaki soldiers began to approach the trio.

“Stay back!” Hashirama called to them. “It’s not safe!”

“Boys, we’re not done. The Kyuubi’s still out there,” Mito said, sighting the beast’s billowing tails over the top of the fifth gate.

The other shinobi did not heed Hashirama’s warning, and Madara scowled. “Don't come any closer!” he barked.

Hashirama put out a hand and raised a thick wooden wall that reached from the ruined cliff face to the shore. It wouldn’t stop the truly determined, but it would slow them down and keep them out of the Kyuubi’s crosshairs for now.

“This strategy isn’t working. If it blasts us again, we’re goners. I don’t have the energy to summon those gates again. We have to take it out with one shot, something big,” Hashirama said. “Mito, you’re the sealing expert here. What’re our options?”

Mito shook her head. “I can summon king beasts, but this monster’s like nothing I’ve ever even dreamed of. Even if it were hypothetically possible to seal the Kyuubi, I’d need a hundred times more chakra than I have, a seal strong enough to bind it, and somewhere to put it. I... I don’t think I can do much as I am.”

“Then I’ll handle it,” Madara said.

“Madara, no,” Mito said, taking his hands. “I know what you’re thinking, and you can’t.”
“Can’t what?” Hashirama asked.

“It’s the only way,” Madara argued. “It’s the best chance we’ve got, and you know it.”

“Don’t be an idiot! You saw what it did last time. I saw what it did to you,” Mito implored him. But Madara was done listening. “I’m not having this discussion with you. You can help me, or you can get out of my way.”

“Somebody wanna tell me what the hell’s going on?” Hashirama said. “Because we’re about to have some bad company in, like, thirty seconds.”

The earth trembled so violently that Madara lost his footing.

“Make that fifteen,” Hashirama said, paling.

Madara pushed past them both. “I’m going in.”

Mito watched him go, knowing that there was no convincing him when he made up his mind. But this was bigger than them, bigger than anything she’d ever faced, and she hated that there wasn’t more she could do. It was difficult to accept that she wasn’t strong enough to deal with this threat to her home on her own, and it hurt. But Madara was being reckless. He couldn’t do this alone.

“Hashirama, we have to help him,” Mito said. “He’s going to get himself killed.”

“What exactly is he doing?”

Mito was about to respond when the air began to pop and the smell of burning flesh and chakra filled the area. The Kyuubi roared in agony as black flames bloomed upon its hide.

“Come on!” Mito said as she dashed toward Madara.

The pain was nothing. Whatever the cost, it was worth it to take down this beast of nightmares. His left eye widened beyond its limits, spilling blood and heat as he traced the Kyuubi’s hide with his vision. Black flames ate away at its fur and skin everywhere he looked, ravenous. The Kyuubi lunged, trying to shake free of the flames, but it was a meaningless effort. The beast crashed to the ground. Its demonic chakra seeped from its wounds, thick and red, and converged on the black flames.

Madara gritted his teeth, fighting chakra exhaustion and the pain that spread from his eye to his head to his heart. The Kyuubi’s wide, golden eye found his, and Madara fell to one knee as he saw himself, the Sharingan, reflected therein.

“Promise me, Madara.”

“My son.”

“Live.”

“Burn!” he shouted.

Tajima’s memory faded as the apex of hatred and sorrow and more pain than Madara could bear consumed him, and the black fires roared. The Kyuubi gnashed its jaws in his direction, but thick
branches moving with a life all their own struck it and snapped its head back before it could reach
Madara. Strong arms hauled Madara to his feet.

“Madara,” Mito said, wiping the blood from his eye. “Come on, snap out of it.”

Hashirama continued to pummel the Kyuubi with his Mokuton, taking advantage of its momentary
debilitation. But it was an opportunity that didn’t last long as the Kyuubi’s sinister chakra snuffed
out Madara’s ghost fire slowly but surely. Hellfire could not burn the devil himself.

“It’s not enough power,” Madara said, gasping for air. “I’m not…”

“You have to stop before you lose control!” Mito said.

The fires spread from the Kyuubi to the rocky earth, taking to any solid surface. Beyond the
wooden barrier Hashirama had erected earlier, Uzumaki soldiers began to cross over and flank the
Kyuubi, launching seals to bind it, but to no avail.

“Settle down!” Hashirama shouted at the Kyuubi, calling forth more roots from underground to
confine its movements.

Madara’s black fire made short work of Hashirama’s trees, however, and as a result the flames
only spread. Hashirama was forced to retreat when the black flames nearly spread up his arm.

“Whoa, that’s hot!”

“Hashirama, move!” Madara shouted.

Hashirama looked back at Mito and Madara, confused, and the Kyuubi took the opportunity to
swat at him with one of its gigantic paws. Mito gasped and flung her chakra chains. They struck
the Kyuubi’s paw just before it could connect with Hashirama, and she channeled sealing chakra
through them to buy Hashirama some time. The Kyuubi’s paw contorted at abnormal angles, and
its wicked claws dug into the soft pad, breaking the flesh and leaking red chakra. The Kyuubi lost
its balance and fell forward on its good leg, howling in pain as all chakra and blood ceased
circulation to its mutilated paw. Hashirama dashed out of the line of fire unscathed and rejoined
Mito and Madara.

“Thanks, that was close,” he said, flashing Mito a grin.

“Oh no, that’s my father’s battalion,” Mito said, noticing the other Uzumaki gathering around the
Kyuubi.

“Go,” Madara said. “I’m finishing this.”

“Madara…”

“You heard the man,” Hashirama said. “Besides, this is all he’s good for, anyway.”

Mito nodded, concerned about her clansmen and knowing there was little else she could do for
Madara now. “Okay.”

Madara watched them dash away and create a perimeter of chakra chains and moving branches.
The Kyuubi shook with rage as its molten chakra battled Madara’s fire and slowly overtook it. He
was out of time.

He stood on shaky legs and reached out a hand towards the Kyuubi. “Vermin,” he spat. “You’re
not welcome here!”
The Kyuubi threw its head back in preparation to launch another chakra blast, but Madara was faster. He directed the flames to burst in the Kyuubi’s mouth, burning it from the inside out. The smell of roasting flesh and blood was redolent in the air, and Madara had to fight to keep his eyes open against the rancid sting of it. But Hashirama and Mito were counting on him, and he couldn’t give up, not when he had the pride of the Uchiha riding on his shoulders as he faced hell incarnate alone for one last push.

“Die!”

Red chakra steamed in the air, engulfing the Kyuubi once more. The haze built and Madara fell, unable to stand anymore. With one final, bone-chilling howl, the Kyuubi leaped from the cloud of raw chakra surrounding it and ran towards sea, cradling the contorted paw Mito had sealed off. One leap and it crossed a league of ocean. The red miasma trailed behind it along with the last of the black flames, just as stubborn as their maker who watched the monster flee, beaten.

But not defeated.

Madara collapsed on his back, his left eye swollen shut and caked with blood.

Mito could hardly believe her eyes when the Kyuubi turned tail and fled across the sea. She chased it with her chakra chains, bracing herself for some new tactic, but the red mist that had called it here also swept it away. With the approach of dawn, there was not a trace of the Kyuubi left. Even the violent whirlpools surrounding Uzushiogakure seemed to calm and spin in peace. She sank to her knees and the chakra chains disintegrated into a thousand shards of light.

“It’s gone,” she said, incredulous. “We did it.”

Together.

The thought of Hashirama and Madara had her pulling herself to her feet again and seeking them out. Hashirama was on his knees surrounded by twisted roots that had kept the Uzumaki soldiers at bay some distance away. He was clutching his thigh, and she wondered if he’d suffered an injury bad enough to ground him.

“Hey,” she said, offering him a hand.

The sunlight grew stronger by the minute and illuminated the night’s efforts on Hashirama’s face. He was dirty, bloody, and bruised. But somehow, he managed to smile brighter even than the dawn at the sight of her. Mito couldn’t help but return the smile.

“Man, how’re you still standing? I’m beat!” he said.

“I guess it’s your lucky day that I’m around to drag you out of here.”

“I’ll say.”

Mito slung his arm over her shoulder and helped him walk as she searched for Madara nearby. He was lying prostrate on the ground, unmoving save for the rise and fall of his chest.

“Well, not as beat as him,” Hashirama said.

Mito grinned and walked them to Madara’s side. He heard them coming and cracked open his good
eye. “Oh, it’s you.”

“Morning, Sleeping Beauty.” Hashirama said.

“Come on,” Mito said, grabbing Madara by the arm. “Let’s get out of here.”

Madara grunted as Mito hauled him up and slung his arm around her free shoulder. Supporting both of them, she practically had to drag them towards where the rest of the Senju, Uchiha, and Uzumaki soldiers were gathering and shouting in joy and relief.

“How the hell’re you still standing?” Madara groused as he leaned his weight on Mito for support.

“That’s exactly what I said!” Hashirama said.

Their clansmen shouted and waved and rushed to meet them, and Mito couldn’t help but laugh as she hugged Hashirama and Madara closer.

When Madara awoke next, it was in a wide room stacked wall-to-wall with hospital beds and patients in varying degrees of life and death. His vision was obscured, and for a moment he feared he’d dreamed up the Kyuubi’s escape and he was back on the battlefield engulfed in insidious red chakra. But when he raised a hand to his face, he felt thick bandages covering his left eye, damp with blood. He had a splitting headache, and when he sat up his vision swam. More dressing covered his hands and arms where Mito’s chakra chains had burned him. It had been ages since he’d last eaten, and the fight had taken everything he had.

Mito. And Hashirama.

He looked around for them and noticed that the Uzumaki medics had made no attempt to segregate the wounded this time around. Uchiha, Senju, and Uzumaki lay together in their beds. Most were passed out in critical condition medics moved from bed to bed checking on the patients. Madara rubbed his good eye. Someone had cleaned up his face, but he felt dirty and grimy from the hard battle he’d fought earlier. He wanted nothing more than to get out of here and clean up, but the urge to find Mito and Hashirama was stronger. What had become of them?

Slipping out of bed, he wandered the rows of beds and scanned the faces for anyone familiar. He walked on autopilot, lost in thought. While he’d fought Hashirama more times than he could count over the years, never had he fought alongside him. And yet, it had been so natural. Knowing Hashirama’s strengths and weaknesses as well as he did, it was easy to act and compensate. To trust that Hashirama would have his back if only because Hashirama was the one person able to keep up.

A hand on his wrist startled Madara, and he had to turn his head fully to see with one eye blinded. A young woman smiled up at him from the hospital bed below.

“You’re awake,” Mito said.

Her long hair was splayed over her pillow and tumbled over the edge of the bed. Even exhausted and battered, she was still so...

“Princess,” Madara said, hanging back and sitting on the bed as she scooted to accommodate him.

“Hey, you.”
Madara hesitated to move closer with so many people around, comatose or not. She smiled and he remembered the image of her facing the Kyuubi alone, surrounded by celestial chains of light and fearless as she looked back at him, so full of joy to see him alive and safe. He hadn’t thought she had it in her to come so far, but she’d had his back out there, just as Hashirama had.

“That power you used,” he said. “Was that...?”

She blushed. “I guess...I wasn’t ready to let you go.”

Madara searched for words to satisfy her but found none. Instead, he took her hand in his and squeezed.

“I told you I should’ve stayed with you,” she said.

He held her gaze for a moment, uncertain but more determined than ever. All those years ago, meeting her on the beach and thinking so little of her, thinking even now that she could never know what it was to dig her fingers into the earth and bleed like he did because what did a princess know of the world? What did she know of facing a monster of myth and legend with no fear and holding it back simply because she was good enough? What did she know of him and the dark covenants he carried, enough to stay and save him when he wasn’t strong enough to do it himself?

“There’s no one like you,” he said, his voice gravel and smoke. “There never will be.”

Tears welled in her eyes as she understood the meaning in his tender words, words he’d never spoken to anyone, least of all a silly highborn woman who’d had everything handed to her, everything he’d never had. But she was here. She had always been here even when he’d had no idea—

Mito leaned in and kissed him, heedless of the sleeping patients around them. And for the first time in a long time, Madara didn’t care, either. He brought a hand up and threaded it through her thick hair and kissed her back, wishing for once that this wouldn’t end, that the sun wouldn’t rise in the east and the world could be forever dark and dim, just for them.

Footsteps froze their wandering hands. Madara pulled away and turned to see whoever had treaded close.

“Hashirama,” Mito said, tucking her hair behind her ear and offering him a small smile.

Hashirama walked with a crutch under his right arm and had his hair pulled back in a ponytail for comfort. His gaze was a little surprised, a little embarrassed, but he recovered quickly and smiled his usual, bright smile.

“Hey, guys,” he said.

Mito waved Hashirama closer. “Sit. The medics won’t bother us. How are you feeling?”

Hashirama hobbled to the side of Mito’s cot opposite Madara and took a seat on the edge. His hands and arms were bandaged, and Madara wondered if he’d also gotten a taste of Mito’s chakra chains in the course of their battle.

“You know, after tonight things’ll go back to normal,” Hashirama said, catching Madara’s eye.

Madara averted his gaze. “Mm. It’s only natural now that the battle’s over.”

“I never got the chance to properly thank you both,” Mito said, hugging her knees to her chest.
“Without you Uzushiogakure would—and my family... Well, you understand.”

“It was nothing,” Hashirama said.

She looked up and held Hashirama’s gaze, her eyes hard. “It wasn’t nothing. Both of you, us, everyone. If we hadn’t all come together, we’d all be dead.”

Hashirama scratched the back of his head. “Now that you mention it, this was the first time I’ve ever fought with Madara instead of against him, haha!”

Madara bravely resisted the temptation to roll his eyes. “I’m still in shock that your natural idiocy didn’t get us all killed.”

Hashirama’s face fell. “Aw, come on, Madara. You don’t mean that.”

“Don’t get all depressed. Haven’t you outgrown those mood swings yet? For god sakes.”

Mito looked between them, amazed. “You know, for two sworn enemies with a thousand years of family feuding behind you, you kinda seem to get along pretty well.”

Madara and Hashirama both turned on her, and she put up her hands.

“Whoa, hey, your secret’s safe with me,” she said.

Madara let it go, but the way her eyes lingered on them, curious, told him she wouldn’t forget this.

“Actually, Madara and I met when we were kids. Can you believe he didn’t know who I was? Well, I guess my hair was a little different back then,” Hashirama said.

Madara scoffed. “Moron. Your hair has nothing to do with it. How could anyone have known you were the heir to the Senju clan with your asinine commentary and ridiculous mood swings?”

Hashirama sighed and caved in on himself once again. Mito shook her head.

“I feel like I’m dreaming,” she said. “Even on the battlefield, I was afraid you wouldn’t help me when we found Madara,” she said to Hashirama. “I’m glad I was wrong.”

“Speaking of the battle,” Madara said, eager to change the subject and looking around to make sure no one was listening to their conversation. “That monster got away.”

Mito and Hashirama sobered.

“I wonder where it went?” Mito asked. “Or if it will be back anytime soon?”

“Unlikely,” Hashirama said, pensive. “It only appears in times of terrible warfare and bedlam. As long as Uzushiogakure remains peaceful, you shouldn’t have to worry about it.”

Madara narrowed his visible eye. “That reminds me. You seem to know quite a bit about the Kyuubi. Out with it, Hashirama. Tell us everything you know.”

Hashirama sighed. “Right, I guess I probably should. We’re on neutral ground, after all, so I’m sure you won’t take this information and use it against me in the future or anything, right?”

Mito shot Madara a look, and he practically vibrated in frustration. “This is no time for games, Hashirama. Out with it, or I’ll beat it out of you.”
“You’ve got one eye right now, buddy. You couldn’t beat a piñata.”

Mito put a hand each on Madara’s and Hashirama’s chests. “Please, both of you.”

Madara ignored her and continued to glower at Hashirama. Something about this place took the sting off his grudge, reminded him of what it was like to be a kid sneaking off to meet up with Hashirama and spar. What it was like to live a dream. Hashirama, as always, was the first to back off.

“Sorry,” he said. “Look, I’ll tell you what I know. No matter what happens, none of us should have to face one of those monsters alone.”

“One of them? You mean, there’re more?” Mito asked.

“Yeah, altogether there’s nine Bijuu. You’ve heard of the Sage of Six Paths, right?”

“The legendary creator of ninshū? What does he have to do with anything?”

“Everything, I’m guessing. He was supposedly the father of the Senju and Uchiha clans’ progenitors,” Madara said.

“Yeah, but he was also the greatest shinobi of his time, maybe of all time. He fought and sealed a monster called the Juubi within himself. The Juubi was pretty much the nine Bijuu all stuck together into one, big super monster. The Kyuubi’s one of them.”

“Amazing,” Mito said. “He sealed it inside himself? But that would be a creature nine times as powerful as the one we just faced.”

“Well, that’s why he’s a legend. No one even knows for sure if he really existed. Some people think he was actually a bunch of different guys, and over the years people just combined those stories into one person. I guess for the ‘wow’ factor,” Hashirama said.

“So the Kyuubi is a part of the original Juubi,” Madara said. “And there are eight more of them. Do we know where?”

Hashirama shook his head. “That’s what I don’t know. My father told me that each Bijuu is a force of nature, and nature has different ways of manifesting, right? So, the Kyuubi appears in times of strife, drawn by people’s hatred and suffering. Others appear under different circumstances, like during lightning storms or floods. One’s even supposed to live in dreams, if you can believe it. But they have one thing in common: they’re always drawn to places where a lot of people will die. It’s the bloodshed that makes them powerful.”

“That’s terrible,” Mito said. “So, you’re saying that some normal natural disasters people have had to learn to live with might actually be the work of these monsters? All those innocent lives...”

“Yeah, I’ll say. The Senju clan’s progenitor, Ashura, passed this information down to us as a warning so we’d be ready when the Bijuu appeared on earth again.”

“Well, they’re here now,” Madara said. “At least, one is. We didn’t kill it. It will come back, someday.”

They were silent a moment as Madara’s words sank in.

“This isn’t right,” Mito said at length. “If there really are monsters like that running around killing people, then we have to stop them.”
“We weren’t even strong enough to defeat one,” Madara said. “We’re the best of our clans, and we couldn’t take that thing out. How can we possibly take out all nine?”

His praise, given without a second thought like it was the most natural thing in the world, shocked Mito into silence, and it showed on her face.

“Then we’ll get stronger,” Hashirama said. “Madara, I know you and I don’t agree on practically anything, but I think we can agree on this. Next time, the Kyuubi’s not getting away.”

“No, it’s not,” Madara said, almost snarling.

Hashirama peered at Mito. “So, I didn’t realize you two probably met during your campaign up north.”

“Actually, we met when we were children before Uzushiogakure was founded,” Mito said.

Madara slipped off the bed. “If that’s all, Hashirama, then I’m getting some sleep. This might be the last night I can rest easy under the same roof as you.”

“Madara,” Mito called to him, but he walked away.

She frowned as she watched him go. Hashirama also slipped off the bed.

“He’s probably right about getting some rest, at least.”

“Yeah, I suppose.”

Hashirama watched Madara walk away and get back into bed, his expression distant. Mito bit her lip, suddenly uncomfortable.

“I’ll tell you another time, okay?” she said.

Hashirama flashed her a smile. “Don’t worry about it.”

Watching him go, she couldn’t believe she hadn’t noticed what had been right in front of her the whole time. From the moment the fighting had begun, most of his smiles had been fake.

Over the next few days, the Uzumaki and their guests worked hard to undo some of the damage the invaders and the Kyuubi had wrought upon the island. Houses needed repairing, people needed relocating, the shoreline needed restoring, and fires needed dousing. Tobirama found himself at the head of the fire dousing brigade, as it were.

“Not that I’m not thrilled to help out, but I can’t help but feel like I was meant for greater things in life,” Tobirama grumbled as he filled trough after trough with water.

Tōka rolled her eyes. “You’re the only one around who can produce water from out of thin air around here. Think of it as calling in a specialist.”

“Specialists get paid,” he grumbled.

Some Uzumaki and Senju soldiers were working together to put out a fire that had spread through a three-story building. They weren’t having much luck. Grumbling something about amateurs, Tobirama shouted for them to stand back. He gathered his chakra and created a swirling vortex of
water from nothing and hurled it at the burning building. The wave crashed into the wall and poured through the windows and holes in the scaffolding. Thick steam rose from the structure, hissing and spitting. Some of the soldiers standing nearest the building got soaked.

“There. You’re welcome,” Tobirama said.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” Tōka said. “Look, you caused more damage than the fire.”

Sections of wall fell from the already dilapidated building, and Tobirama scowled. “Whatever, I put the fire out.”

“Yeah, but now that building might not even be salvageable.”

“Well, maybe the Uzumaki oughtta reconsider building everything out of wood. It’s totally impractical.”

“What else are they supposed to use?”

“I don’t know! Not wood!”

Tōka threw up her hands. “Good lord. I’m starting to see Izuna’s point.”

Tobirama crossed his arms and jutted his lower lip out. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Tōka, we need your help over here,” one of the Senju soldiers said.

“Coming!” Tōka took off to help.

Tobirama marched after her. “Hey, don’t just walk away!”

Tōka ignored him, knowing he would follow no matter what she did or did not say.

As soon as Mito was well enough to leave the hospital, she went home to clean up. Most of her family’s quarters had been spared any serious damage, to her immense relief. Lena was not around to help out, but Mito didn’t mind, figuring she must be with Sasuke. The thought brought a smile to her face. Sasuke had been in critical condition and unconscious when the medics got ahold of him. He was still unconscious when Mito left the hospital. Concerned, she’d asked one of the medics what had happened, and they said he’d fought an old ally-turned-traitor of his. Mito didn’t know the whole story except that Sasuke had apparently won. She was grateful he was okay and made a mental note to ask Hashirama about him later.

Dressed in a simple, white yukata with her wet hair loose down her back, she made her way to Satto’s room, disappointed to find it empty. Maybe he was at the hospital? But she hadn’t seen him there.

There were a lot of people there. I could have just missed him.

Perhaps he was part of the restoration committee already working to rebuild Uzushiogakure. In that case, he could be anywhere on the island. Her father would know, she decided, and went to find him. Ensui had come to retrieve her at the hospital, having suffered fewer injuries than most of the others who’d participated in the island’s defense. He’d been so relieved to see her well and safe that he’d teared up and drawn her into a hug right in front of everybody. She’d never seen him so shaken up, so emotional in the face of almost losing her. They hadn’t had much time to catch up,
what with Ensui having responsibilities to the Uzumaki as well as the visiting Uchiha and Senju clans. But it had been enough to know she was all right.

Mito wandered through her family’s vast residence and came upon the door to the sun room, where she figured Ensui would be. She heard voices on the other side of the door. Odd, considering Ensui never conducted business in this room, his private retreat, unless it was an extraordinary circumstance. She knocked and announced her presence.

“Come in, Mito,” her father said from inside.

Mito slid the shoji door open and let herself inside. She was surprised to find Hashirama standing by the entrance to the garden, his expression stony but not unkind. When he met her gaze, he offered her a polite smile in greeting. He no longer had the crutch he’d been using in the hospital, to Mito’s relief.

“Hashirama,” she said, returning his smile. “I’m glad to see you up and about.”

“Me, too,” he said. “Although, now I can see why some people have such problems with hospitals. I was going a little stir crazy in there.”

Mito tucked her hair behind her ear and looked down, smiling a little. “Yes, they can be a little claustrophobic.”

“Mito, I’m glad you’re here,” Ensui said. “Hashirama and I were just discussing where to go from here. Sit.”

Mito took a seat next to Ensui on the floor at a low table and folded her hands on her lap, wondering what this was all about. Hashirama remained standing. Looking up at him like this, the casual greeting he’d given her seemed so far off.

“Hashirama, you were saying,” Ensui said.

Hashirama cleared his throat, and all traces of his good humor left. Mito just stared. It was like with that one change of subject, he became a totally different person. Not the Hashirama she’d come to know over the past few days.

“Right,” Hashirama said. “An alliance is in the Uzumaki’s best interest. I don’t mean to speak out of line, but after what’s just happened, surely you can’t deny it any longer.”

Mito gaped before she could stop herself.

“My answer hasn’t changed,” Ensui said. “Alliance with the Senju would only mean picking a side in your feud with the Uchiha who, need I remind you, are currently my guests here. You’re asking me to join a war in which the Uzumaki have no interest.”

“I’m asking you to be practical. How many soldiers did you lose? Uzushiogakure took a heavy blow, and Sanada himself is still out there. He might return.”

Ensui shook his head. “Yukimura Sanada had no reason to attack us.”

“But he did. And he brought a monster with him. If it hadn’t been for us—”

“You mean, if it hadn’t been for you and the Uchiha. As I recall, it was a joint effort.”

Hashirama’s gaze flickered to Mito briefly. “Yes, it was. But even then, we didn’t kill the Kyuubi.
It’s still out there.”

Mito got over her initial shock and found her voice. “The Kyuubi was lured here because of the violence taking place. The fight is over. There’s no reason for it to make another appearance.”

She held his gaze, and he faltered.

“Hashirama, is this true?” Ensui asked.

“...Yes, it’s true,” Hashirama said softly. “But that doesn’t mean this is the end of it. You know, now more than ever, that the affairs of the mainland can and will involve Uzushiogakure. Isolationism isn’t a realistic solution going forward.”

Mito said, “So instead, you propose the Uzumaki join forces with the Senju and make enemies out of the Uchiha by default. After everything the Uchiha have done to help defend Uzushiogakure.”

Hashirama had the grace to look wounded, but he spoke with confidence. “I propose we each gain a new ally, not a new enemy. Uzumaki and Senju share blood and a history of cooperation. Your talents are invaluable to us, and you could use our support in defending Uzushiogakure should something like this ever happen again. And it will happen again so long as loyalties are only as good as a last name.”

Mito gritted her teeth. “You’re still skirting the issue. This feud with the Uchiha is your problem. The Uzumaki have no enemies, but you propose that we take them on when they have done nothing to wrong us. It’s the cornerstone of selfishness.”

Ensui watched but did not interrupt.

Hashirama averted his gaze to compose himself. “Maybe it’s a little selfish, but aren’t all alliances? Isn’t the point of an alliance to fortify yourself against threats? Threats like the Kyuubi?” he challenged. “You’re sitting ducks out here. What do you think would’ve happened if I hadn’t been here?”

“What do you think would’ve happened if Madara hadn’t been here?” Mito countered.

Hashirama blinked and deflated. When he spoke again, it was not so much as the leader of the Senju clan, but as a man who had been through a hellish ordeal and was afraid to repeat it. “I’m not trying to take over Uzushiogakure. I only want...” He paused to breathe, to collect his courage, and said, “I need you. And you need me.”

Mito bit her tongue at the intimate turn this conversation had taken. Like the day she’d first met him, Mito couldn’t deny the sincerity in Hashirama’s words. If he hadn’t been there when they fought the Kyuuubi... If he hadn’t been there to revive Madara...

“Madara won’t offer what I’m offering,” he said, returning his attention to Ensui. “You know as well as I do that the Uchiha don’t associate with outsiders. He hasn’t approached you with a proposal, has he?”

Ensui said nothing. His jaw was set, and Mito felt a flutter of panic in the pit of her belly.

_of course not, she thought to herself._

“A man’s name is his identity; it’s everything.”

_of course not. For Madara, the Uchiha clan came first._
“...What exactly are you offering?” Mito said.

“A fair alliance,” Hashirama said. “Uzushiogakure remains autonomous without any interference from the Senju.”

“In exchange for soldiers to fight your wars.”

“In exchange for a chance to help make peace a reality one day.”

Ensui sighed. “You truly believe it, don’t you?”

Hashirama smiled, and Mito stared. He looked lighter, different somehow. Unforced. “I believe in the power of individuals to rise above the limitations of the group.” He gestured around him with his arms. “If there’s such a thing as peace, I’ll find it.”

It was a sneaky tactic using her own words against her now. Coming from anyone else, they would have sounded hollow, even mocking. But with Hashirama, who had shown himself to be nothing but true and just and so full of hope from the moment she met him, she believed them.

“I don’t need an answer right now,” Hashirama said hastily.

“When do you plan on departing?” Ensui said.

“By the end of the week. My men will help with repairs until then.”

Ensui nodded. “I appreciate the assistance. I’ll have an answer for you by then.”

Hashirama bowed and excused himself. As soon as he was gone, Ensui refilled his tea cup from the kettle on the table and sipped in silence. Mito said nothing as she stared at the door through which Hashirama had departed, still trying to process all that he’d said.

“What do you think?” Ensui asked at length.

“I think it’s a lot to take in.”

“Mm. It’s why the Senju are here at all. Hashirama approached me with this the day he arrived.”

Mito gaped at her father. “And you didn’t say anything?”

He shrugged. “There wasn’t much time.”

Mito rubbed her temples. “It’s a lot to take in,” she said again.

“Mm.” After a short pause he continued, “Mito, there’s something you should know.”

“What is it?”

Ensui set down his tea and rubbed his eyes. When he looked up at her again, he seemed to have aged ten years. She hadn’t noticed it before, but there were bags under his eyes and day old stubble on his chin, dark red despite his graying hair. He looked haggard, like he hadn’t found time to return fully to the land of the living just yet. She swallowed, dreading whatever he would say. He took his time choosing his words. Mito’s hands began to shake. She thought of the red mist she and Hashirama had chased, those minutes of mounting dread as her feet pounded against the earth, closer to something she didn’t understand but knew to fear instinctively.

Finally, Ensui took a shaky breath but couldn’t meet her eyes. “It’s about Satto.”
Mito stared at her reflection in the mirror in darkness. Lights hurt her eyes lately. At least, this was what she told herself. In darkness no one could see the puffiness around her eyes from crying too much. She’d entertained the idea of seeking out Madara, but she had no energy to leave her room. She touched a hand to the glistening crystal around her neck, which glowed in the moonlight diffusing through her window.

“This was Satto’s,” Ensui had explained as he clasped the necklace around Mito’s neck. “His grandmother wore it. He wanted you to have it when the time was right.”

The crystal was cool against her too-hot skin. It was an ancient relic, supposedly, forged of Indra’s fire and Ashura’s stone. It had been passed down through the Uzumaki line for generations to those who had done what Mito had done.

“They say the chakra chains have the power to bind anything, even fate itself,” Ensui had explained. “That necklace carries the will of all those before you who dared to do just that.”

Silent tears streamed down Mito’s face. She’d cried so much that she was surprised she still had it in her.

“He was so proud of you, Mito,” Ensui had said, his hands heavy on her shoulders.

“What’s the point?” Mito whispered to her reflection. “When I can’t even change his fate.”

She tightened her grip on the necklace, a cruel whim whispering in her ear to crush it. Crush it, like the Kyuubi had tried to crush her. Like this war had crushed Satto. But it didn’t break, didn’t even crack.

“I didn’t even get to apologize,” she said around the knot in her throat. “I didn’t... I didn’t—”

I didn’t get to say goodbye.

Mito squeezed the small crystal between her fingers, pouring her pain, her sadness, all of her into it.

Because unlike her, it could not break.

The Senju were scheduled to leave the next morning, and Mito found herself in her father’s chambers. They hadn’t discussed Hashirama’s terms at all since that morning almost a week ago, and in the meantime Mito had done her best to help out with the restoration. She’d ended up working closely with Izuna, by chance, who’d brought her up to speed on Haruka. The girl was permanently blinded, and Mito offered her sincerest condolences.

“She did it for me, you know,” Izuna had said out of the blue one day while he and Mito worked with some other Uchiha and Uzumaki clearing out debris from a trashed residential area. “She did it for me.”

“She must care for you very much,” Mito had said, remembering how close Haruka had seemed to be with Izuna and Madara despite their lack of actual blood relation.
"Yeah, I guess so." Izuna hadn’t said anything else about it, and Mito didn’t bring it up again. She didn’t have siblings and she couldn’t imagine what Izuna was going through. But she could understand a little of what it was like to live when others perished.

“Mito,” Ensui said, shaking Mito from her thoughts. “Come in.”

Mito peered at the papers he was hunched over at the table in his study. Nearby, Inari was asleep on a mat and breathing deeply. He’d wanted to help with the restoration and had tuckered himself out.

“What are you looking at?” she asked.

“A draft of the treaty the Senju prepared.” He leaned forward over the table on his arms and heaved a tired sigh. “Already signed by Hashirama.”

Mito pulled the document toward her and read in silence. It wasn’t a long treaty, succinct and to the point. Just as Hashirama had said, it promised clear autonomy for Uzushiogakure in exchange for soldiers to stay with the main Senju forces.

“I don’t like our options, but I’m afraid Hashirama has a point. This isn’t something we can avoid forever. It’s only a matter of time before others will try to acquire us, and who’s to say they’ll offer us such magnanimous terms?”

Mito stared at the unsigned treaty, her gaze heavy. She put a hand on her father’s. “We should accept the alliance,” she said.

Ensui gave her a pointed look. “I have to say I’m surprised to hear you say that after the way you spoke to Hashirama the other day.”

Mito’s gaze fell. The room felt hot, and she was grateful for the bun keeping her hair off her neck.

“What’s on your mind?” Ensui asked.

“Hashirama’s right,” she said. “It’s not about gaining an enemy; it’s about securing Uzushiogakure’s future. We lost nearly half our military force in this battle, and that was with the Uchiha and Senju backing us up. We can’t afford not to make an ally out of the Senju.”

Ensui studied his only daughter carefully and rested his chin on his steepled hands. “An alliance with the Senju would put us at odds with the Uchiha.”

Mito thought of Madara. This would be the end of any friendly relations between Uchiha and Uzumaki. She was no fool. Hashirama was asking a lot, but he was also offering more than the Uzumaki could afford to turn down.

“The Uchiha haven’t offered us the same deal. They’re notoriously isolated. They keep their allies at arm’s length. The Senju are more accommodating. Hashirama’s most trusted general is an outsider. And we share ancestral ties with them.”

“But it’s more than that,” Ensui said.


“And you think he can really accomplish that? After everything?”
She remembered the first time she’d met Hashirama, how he’d cheered her up effortlessly. The way he’d defended his ideas of peace to his stubborn family, to her father, even to her.

“If there’s such a thing as peace, I’ll find it.”

It was more than a dream to him. So much more.

“Yes. If anyone can do it… I think he can.”

And then the feuding will stop.

“You know peace won’t come tomorrow. It could take years, even lifetimes. Don’t underestimate the power of a grudge. It’s a curse that only grows stronger with the passage of time.”

“Burn.”

Madara’s hatred echoed in her head, hatred that had won him the right to lead the Uchiha, to exact revenge on Tajitsu.

“I believe in you,” she’d confided in him under the cover of darkness.

Which was stronger: Mito’s faith or Madara’s hatred? Only one had driven the Kyuubi out of Uzushiogakure, but in the end, it had not been enough.

“I know,” she said. “But curses can be broken. All you need is the right tool.”

Ensui rubbed his mouth. “I won’t lie to you. We can’t go on as we are. Hashirama’s right about that. I would prefer an alliance with the Senju over the Uchiha when it comes down to it. But negotiations are about give and take. We’ll be giving up something precious for this. We can’t forget that.”

“I won’t forget,” she said softly.

“All right, I’ll send for Hashirama in the morning before he departs. I suppose I should put together a garrison to accompany him as part of the alliance.”

“I want to go.”

Ensui frowned. “Excuse me?”

She’d thought about it a lot over the last week. There were drawbacks, but they paled in comparison to the opportunities that awaited her if she took the chance. To leave home, her family, for a destiny she’d never once imagined for herself. It terrified her so much that just thinking about it now made her hands shake. She tucked them behind her back so her father wouldn’t see.

“You heard me, Father. I want to go.”

Ensui stood up. “Absolutely not. Are you out of your mind? You are a princess of the Uzumaki clan.”

“I’m a soldier who helped save our home,” Mito said fiercely.

Ensui’s eyes flashed in anger at her outburst, but Mito didn’t give him a chance to catch his breath.

“Please, Father, listen to what I want for once in your life.”
Ensui snapped his mouth shut, stunned. Mito never raised her voice to him, but right now there was no force on Earth that could keep her silent. Not anymore.

“Satto... Satto is gone,” she said, struggling to keep her voice from cracking as she admitted it aloud for the first time since Ensui had broken the news to her. “And he left me this.” She touched the blue crystal necklace Ensui had passed on to her as per Satto’s wishes. “Do you know why? Because he knew I could do more for the Uzumaki than simply marry a rich lord and produce sons.

“I don’t defy you, Father. I promise I will marry one day and uphold our family’s legacy. But I’ll also fight to protect that legacy. It’s what I was meant to do, I know that now.”

She thought of the Kyuubi and how it had overpowered not just her, but Madara and Hashirama, too. The best of their clans, as Madara had put it. Nothing but dust mites in the face of that beast.

“But I’m not strong enough yet. I have to know more. I have to keep fighting. Monsters can be killed. Hashirama’s right about the troubles of the mainland reaching us here. They’re here to stay, and I’ll fight to protect our family until I draw my last breath, I swear it.”

“Mito...”

She looked at her hands, hands that had commanded the golden chains that had kept the Kyuubi at bay. That had saved Madara. Chains that could bind destiny. “Satto was right. I can... I can do things others can’t. And I have a responsibility to our family to use that power to protect them. I want to protect them. I don’t need your blessing, but I’d like to have it if you’ll give it.”

Ensui was silent for a long while as he studied her. Mito held her head tall and waited for him to say something, anything. Finally, he released the breath he was holding.

“You’re so much like your mother,” he said, defeated.

Mito’s resolve faltered. Ensui never talked about her mother, who’d died in childbirth. Mito had known her only in pictures and the occasional passing comment.

“Once she set her mind to something, she fought with all her might to see it through.” Ensui’s gaze was wistful as he remembered, but he didn’t smile. “But I suppose she wasn’t quite strong enough to see everything through to the end.”

He touched a finger to the crystal necklace hanging over Mito’s sternum. “Maybe...you are. Satto believed it.” He sighed and let his hand fall. “I’m not blind. I know you have something extraordinary. I only, well... I suppose I only ever wanted the best for you. A chance to raise your own family. A chance your mother never had.”

Mito’s throat tightened, and tears threatened to fall.

“I knew this day would come someday, but I didn’t think it would be so soon. I thought maybe you might want to stay.”

Mito blinked away her tears and hugged her father. He tensed.

“I have to do this, Father. These Bijuu, the wars, it’s so much bigger than all of us. Please, let me go.”

_They can’t do it alone._
He slowly raised his arms and encircled her waist. “I’ve known for a long time that I would never be able to stop you.”

They broke apart, and Mito wiped her tears.

“I’m proud of you, you know,” he said. “You’ve become a fine woman.”

“Thank you, Father,” she said, meaning it with every fiber of her being. “Thank you.”

He kissed her forehead, and she laughed through her tears.

Hashirama finished donning his armor, which was scratched and cracked in places from the invasion despite the thorough cleaning he’d given it. When he got back to the mainland, he would have to commission one of the armorers for a new suit.

“Any word?” Tobirama stood in the doorway to Hashirama’s room, already dressed and ready to depart.

“No,” Hashirama said glumly. “I thought for sure Ensui would accept my terms after everything. I s’pose there’s not much else I can do.”

Tobirama grunted. “Their loss. If they’re too stupid to see the opportunity, then they’re not worth it.”

“The alliance was your idea.”

“Yeah, well, I can’t control for stupidity.”

Hashirama finished dressing and exited the compound with Tobirama. Their barge awaited at the beach. The Uchiha were leaving as well, and he looked for Madara among the crowd some hundred yards away but didn’t spot him. His heart sank.

I guess this really was kind of a dream.

Tōka and Sasuke had already boarded the ship set to take the Senju garrison—what was left of it—back to the mainland to rejoin its main force. Hashirama hung back and looked over Uzushiogakure, still somewhat in ruins but on its way to recovery. The sky was blue and cloudless, and the morning sun was bright and warm. Even the ominous whirlpools seemed calm and quiet, unwilling to disturb such a beautiful day. If only Hashirama’s mood were a little brighter.

The fog horn sounded, signaling the ship’s imminent departure. Sighing, Hashirama turned away from the island. It was time to leave. He trudged into the shallow water up to his knees and began to climb the gangway up onto the ship’s starboard bow.

“Hashirama!” a familiar voice called.

Mito, dressed in full whalebone armor, led a group of Uzumaki soldiers, also dressed for battle and carrying packs and trunks of supplies. He walked back the way he came without thinking, curious.

“Mito,” he said, almost a question.

She and the other Uzumaki soldiers splashed towards him, and he met her among the crashing waves.
“Leaving already?” she asked.

Hashirama took in her appearance, her cheeks slightly flushed from the exertion of running all the way out here. Her long hair was pulled back in a thick ponytail, the bangs framing her face. Decked out in full armor she looked older, more seasoned. Flashes of her floating high in the sky surrounded by golden chains appeared in his mind. The look in her misty eyes as she turned back and saw Madara and him running to back her up, the happiest sight she’d ever seen.

“That’s the plan,” he said.

She extended a hand to him, and he noticed she held a scroll. Frowning, he accepted it.

“What’s this?” he asked.

“Your treaty,” she said.

Hashirama sputtered. “What?!”

She waited for him to open the scroll, and sure enough there was Ensui’s signature and seal binding the Uzumaki to the Senju in a political, military, and economic alliance until the end of time, until otherwise mutually amended. Hashirama stared openly at the document, hardly believing his eyes.

“A-Are you serious? This is for real?” he said, hardly able to contain his hope and excitement.

“Yes.”

“Oh my god, I can’t believe this! I mean, I can believe it but I can’t believe it, you know?”

She laughed, and the Uzumaki soldiers at her back chuckled amongst themselves. “Believe it,” she said, grinning brightly.

Hashirama rolled up the scroll and ran a hand through his hair, his smile almost hurting with how bright it was. “Wow, I mean, wow. I’m honored, really, like you have no idea. Oh! I should go speak with Ensui! I gotta thank him in person!”

Mito shook her head. “No need. He sends his regards and his blessing. And us, of course.”

Hashirama looked over the soldiers behind her. “Wait, you’re all coming? You too?”

“If that’s agreeable?”

“Well, yeah! Wow, best day ever!”

He covered his mouth, embarrassed at his own enthusiasm. Tobirama would have let him have it if he saw how unprofessional Hashirama was being.

“What’s taking so long?” Tobirama called from the quayside.

“The Uzumaki signed the treaty!” Hashirama called up. “They accepted the alliance! And Mito’s coming with us!”

Tobirama made the most appalling face, and Hashirama was amazed at how large his eyes looked, like they’d actually popped out of his head.

“What?!” he sputtered.
“That’s what I said!”

Mito put a hand over Hashirama’s and the scroll he still held. “My father’s putting his trust in you, Hashirama. He—I want to see this peace you keep talking about. One day.”

“I promise you,” he said, placing his hand over hers and leaning close. “I promise we’ll do it. You and me, and Madara, too. We’ll do it together.”

She smiled, but there was something sad about it. He had the sudden urge to pull her close in a true embrace, but he refrained. It wouldn’t be appropriate.

“I believe you,” she whispered.

Hashirama was beside himself with happiness and relief. He waved to the soldiers behind Mito and eagerly welcomed them on board. Tobirama shouted for them to hurry the hell up, the sooner they left the sooner they could get off this godforsaken ocean. Hashirama barely heard him, delighted as he announced to anyone on board that the Uzumaki would be joining them. Tōka, Sasuke, and others vocally welcomed the Uzumaki soldiers and helped them settle in. To Sasuke’s immense delight, Lena was among the handful of skilled civilians that had come with Mito to share their knowledge and specialized skills with the Senju clan, and he picked her up and spun her around, laughing.

The ship weighed anchor and set off from the island at a steady pace. Tobirama disappeared from the crowd and hung over the edge with his head in his hands, preparing for a miserable journey. Hashirama couldn’t stop smiling as he spoke to the various Uzumaki soldiers that had joined his brigade, welcoming them all personally, learning names, memorizing faces.

Out of the corner of his eye he caught sight of Mito, who’d distanced herself from the group and stood at the edge of the barge leaning over the railing. Her eyes were heavy and her jaw was set as she gazed into the distance. Hashirama followed the direction of her gaze back to shore where the vessel preparing to transport the Uchiha was still docked and loading passengers.

“There’s no one like you.”

Madara’s whispered confession echoed in Hashirama’s head, guilty, a secret that wasn’t his to know, but he did know it, and even his most brilliant smile and this happy day darkened just a little remembering it.

End of Part I
There are places in this world that are worlds apart. Disconnected, and yet omnipresent, living things. It was in the air of this place, this place she’d lived in for the past year, this place that wasn’t home and never would be. She was a stranger in this place, but she’d earned the right to exist here.

Mito sat perfectly still atop a lily pad—enormous, like everything else in this place. Water rivulets had leaked onto its surface, collecting beneath her where she sat, but she didn’t feel them. The water was warm. The water below was stunningly clear, a blue so dark it was nearly black under the thick, forest canopy that blotted out the sun. But no animal life thrived there. The water was toxic to any life that could not adapt quickly to its noxious composition.

Her eyes were closed as she meditated, a constant and daily ritual necessary for the training she was pursuing here. Above, she could hear insects singing and wings buzzing, reptiles’ suctioned toes sticking and unstickling to spongy tree bark as they climbed up high. Below there was nothing, not even a lonely fish. Close, where she couldn’t see even with her eyes open, came the constant slither and scrape of something colossal, moving ever forward. And beyond, far beyond but nearer than it had ever been before this place, was the whisper that wasn’t really there at all. The presences before her, long silenced and stilled. They lingered.

Slowly, Mito opened her eyes. Soft, blue lights wafted upon invisible winds just inches above the water’s surface and far above. They floated aimlessly around thick, ancient tree trunks bigger around than several houses back-to-back. They grew directly out of the water, their roots submerged and covered in moss that fought a constant battle against gravity. Their gnarled branches, twisted by the magic of this place and its native inhabitants, grew in crisscrossed angles, embracing each other to create networks of pathways above, some thin and brittle, others wide enough to accommodate a king summon or two.

But the great trees were not ordinary trees. Their bark was unnaturally blanched, diseased to the ignorant eye, and porous. From their countless pores, they sweated a milky molasses that trickled down the trunks slowly, hardening as it was exposed to the naked air. The broad leaves that crowned them were also white, and jade green veins crisscrossed them, carrying nutrients from the toxic water below that sustained the strange trees.

Rumbling in the distance caught Mito’s ear, and she rose. The white dress she wore was secured at her waist with a vine rope and tattered around her knees from wear and tear. Her hair hung long behind her, wild. She carried a handmade spear. Upon the small of her back, she had secured an old sealing scroll burned black at the edges. It emitted a humming warmth even now.
Silent, she jumped as high as she could and thrust her spear into the bark of the nearest tree. The tip sank deep into the spongy wood and stuck fast. Mito swung her body around the spear and landed nimbly on the branch above. Spear in hand, she followed the branch’s path at a jog, chakra ensuring her balance along the way.

The path wound along the canopy’s underside, and through the fleshy leaves overhead she could make out thin shafts of sunlight. The little blue lights, manifestations of the raw life energy teeming in this place, chased her progress, curious. The branches were a maze, and navigating the network had taken months. She still got lost in this place. But even when she lost her way, all paths eventually led to the heart of the forest.

The water below gave way to patches of stubborn land that hadn’t sunk to the bottom of the swamp yet, little islands overflowing with flora and fauna that lived their whole lives on those tiny patches of land. In between them, the waters rippled with movement. Mito cast a glance below at some of the forest’s native inhabitants going about their lives. The acidic water broke and a large head rose from its depths. Two giant eyes swiveled back and forth until the creature found its destination—a nearby tree.

With only a whisper of ripples to mark its passing, the thirty-foot slug crawled out of the water and slithered up the tree trunk with remarkable speed for such a lumbering beast. Its pale body was nearly indistinguishable from the tree trunk save for the dark blue stripe running down its back, the same as all its kin. One shifty eyestalk caught sight of Mito passing by and followed her progress. Mito ignored the creature, long accustomed to the slugs’ penchant for staring and silence. Not all were used to such a foreign presence in their home, but most preferred to avoid confrontation unless provoked.

Mito continued her journey deeper into the crepuscular forest until she came upon the heart. At its center stood an island, bigger than the others. Ruins crumbled under the weight of a great tree growing out of them. Their walls were bleached white from the poisonous air that hung here, their halls quiet and devoid of life. For the most part. Mito touched down on the land, smoothed her dress, and looked around.

“Lady Mito!”

A familiar voice called to her, and smiled. “Sazae, I’m back.”

“Did you have a productive morning?”

From the canopy above, Sazae slithered down a thick trunk at a sedate pace. She reached the water and drifted nearer to the island where Mito stood. Her ebony shell, as big around as a cottage, did not seem to weigh her down into the water. Once Sazae was close enough, Mito reached out a hand to pat blue-striped her nose. Two eyestalks looked down at her from nearly thirty feet above, but Sazae’s full size was now closer to that of the Kyuubi Mito had faced back in Uzushiogakure three long years ago alongside Hashirama and Madara.

“I did, thank you,” Mito said.

“Hm? You seem to be in a good mood today.”

“I was just thinking how much you’ve grown. I remember when I was taller than you.”

Sazae laughed. “That was ages ago!”

“Aw, it wasn’t that long ago. And I’ve grown a bit since then.”
A rumble of sound in the distance drew their attention. Sazae swiveled her large eyes to peer into
the forest’s murky depths.

“It’s bothering you, too, isn’t it?” Mito asked.

“Y-Yes, there’s something strange about it.”

Mito crossed her arms and peered up at her summon ally, thinking. “The others are thinking it,
too.”

“Oh dear, we so obvious to you?”

Mito shook her head. “There’s something off about it. I feel like I know it, but I can’t put my finger
on it. It seems familiar somehow.”

“The Shikkotsu Forest has been around for millennia, and my kin have lived here since the
beginning,” Sazae said. “Even so, this is the first time something other than a Human has appeared
in our home.”

“Then why not flush it out?”

Sazae shivered and retracted her eyestalks. “It’s better not to approach it.”

Mito peered into the distance, but of course she could make out nothing but shadows among the
trees. The longer she stared, the more her eyes played tricks on her, tracing shapes in the darkness.
Things with claws and sharp teeth and hateful, golden eyes, chakra as red as blood. She blinked the
recurring nightmare away and averted her gaze.

“Whatever it is, it can’t stay. And I bet it won’t remain hidden forever,” she said.

Sazae said nothing to that, and Mito knew that was all she’d get out of the quiet snail. Still, she
wasn’t about to let this go. Something had carved out a home in the bowels of the Shikkotsu Forest.
Or perhaps it had been there much longer and only now made itself known. Whatever it was, it
was nestled deeper than Mito had ever dared to venture. This place held secrets and death traps
around every corner. If the slugs and snails themselves were reluctant to disturb the ominous
presence lurking in the shadows, then it was all the more reason to draw it out and eliminate it,
whatever it was. But it was not a task she was ready to tackle alone, or today.

“Ah, Lady Mito, it has been a year now, hasn’t it? What have you decided?”

Mito looked up at the white and green canopy above. Sunlight filtered through the leaves and
splashed her face in warm patches. She lifted a hand and peered at its golden light through her
fingers.

“I think I’ve learned everything I can here. And if I stay away much longer, the world might
change without me,” Mito said.

Sazae had limited expressive capabilities, but Mito imagined the snail giving her a quizzical look
from the way her mouth tentacles twitched and she peered at Mito askance.

“I miss them,” Mito clarified.

“I am sure they long for your presence, as well.”

The air shifted all of a sudden and Sazae lurched. Her eyestalks swiveled toward the direction from
which Mito had come, and she tensed. Mito put a hand on her clammy skin, long since immune to the snail toxin Sazae secreted.

“What is it?”

Sazae was on high alert. “Someone’s here. Someone uninvited.”

Mito wished she were a sensor like Tobirama or Tōka at times like these. With nothing to reach out to, she felt blind and deaf in this vast place. But she did have one advantage: she knew this enchanted forest like the back of her hand. Still, that didn’t mean she was safe here. It was a wasteland disguised as an oasis; step wrong, and it would be the last step she ever took.

“I’ll go check it out,” Mito said.

“But Lady Mito, it could be dangerous,” Sazae protested.

“You said the presence felt like an outsider, right? Then it’s not a slug. It’s better if you stay hidden. I’ll just go check it out.”

“Please be careful.”

Mito took to the trees once more, navigating the network of branches with her spear in hand. The rules in this place were different, and ninjutsu wouldn’t get anyone very far with the air this thick and the life energy so potent. She would have to tread lightly.

Splashing drew her attention midflight, and she crouched. The crystal necklace Satto had passed on to her tinkled softly about her neck, the only sound she made. Green eyes narrowed, Mito searched below for the source of the splashing. What she saw drained the blood from her face.

A colossal snail with a wicked, rough shell the color of an ocean pearl slapped the water in anger as if to attack something. And that something was a man clad in red armor.

“Whoa! Hey, big guy, cool it, okay? I’m sorry I stepped on your tongue, uh, tentacle thing... I mean! It’s not a thing, it’s your precious, uh, well you know? I’m not really sure what it is— whoa!”

The snail reared its head back and spit out a stream of yellow acid. The man barely had time to dodge, narrowly avoiding death by hyper-desiccation and disintegration. The acid landed in the water with a hiss.

Mito gasped at the sound of that voice and jumped down from the branches. She bounced off the giant snail’s shell and then landed on the small patch of land where the intruder lay sprawled out on his belly. She held up her spear in both hands in a defensive position.

“Baikan! Please restrain yourself! This man means you no harm!” Mito implored the beast.

The snail’s eyestalks swiveled to better see Mito. “Human,” it said in a low, booming voice. “You are in my way.”

Mito tightened her grip on her spear. “Please, I beg you to overlook his presence. He bears you and this holy forest no ill will.”

“You speak boldly for one so small,” Baikan said, the anger evident in his ancient, raspy tone. “Know your place. Your presence is merely tolerated among us.”
Mito fell to one knee and bowed her head. “I understand. I mean you no disrespect. But please, I beg you: overlook this. I will take responsibility for him.”

Baikan was silent a moment, and Mito dared not look up at him. Engaging the slugs and snails was a terrible transgression and one that would get her excommunicated permanently. They had high standards of mutual respect, polity, and hierarchy such that Mito had never known in shinobi society. Her complaints growing up about the formalities of court seemed trivial in comparison to life here. And instead of a slap on the wrist she might have earned back home as a girl, here the punishment for rudeness was death. Still, if Baikan refused to see reason, Mito was prepared to sever ties and fight back. He was more important.

“Well, Human. He is in your care. But you know the consequences for disrespect. Next time, I will not be so lenient.”

“Thank you, Baikan,” Mito said, steadying her hands so they wouldn’t shake.

Baikan turned his large head away and sank into the water. After a moment, even his pearlescent shell disappeared into the water’s dark depths, leaving no trace of his passing. Mito let out the breath she’d been holding and straightened up again. When she turned around, she found two wide, brown eyes glistening with tears of shock and joy staring back at her.

“Mito! Oh wow, it really is you!”

Mito lowered her spear and smiled from the bottom of her heart. “Hello, Hashirama.”

Hashirama followed Mito as she led him along the twisting branches high above the swampy forest floor below. It had been a year since he’d last seen her, when she’d decided to complete her solo training in a place without distractions.

“I’m so close, Hashirama. I just need some time.”

So he’d given her time. Things had been different without her, and not for the better. Over the two years since the Uzumaki had signed the treaty binding them to the Senju, he’d grown used to her constant presence at his side as a sharp political advisor and close confidant. Hashirama got along with most everyone, but there were only a few with whom he truly felt comfortable, the ones he trusted with his life and his worries. Mito had become one of those people, a precious friend as important to him as his own flesh and blood. Losing her to solitary training after all that had been a difficult adjustment to make, and if he was honest, he had never quite gotten used to her absence. But all that was over now. It was time for her to come home with him.

“I’ll forgive it this time considering the circumstances, but you really do have a terrible habit of getting lost at the most inconvenient times,” Mito said as she walked ahead of him.

Hashirama grinned and ignored the flush of embarrassment on his cheeks. “Yeah, I guess I do wander a little bit here and there.”

She shot him a look over her shoulder. “More than a little. You get lost in your own camp. You know, some people might call you hopeless.”

He slumped. “Aw, Mito, you really think that?”

She stopped and faced him. The smile she wore lit up her eyes in ways the meager sunlight that
penetrated this place never could. “Maybe a little. More reason for me to keep an eye on you.”

Here, suspended tens of feet above a depthless, still sea and no other people around for hundreds of miles, Hashirama let himself stare at the woman before him. She’d gotten taller even in just the last year, and while she’d been beautiful to him before, seeing her again after so long without her felt like a punch to the gut. Something about this place had changed her, made her more radiant. She was always calm and poised, but now there was an air of quiet about her, a deep-seated intensity that seemed to see beyond him, within him, and any move he made would give him away.

“Wow,” he said.

“Words really aren’t your strong point, are they?”

Before she could protest, he pulled her into a tight embrace. He was larger than her, far taller, and he could surround her like the earth surrounds the ocean. She was cool to the touch, perhaps due to this harsh environment in which she’d survived all this time. But her hair was soft and her breath was warm on his shoulder. And she hugged him back.

“God, I missed you,” he whispered, all smiles.

Mito laughed. “I missed you, too.”

He took a deep breath and hoped she wouldn’t push him away just yet, it had been so long. A shiver ran up his spine as he caught a whiff of something. He pulled back and squinted at her, sniffing around to try to place the scent.

“Hey, what’s that funky smell?” he asked.

“Excuse me?”

“You know, like mulch and old clothes that were left out in the rain—”

He didn’t get a chance to finish his sentence because she let him it have nice and hard right in the kisser. Hashirama grunted in pain and stumbled backwards, nearly losing his balance on the slippery, spongy branches. He rubbed his jaw as Mito glared at him, fist shaking.

“For your information, I’ve been living in this forest for the past year without any human contact whatsoever. I bathe in the water here every day to maintain personal hygiene, I’ll have you know.”

He wiped his watering eyes and ground his teeth to will the pain away. Strong! “Ahaha, sorry, guess that came out wrong...”

She sighed and lowered her fist. “You think?” she grumbled.

Cautious, Hashirama said, “Still, the water here’s toxic. How d’you stand it?”

She shrugged. “I’m used to it.”

“Oh, okay.”

“Honestly, I shudder to think how you’ve been handling things back with the Senju when you let your mouth run like that. Poor Tobirama must have his hands full.”

He grinned. “Well, you know, that’s why I’m glad you’re finally coming home. I’d be lost without you.”
Mito ran a hand through her bangs and bit back a smirk. “Flattery won’t make me overlook your previous comment, Hashirama. But since it’s the truth, I won’t argue with you.”

“Hey, what’s that?”

He poked her in the forehead. Mito winced and rubbed the spot he’d abused, frowning up at him.

“Don’t just go touching things you know nothing about. That’s how people around here end up poisoned or worse.”

He ignored the chiding, instead focusing on the small, violet diamond emblazoned upon her forehead. “You didn’t have that before.”

Mito put her hands on her hips. “It’s called a Yin Seal. Remember how I wasn’t able to do anything about the Kyuubi before, and I said I would need more chakra? Well, this is it.”

“Wait, I don’t get it. How will a tattoo help?”

She bit back a laugh at his expense. “No, silly. This is a chakra receptacle. Over the past three years since that fight, I’ve been working on storing up my chakra little by little. But over time, I realized I couldn’t just let it roam around my body or I’d end up paralyzed from the overdose. So I have to manifest it in a physical way. That’s what this is for.” She pointed to the diamond on her forehead. “This is where I store it all.”

Hashirama squinted at her forehead. “Huh, in that little thing? That’s somethin’, all right.”

“Yeah,” she said. “It’s something.”

“You think that’ll help us deal with the Bijuu?”

Over the years, Hashirama had seen first-hand just how extraordinary Mito was when it came to fūinjutsu. She truly was the best of her clan, as Madara had said. In one battle, he’d even witnessed her yank the soul out of an enemy and lock it in a smooth, black stone. All with just the touch of a hand. Just thinking about it gave him shivers, but then he remembered she was on his side. (What had she done with that little black stone, anyway? He thought it best not to ask.) But to transmute a Bijuu into something like a small rock? Even now, it seemed like an impossible feat.

“Yes, I do,” she said.

She spoke with quiet confidence despite her untested theories. Hashirama was many things, but he could admit that he was not always the smartest person in the room. And so, he surrounded himself with people who could provide what he could not. Tobirama provided pragmatism, Sasuke military strategy, and Mito political and academic acumen. If anyone could figure this out, it was her.

“Okay,” he said, nodding. “Then it was worth it to live without you for a whole year.”

Mito turned away. Her bangs obscured the blush inflaming her cheeks, but they weren’t enough to fool Hashirama. His heart warmed at the sight.

“Anyway, what the hell were you thinking stepping on Baikan’s tentacle?” she tried to change the subject. “I’ve seen him kill for a less grievous offense than that.”

It was Hashirama’s turn to blush. “Oh, haha! Uh, that was an accident, really. I was so busy looking around at this place that I didn’t even see him there, you know?”
“...Hashirama, he’s a hundred feet tall. How could you possibly overlook that?”

“Um, well...”

Oh no, she had that reproving look she got whenever she was about to lecture him about how he could have avoided whatever mishap he’d gotten himself into this time. Hashirama took a step back.

“You know,” she prattled on, “this could have all been avoided if you’d just used the transmission seal I taught you. It could’ve transported you directly to my location without any hassle.”

Hashirama put his hands up in a placating gesture. “Ahhh, that! Right, well, there’s a perfectly good explanation for that.”

“Oh, well I’m just dying to hear it.”

She crossed her arms, nonplussed. Hashirama slumped again.

“Well, I got here and I thought it might be fun to see the Shikkotsu Forest for myself, and maybe surprise you...”

Mito’s expression turned icy and Hashirama shrank in on himself even more.

“Hashirama, that is a terrible idea. Do you even realize the kind of danger you put yourself in? Baikan would have killed you if I hadn’t happened to be there. And if not him, then something else surely would have once you ended up lost in this place. Have a little more concern for your own safety, please.”

“Aww, I’m sorry, Mito. I just couldn’t help it. This place is really amazing!”

She sighed and lowered her arms to her sides. “What’s done is done. All that matters is that we found each other. But I hope you’ll learn something from this.” She paused and held his gaze. “You really should stop trying to do everything by yourself. That’s not what it means to be a leader.”

Hashirama stared, mouth slightly agape, and before he could respond, she turned and continued walking. Her white dress fluttered behind her, swishing over her bare calves in rhythm with her steps. Hashirama followed on autopilot as he processed her words, words he’d heard many times before but never from her. She was always silent, observing. Calculating.

“You sound like my brother,” he said, forcing a smile.

“That’s because I agree with him.”

He chuckled. “I guess that makes sense.”

Mito said nothing else on the subject as they traveled deeper into the forest. Hashirama looked around as they went, more relaxed now that Mito was with him. Truth be told, he’d been exaggerating about how much sight-seeing he’d done on his way here. He was more concerned with the noxious atmosphere that would have probably killed anyone else that had chosen to come here with him, which was why he’d insisted on coming alone over Tobirama’s protests. Even so, the toll on Hashirama’s energy was nothing to sneeze at. If he wasn’t so in tune with the Earth’s natural energy, he surely would have perished in here long before running into Mito.

The trees here were not trees. At least, not like he was used to. Perhaps at one point they had been
trees, teeming with life, but now they were something else. Harboring something other than life. The mucous they oozed was foul poison, but Hashirama could not help but be intrigued by the strangeness of it all. This place was like an alternate dimension where venom sustained life rather than took it. He stopped and bent down to touch the opaque sap only to find his hand stalled by Mito’s firm grip.

“Don’t touch that,” she warned. “It’s poisonous.”

Hashirama frowned. “So how can the trees live if they leak poison?”

“It’s this place. The slugs and snails dictate the ecosystem. What’s poison to us is nectar to them. This place just adapted to suit them, I guess.”

“Weird.”

“Yeah.”

“You’re barefoot. It doesn’t affect you?”

Mito released his hand and stood up. “Not anymore.”

They continued and Hashirama was drawn to the floating blue lights following them. He was most astonished to find that they disintegrated when they came into contact with his skin. So beautiful, but so fragile. Little wisps of latent, natural energy that grew out of this place so teeming with the stuff that it could not house it all. They followed Mito as she walked, drawn to her.

You’ve really been working hard, he thought to himself, smiling a little.

Sucking sounds above drew his attention: more of the Shikkotsu Forest’s denizens were peeking out from the canopy. Slugs and snails, both small and large, poked their eyestalks out from the fan-like leaves above to observe his and Mito’s passage. Hashirama laughed, and the smaller ones retracted their eyestalks, surprised and maybe a little afraid. Mito shot him a look over her shoulder.

“This place is magical,” he said.

“I couldn’t think of a better word for it myself,” she said.

Eventually, they arrived at what Hashirama presumed to be their destination and touched down on solid land. Tiny snails and slugs scattered at his feet, afraid of something so big intruding on their territory. Hashirama kept his eyes glued to the ground, careful not to step on anything alive. Mito watched him from the entrance of the blanched ruins occupying the island. Hashirama felt her eyes on him and looked up.

“What?”

She shook her head. “Nothing.”

He smiled brightly and didn’t press her. If she had something to say to him, she’d say it when she was good and ready. Mito led him inside the ruins, a place she called the heart.

“Kind of a weird name, don’t you think?” he ventured.

“Not if you consider what this place means to the slugs and snails that live here. It’s like they’re part of something that’s just as alive as they are.”
Hashirama nodded. “Oh, I get it.”

“You know, it took me months to really appreciate that, and you’re telling me you get it just from me saying so one time?”

“Well, yeah. This whole place is alive. The Earth’s energy isn’t something you can just ignore, you know. It’s what gives everything life. So it makes sense that the snails and slugs would revere that. The chakra we use as shinobi is more of a lesser manifestation of that energy. This is the real stuff, right here.” He poked at a floating blue wisp, and it disintegrated on contact.

Mito watched him with half-lidded eyes, a small smile on her face. “Hashirama, you really are incredible. I’m not surprised you were able to come this far.”

“Well, I couldn’t just let you stay here forever!”

She laughed. “Of course. I’ve done what I needed to do, and I think it’s time I returned. One year... Sometimes it seems like it’s been so much longer.”

“That’s how it is when you really miss the people you left behind.”

She looked away. “Yes, I suppose that’s true.”

She led him to a wide chamber that had beds carved out of stone and covered with some kind of blue moss as a mattress. Sheets were folded on one of the beds, clearly having been used before. This was where she lived.

“We can leave in the morning. This place isn’t safe at night,” Mito said.

“You mean, running into that big snail was considered ‘safe’?”

Mito grinned. “You’re a bit of an outlier.”

“Fair enough. Okay, Boss.”

She laughed again, and he remembered just how much he’d missed her laugh. A year was too long. Now that she’d had her time to train, he wasn’t about to let her run off like that again for a long time, if ever.

“I’ll get us something to eat,” Mito said, rising.

“Can I help?”

“Between the two of us, we’re both dismal cooks.” She paused before adding, “So I guess it wouldn’t make a difference if I let you man the cooking fire.”

“Yeah, I stoke a mean fire, in case you forgot.”

“You know, I didn’t miss you that much.”

She disappeared through the doorway, and Hashirama rose to follow. “Hey, you don’t mean that, right? Mito!”

But she only laughed.
The next day, Mito bid farewell to Sazae.

“It’s only temporary until the next time I have to ask you for your help in battle,” Mito said.

Sazae’s eyestalks swiveled back and forth as she fretted. “Oh! It will just be so strange not having you around every day, Lady Mito. I will miss you, and I know the others will, too.”

“Well, maybe not that Baikan fellow,” Hashirama quipped.

Mito shot him a dangerous look over her shoulder, and the blood drained from his face in fear of her temper.

“Be careful, Hashirama. The slugs and snails value respect and politeness over everything. Don’t be rude.”

“S-Sorry! I didn’t mean anything by it.”

“It’s all right,” Sazae said. “I think I’ve learned a lot from you Humans, too, even though you are so very small.”

Mito wrapped her arms around Sazae’s nose. “I’ll see you soon. And thank you for everything.”

“We do not offer much, Lady Mito. It’s you who came this far, not me.”

“All the same.”

“Yes, have a safe trip. I hope I shall see you again very soon!”

Hashirama followed Mito to the canopy, up and up to a height taller than any normal trees he’d ever seen, until they breached it entirely. Once on the surface, they were able to see the rolling ocean waves and green mountains in the distance that marked the world of man.

“We’re crossing over the treetops?” Hashirama asked.

“If we tried to get out through the forest, we’d be lost forever,” Mito said. “It’s a world of its own.”

“Huh. That’s pretty convenient for the snails. They won’t be disturbed here.”

She gave him a weird look. “You’re the only person I know who would ever see it like that.”

“Is...that a bad thing?”

Her expression softened. “No, of course not.”

“Oh, well, good!”

They took off at a run over the canopy, chakra keeping them aloft. Paradoxically, it only took them about an hour to reach the edge of the forest despite how vast and labyrinthine it had seemed down below.

“Wow, you weren’t kidding! I swear I was wandering around for, like, at least a day when I came here looking for you. And this is where I came in,” Hashirama said.

Two giant, stone monoliths marked the entrance to the Shikkotsu Forest. Ancient glyphs on their faces were long weathered by the elements, and Hashirama wondered what they said.
“Well, if you could read the monoliths, you’d see that they warn about that,” Mito said.

He sighed. “So that’s where I went wrong.”

“Come on, let’s go.”

They were somewhere in the remote, uninhabited islands of off the coast of eastern Lightning Country, and the journey back to Fire Country where the Senju were camped would take several days. Hashirama didn’t mind the time alone with Mito, and she didn’t seem to mind it, either, eager to hear about what everyone had been up to over the past year. But as it was wont to do, their conversation shifted to the Uchiha and the timeless conflict between them and the Senju.

“It’s been a while since our last confrontation, actually,” Hashirama said. “We’ve been busy out west in Wind Country, and they’ve been taking jobs in the north.”

“And what about Madara?”

He knew she’d ask, and even so, he couldn’t help the twinge of something sour on the back of his tongue. Not because it was Madara, but because it was Mito asking.

“Same old, same old, I guess. The Uchiha really respect him. Ever since he married Haruka, things seem to have settled down. Doesn’t look like much has changed in that regard.”

Mito was silent, her eyes downcast and thoughtful. Hashirama had to wonder what she thought about all this. It didn’t take a genius to understand her feelings for Madara, as he’d discovered during the invasion of Uzushiogakure. At the time, he hadn’t minded on a personal level, though he had felt guilty about discovering the relationship entirely by accident. Now, though...

“I wish this would just end,” she admitted. “All this time and still no progress between you. That’s not right.”

“It will happen,” Hashirama said.

“You said that when my father agreed to our alliance three whole years ago.”

“And I intend to keep my promise. Just wait, somehow I’ll convince Madara to make peace.”

Mito sighed. “I know you will. It’s just hard to swallow sometimes with all the time and all the dead.”

“Yeah...”

They traveled by barge back to the mainland, but it was a short trip that took less than half a day. Once docked, they made efficient progress to the Senju camp in northern Fire Country. Despite how barren and dry the plains were, this place had grown to feel like home to Hashirama.

The warlord that had conquered this land, Kenshin Uesugi, was in a partnership with the Uzumaki clan. While he had a history of employing the Uchiha clan for various jobs, Hashirama found him to be a decent man and a reasonable negotiator most of the time. He was fair as long as he saw honest work, and he was partial to Mito, as Hashirama had learned in their first joint dealing a couple years ago. Something about making a good first impression, she’d explained. Hashirama didn’t mind the advantage. In exchange for leasing fees, Kenshin permitted any shinobi clan to reside in his territory, a policy most warlords employed these days.

“I hope my clansmen have been helpful to you this past year?” Mito asked as she and Hashirama
walked through the sprawling Senju camp on the way to the private living tents.

“Definitely. Although, I guess it’s been pretty hard for some of my shinobi to learn the Whirlpool kata. Guess you have to learn from a young age, after all.”

Mito grinned. “It’s a bit different from what you all have been brought up with, so I can understand the difficulty.”

“You know, it’d be nice to have them with us on the battlefield more often. I never realized how versatile fūinjutsu really is.”

“Sorry, Hashirama, but I’m not budging on that. We’ll help you out in any way we can, but not against the Uchiha. We’ve discussed this, and you know my father agrees with me.”

Hashirama sighed, a smile on his face. He should’ve known she wouldn’t change her mind even after a year without his attempts at persuasion. Even her clansmen were immovable, unwilling to go against her wishes or her father’s. He didn’t have to ask, and he didn’t think it was an outlandish condition given that the alliance had made the Uzumaki default enemies of the Uchiha without any reason other than a name. Still, to have her active support to convince Madara would have been nice...

“I know what you’re thinking,” she said, interrupting his thoughts. “And there are other ways to convince Madara. Fighting is not one of them.”

“Haha, yeah, you’re right. But it’s kinda hard when he’s trying to kill me every time we see each other...you know?”

They passed by Senju civilians going about their daily routines. Craftsmen hammered away at their forges and wove new clothing. Women cooked large pots of stew to pass around to the camp’s hungry inhabitants. Even children were hard at work helping out their parents. They all shied away at the sight of Hashirama and Mito, whose strange appearance merited more than the occasional gape and gawk. Hashirama waved at them with a bright smile on his face, and the children waved shyly back. People greeted him warmly, along with his female right-hand. Some welcomed her back personally, glad to see her again after so long.

The soldiers, of course, were nowhere to be found. Shinobi, kunoichi, and children would all be sparring, meditating, training in some fashion just to get an edge in the next battle, which could be tomorrow for all anyone knew. Constantly on edge and ready for death, the energy in the camp was always high and bright and ready to burst at the first sign of trouble. It was empowering, but it was also exhausting. Beside him, Mito had tensed up as they made their way deeper into the camp. He put a reassuring hand on the small of her back.

“A little overwhelming after all that time in a dark, lonely forest, huh?” he whispered.

She seemed to relax a little bit under his touch and nodded. “Yes, a little.”

Something warmed his fingertips where he touched her, and he noticed a burned scroll secured at her belt. Hashirama instantly retracted his hand. She’d told him the story of that scroll and what it contained, what it meant. He forced a smile and stared straight ahead. Some things, he supposed, hadn’t changed even after so long in the poisonous bone forest. He tried to think of something else so she wouldn’t pick up on his mood.

“Hey, Hashirama!” Sasuke called as he exited a large tent carrying several rolled up maps under his arm. “You’re finally back!”
Hashirama waved enthusiastically. “Sasuke, look who I found.”

“Well, well, if it isn’t the better half,” he said grinning.

Mito smiled. “Hello, Sasuke.”

Sasuke loped toward them and scooped Mito up in his free arm, twirling her around. “Aren’t you a sight for sore eyes!”

“Hey, where’s Tobi?” Hashirama asked.

“With Tōka inside. Actually, you should probably go and see them.”

Hashirama sighed dramatically. “Man, I’m gone for just a few days and there’s already something happening? Can’t a guy take a proper vacation?”

“Bahaha! Very funny, kid. You can take a vacation when you’re dead.”

Hashirama slumped. “That’s so depressing.”

“Look sharp, Hashirama,” Mito said. “You wouldn’t want those kids to see their great and just leader moping about like a wet towel, would you?”

Some civilian children had trailed Hashirama and Mito as they walked through the camp, whispering and giggling to themselves. It was no secret that Hashirama adored all children, and they adored him. No matter how busy he was running one of the most powerful shinobi clans on the continent, he always made time for children, whether to spoil them with sweets or with smiles. The kids following Mito and him stared openly at Hashirama, wide-eyed.

Hashirama straightened up and rubbed his hands together. “You know something? You’re absolutely right. Hey, kids, come and have a look at this.”

He kneeled down, cupped his hands, and blew into them like a magician preparing a wonderful trick for his audience. The children scrambled together to get a good look at his hands, trying to see inside. Mito and Sasuke looked on, just as intrigued. Hashirama grinned.

“Ready?” he said.

“Yeah!” the children said in unison.

“Okay, try and catch this!”

He opened his hands and out flew a glowing, green tuft of raw life energy that buzzed around as fast as a lightning bug, not unlike the floating wisps he’d seen in the Shikkotsu Forest. The children squealed in delight and chased after it, reaching for it with grabby hands, though it was a little too fast for them. Laughing, they bounded after it back towards the civilian settlement, laughing.

Hashirama rose and dusted himself off. Mito watched him quietly, her expression soft, but she said nothing. He held her gaze, trying to think of something to say.

“So, Mito,” Sasuke said. “You should probably go talk to the others, too. I’ll find Lena and let her know you’re back. She’ll be thrilled!”

“I will as soon as I’ve had a bath. Apparently, I smell ‘funky’.”

Sasuke laughed. “If you say so. Anyway, I’ll see ya both around.”
Mito began to walk off toward the bathing area. “I’ll see you later, Hashirama.”

He watched her go and decided he might as well see what Tobirama and Tōka wanted. Back to work. It wasn’t much of a vacation, but it had to count for something, he figured.

The Naka River remained unchanged no matter how many years passed. Madara stood on its banks and watched the clear waters rushing by, glittering under the light of the orange, evening sun. He wore a simple navy yukata in between missions. If nothing else, the Fire Country was at least good for its temperate climate. But Madara had another motivation for always returning here when there was a lapse in between missions. This place, he supposed, would always be home. It was the only place in the world where he’d actually made a friend instead of killed one.

“Madara.”

Izuna joined him at the shoreline, similarly dressed for a relaxing evening after a long and hard campaign in northern Lightning Country. The brothers stood side by side, gazing over the river to the opposite bank.

“Did you come here to read the Tablet again?” Izuna asked.

The Uchiha Tablet, knowledge of which Tajima had imparted to his adoptive sons shortly before his death, lay hidden in a subterranean shrine near here. From it, Madara had learned the truth about his eyes, the Mangekyō Sharingan, and the powers they could bestow upon him. Amaterasu, Tsukuyomi...perhaps others. The Tablet was difficult to decipher, like reading a book whose words faded in and out of focus with the onslaught of exhaustion. Izuna hadn’t been able to decipher much of the Tablet at all until he, too, had awakened the Mangekyō Sharingan. That discovery alone led to the inference that there must be some level of sight beyond even what the brothers possessed now.

“I know what it says,” Madara said.

“‘The world consists of opposing forces, Yin and Yang, constantly at war. But when the two come together, they can create a perfect and harmonious union.’” Izuna recited a passage from the Tablet from memory, like a teacher to a group of school children. “It sounds like some kind of advice, don’t you think?”

“Perhaps. But it’s impossible to know for sure without being able to read everything.”

“Mm. We’ll have to get stronger so we can read the whole message.”

It was a thought that was on Madara’s mind daily. Ever since the invasion of Uzushiogakure three years ago, he’d promised himself he would keep his word to Hashirama and become stronger, the strongest of them all. And not just him, but the Uchiha clan, too. With monsters like the Kyuubi running loose in the world, he couldn’t take the chance that what had befallen Uzushiogakure would befall the Uchiha. Next time, he would be ready. The beast was not getting away the next time they crossed paths.

*Three years...*

Three long years since the Uzumaki had thrown in their lot with the Senju. Even now, Madara still smarted at the thought. Mito had visited him that night and told him the news, guilty, like this was her fault. Maybe it was. Madara had been surprised at how well he’d taken it (expected it). Senju
and Uzumaki shared blood ties, after all, and blood was the most important bond in this world.

Sometimes.

“*I’m doing this for us,*” she’d implored him. “*All of us. One day, we can make peace more than just a dream. I can’t do anything stuck on this island, so please...*”

He’d been angry with her. After everything, *everything*, the Uzumaki turned their backs on those who’d laid down their lives for them. But he couldn’t hold it against her. The Uzumaki would have found no such welcome from his own clan. Search for her as he might on the battlefield whenever the Uchiha clashed with the Senju, she and her kin were nowhere to be found.

“I’m not your enemy,” she promised him. “I never will be.”

“*Never is a very long time, Princess.*”

But she’d kept her promise, visiting him every few months whenever they had some time to themselves, vespertine moments away from prying eyes. He never explained himself to Izuna or anyone else, and no one was stupid enough to ask. Not now that Madara was the unquestioned leader of the Uchiha clan.

“Haruka was asking for you just now, by the way,” Izuna said, interrupting Madara’s thoughts. “She was wondering if you wanted to have dinner together.”

Marrying Haruka had been something he knew he couldn’t avoid, not that he’d particularly wished to avoid it. Marriage was a formality, a pretty dotting of i’s and crossing of t’s meant to satisfy the masses. It was also an excuse for celebration, something the Uchiha had sorely needed after the debacle in Uzushiogakure. The marriage, combined with Madara and Izuna’s hard and fast takeover of the clan in the chaotic aftermath of Uzushigakure, had cemented Madara’s position as head of the clan. Anyone bearing him ill will remained silent, lest they learn the true power of the Mangekyo Sharingan first-hand.

“Fine. She should be resting, though. I’ll have to tie her to the bed so she can’t get up if she keeps involving herself with clan politics.”

Izuna grinned. “Yeah, but this is Haruka we’re talking about. Maybe any other woman would use pregnancy as an excuse to take it easy, but not her. I think it’s a good thing.”

Madara’s expression softened. With the loss of her eyes, Haruka had fallen into a toxic mental state, depressed and wholly unfit to participate in the normal Uchiha affairs around which she’d grown up. Without a way even to live the only life she’d ever known, it was easy to see why she’d deteriorated so quickly. To lose one’s purpose was a far crueler fate than to lose one’s life. The marriage had helped a little, but it wasn’t until a couple years later, when she found out she was with child, that Madara began to see a change in her. She wasn’t the Haruka he remembered, and she probably never would be, but it had been so long since he’d seen that cheeky grin on her pretty face. The idea of a child was even less appealing to Madara than the obligation of marriage, but he supposed it was his duty as clan head to produce an heir. If nothing else, it made Haruka happy. That was enough.

“Ah, I guess it is.”

“You’re lucky, Brother. I wish I could marry a woman as great as Haruka one day.”

Madara closed his eyes. Visions of swimming, red hair and calloused fingers tracing the contours of his temples danced in the shadows of his memory. Marriage was duty. Family was blood. But
she was for him.

“There’s no one like you.”

“There never will be,” he whispered.

“What was that?” Izuna poked his head forward.

“Nothing. Let’s go. I’m hungry.”

Izuna followed Madara back to the tents, watching his brother’s back in silence.

Dinner was brighter than Madara had expected. Haruka was eager to hear more about the brothers’ most recent campaign, and Izuna was delighted to indulge her. Madara was content to contribute here and there. If Haruka derived any pleasure from hearing their war stories, however small, he would not deny her this.

“I’m glad to know you’re working on your footwork, Izuna,” she said. “You always were poor at that.”

“Thanks a lot, Sis. I am practically the leader of the whole clan even with my two left feet.”

“It’s true,” Madara said. “Izuna does all the heavy lifting. I’m merely a figurehead.”

“A figurehead that likes to work everyone like pack horses,” Hikaku grumbled through a mouthful of food. “Sometimes I think you’re not even human, Madara.”

“You wouldn’t be the first to get that impression,” Haruka said.

Izuna grinned and put a hand on his brother’s shoulder. “Don’t look so glum, Brother. It’ll rub off on your future child.”

Not getting the joke he said, “Don’t be ridiculous, Izuna.”

Haruka put a hand over her swollen belly, smiling a little. So different from the nights Madara had found her on the floor, having fallen out of her bed and bleeding because she’d accidentally cut herself on a kunai she still insisted on keeping under her pillow despite her handicap.

“Don’t touch me! Don’t touch me!”

“Haruka—”

“Just leave me alone! You got what you wanted, so leave me alone!”

A part of her hated him, and he supposed she had every right. To be reduced to a pawn in a game of thrones was humiliating. To lose everything that made her who she was, to lose her will to live without anything or anyone to live for was a fate worse than death. So he let her beat her frail fists across his chest (so bony, they’d never been like that when she’d held a sword in them). He let her scream and claw at him, better him than her.

And then, things started to get a little better. Time healed all wounds, but wounds this deep left scars. Haruka would never really recover. But maybe she could find something new to live for. She would never live for Madara, but she could live for their unborn child.
“Family really is the best, isn’t it?” Izuna said.

“Oi, don’t lump me in with you guys,” Hikaku said. “I’m not here by choice.”

“That’s true. Hikaku, leave,” Madara said, bored.

Hikaku dropped the drumstick he’d been chewing on and looked almost comically wounded.

“Madara...”

Madara rolled his eyes and tried not to laugh at that ridiculous sight.

“Quit it, Brother. He didn’t mean it,” Izuna said to Hikaku.

“He better not, ‘cause I dunno anyone who was brave enough to stick around you two since we were kids besides me.”

“You know, they say the brave and the stupid have much in common,” Madara said.

“You wanna take this outside? I could take you, leader or no. I beat your skinny ass into the ground plenty of times when we were kids.”

Madara bared his teeth in a grin and his eyes flashed red. Hikaku also activated his Sharingan, unafraid. He was one of the few who wasn’t anymore.

“I think I’ll head to bed,” Haruka said. “I’m suddenly not feeling well.”

A young Uchiha girl tasked with assisting Haruka helped her stand. The men rose with her.


“Yeah, don’t you want to watch me pound Madara into the dirt?” Hikaku said.

He realized his mistake too late, and Madara shot him a venomous look. Haruka smiled, the lower edges of her thick, white blindfold crinkled.

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“Some other time,” she said, her tone clipped despite the thin smile she wore.

Haruka left, and Madara grabbed Hikaku by the collar.

“Moron,” he hissed.

“Hey, I’m sorry! Really, it was an accident. I didn’t mean—”

Madara released him and stormed out of the tent. He didn’t follow Haruka, instead wanting to be alone. Izuna didn’t call after him, either, perhaps sensing that it would have been futile.

It was dark, out but a river of stars twinkled above, thousands and thousands of them. Madara walked at a brusque pace through the Uchiha camp, past glowing campfires and torches that marked the main path. Shinobi and civilians bowed respectfully as he passed. Normally he would have stopped to greet them, but right now his mood dragged his feet forward as quickly as they could without him drawing too much attention to himself. No one tried to stop him, and children playing scampered out of sight as the sound of his passing, not wanting to be caught idling.

Madara’s private tent was nothing too lavish—the Uchiha valued power and blood, not material riches. But it was large enough to pace in, and right now he was counting on that small luxury. Rubbing his eyes, he pulled back the tent flap and walked inside, ready to take out his frustration.
on the new battle formations he’d been devising to test out against the Senju. But the sight that greeted him stopped him dead in his tracks.

Flowing, red hair and stormy eyes that came alive at the sight of him. She wore her traditional whalebone armor over a light blue gi. Madara’s voice hitched in his throat, and his eyes flashed red involuntarily at the strong influx of emotions upon seeing her like this out of the blue.

“Madara Uchiha,” she said.

Mito faced him with her hands at her sides. She looked not a day older than the last time he’d seen her. Maybe it was just the timing. A year seemed like an eternity away from her, but it was no time at all now that she was here.

A year.

A whole year without her. She’d mentioned something about solo training, and one day he got the message that she was leaving for a long time, just like that. To see her again now...

“Princess,” he said, his voice barely louder than a rasp.

She approached like water, so fluid, just like he remembered. She was water, the ocean, vast and unconquerable. Slave to none, a true princess in the best sense of the word. She stopped just short of him, uncertain, unaware despite their shared history and the secret things she knew of him.

Red eyes looked down on her, for he was the taller of the two of them now, easily. No longer a boy, and she no longer a girl. He narrowed his eyes, and she moved.

Slender arms—strong arms—wrapped around his neck and pulled him to her like he might fade away. She laid her head in the crook of his neck and breathed him in deeply.

“Oh, I’ve missed you,” she said.

Madara’s eyes fell closed and he returned her embrace, savoring this moment of unguarded vulnerability. Was she real? Was she really here again after so long? Hadn’t she forgotten about him, as he’d imagined she might?

She smelled just as he remembered.

“I’m sorry I was gone for so long,” she whispered. “But I had to leave. Not just you, but everyone.”

He fisted her long, thick hair to keep his hand from shaking. Mito pulled away, and he noticed the purple diamond imprinted upon her forehead. His Sharingan registered a bright abundance of chakra there, blinding beyond anything he’d ever seen. She’d trained hard.

He ran a hand over her jawline and angled her face upward to peer at her better. Her lips parted for his searching thumb, and he knew he was finished. His grip on his shoulders tightened, and he closed the distance between them with a hard kiss, fast and greedy for all the time they’d missed.

Madara pushed her against the edge of the bed and tore at her armor. Nimble fingers unclasped and untied—he knew his way around. Mito tugged at the front of his yukata loosened it enough to send it falling. His hands traveled up the curve of her waist, shedding the layers of cloth bundling her up as they went. He hooked a hand under her knee and forced her down onto the fur-lined bed.

“Madara—"
His hand in her hair cut her off and yanked her head back to expose her neck. Something in him twisted and clawed at his insides, begging to be free, not unlike the rush he got on the battlefield at the prospect of cutting down a powerful enemy. He hovered over her, unsure where to start, but she didn’t give him even a moment to ponder as she pulled him toward her by the hair. Open palms, hot to the touch, roved over his chest. Palms that could end him right there, the leader of the Uchiha clan, if she wished it. But she didn’t wish it, never had. He forgot his frustrations, his anger, the bitter guilt of watching Haruka storm out of the dinner tent earlier, and lost himself in Mito, a red so vibrant he couldn’t imagine any other way to be.

Hours later, Madara lay awake in bed unable to sleep. Mito shifted next to him and draped her hand across his bare chest as she nuzzled his neck and left light kisses wherever she could reach him.

“What did you accomplish?” he asked.

He felt her smile against him. “So much.”

“Good. Next time, it’s not getting away.”

She shifted a little and brought her hand up to his neck, tracing circles. “There was something in the Shikkotsu Forest that shouldn’t have been there.”

“What kind of ‘something’?”

“I don’t know, but I do know. I can’t explain it. I only know it’s not welcome there.”

He tightened his grip around her waist, pulling her close enough to kiss her hair. “There are nine Bijuu...”

“Maybe.” She drew her nails lightly over his shoulder. “But it’ll take the three of us to bring it down.”

He sighed and closed his eyes. “I know that.”

Mito rose off the bed and hovered over him. Her long hair spilled over his chest, ticklish. “Then make peace. We have more important things to worry about than this feud and you know it.”

“Don’t belittle my situation. You know it’s not that simple.”

She watched him a moment, but he could not make out her expression in the dark without the Sharingan. “Hashirama’s a good man. He only wants to make peace with you.”

“He’s also killed more of my kin than I can count.”

She looked ready to say something more, but in the end she let the subject drop. She never was one to take sides between Hashirama and him. It bothered him a little, but the rational part of him decided it was one of her better qualities. If she took sides, it might not be his.

“I’m afraid something terrible will have to happen before you two can come to any sort of agreement,” she admitted. “I don’t want that to happen.”

“We’ve been fighting for a thousand years. Bad things happen, Mito. You would understand if you’d been born Uchiha.”
“If I’d been born Uchiha,” she repeated. “I wonder how that would have turned out for us?”

Madara lifted a hand to her cheek and tucked his fingers into her hair. “If you’d been born Uchiha, you wouldn’t be here with me now.”

Something warm dripped onto his bare chest, and he realized she was crying.

“I suppose it’s fate, then. I wonder where it’ll take us?”

“I don’t know,” he said, meaning it. He pushed up on his elbow and flipped them so that he was on top looking down. The Sharingan flared to life and she came into stark relief beneath him. His chest constricted at the sight of her. “But I don’t care.”

“Madara, I—”

He silenced her with a bruising kiss. No more tears, no more fears or doubts or what-ifs. What mattered was what they had. They shared the darkness for as long as it lasted, content to savor it until the inevitable dawn.

Mito awoke the next day to a sleeping Madara. She grinned to herself. He was always a late riser, and she was content to watch him like this, unguarded, whatever chance she got. Instead of his usual scowl, his expression was serene and youthful. Nineteen was not an old age in the grand scheme of things despite their lifestyle, she reasoned. They were still naïve and young in many respects. At the very least, in these precious twilight moments between she could savor the innocence of them, a shadow of the real thing. She traced a finger just under one of his eyes. They had both developed grooves from compounded lack of sleep and stress. She supposed it came with being the leader of such a powerful shinobi clan. Feeling mischievous, she bent down and kissed him lightly at first, lingering as he stirred, and then she deepened it. Madara shifted and returned the kiss, only half awake at first. A hand snaked through her hair, and she smiled as he turned them over.

“Good morning,” she said, breathless as she stared up at his dark, sleepy eyes.

“Morning.” He dragged a hand up her thigh and guided her toward him.

It was another twenty minutes before they finally dragged themselves out of bed, exhausted all over again. Mito dressed in her undergarments and a robe she found in Madara’s chest of clothes—one of the few she’d left with him for her visits. There would be no need for armor today.

“How long can you stay?” he asked as he dressed.

“A few days. I don’t want to impose on your next campaign.”

“I wouldn’t mind the help.”

Mito shot him a look over her shoulder, but he was busy adjusting his yukata coat. She smirked. “Ah, you Uchiha could always use some help.”

He finished dressing and approached her. An arm around her waist turned her toward him just as she was fixing to pin up her hair. His hand found hers and closed around it.

“Leave it down,” he whispered against her lips.
“I indulge you too much.”

He smirked. “What’s wrong with that?”

His kiss was gentle but deep, and Mito was tempted to wrap her arms around him and haul him back to the bed. But it was getting late, and surely he had important duties to attend to as the clan head. So she pulled back and gave him her best disapproving look.

“Don’t you have places to be, slacker?”

“I do,” he admitted. “Join me for breakfast. Izuna and Haruka will be happy to see you.”

Mito’s expression fell somewhat at the mention of Haruka. “I don’t like this, Madara.”

“Our marriage is a political formality. The only love that ever existed between us is fraternal, and after what happened I don’t think I have that much from her, anymore. We’ve been over this.”

“I understand, but does she?”

He looked away. “Haruka’s only concern is the child growing within her. She cares for nothing else, and I’ll be damned if I take that last hope away from her.”

Mito smiled sadly. “If you say so.”

He placed his hands over her shoulders, gaze serious. “I do say so.”

Mito blinked, taken aback. If she were a lesser woman she may have let envy twist her perception of reality. But she was not. And neither was Haruka. One day, Mito would face the same fate as Haruka, just as she’d promised her father. She was the last person who could ever bring herself to hold it against Haruka.

“Okay,” Mito said, placing her hands on his chest.

“Come on.” Madara took her hand and led her out of the tent.

Some people were up and about, but since most of the Uchiha were soldiers, they were busy training elsewhere. Only a few civilians milled about at this late hour of the morning. They greeted Madara dutifully as he passed.

“Good morning, m’lord,” a little boy of seven or eight years said.

He was dressed plainly and bore soot markings on his cheeks, probably a blacksmith’s son with no last name. Madara nodded to him.

“Good morning, Ayato,” he said.

Ayato smiled brightly at having been acknowledged. He spared Mito a glance and blushed, his dark eyes following the flow of her brilliant red hair. It was a strange sight among the darker Uchiha.

Mito leaned in and whispered, “So you know all the civilian children’s names?”

“I make a habit of remembering.”

She squeezed his hand and tried not to let her pride show. “You are so much like Hashirama, you know.”
“Don’t compare me to that idiot.”

“That idiot is your best friend.”

Madara said nothing to that, and Mito dropped the subject before she gave him an aneurysm. Putting some distance between them, she followed as he led her to the dining tent where he and his trusted advisors usually convened for meals. Izuna was already there, and at the sight of Mito he lit up like the first day of spring.

“Mito! When did you get here? I didn’t know you were coming.”

He rushed to greet her and took her hands in his. Mito smiled wide. A man grown now, Izuna was softer around the edges than his brother, charming where Madara was rugged. Mito almost did not recognize him with his long ponytail and heartbreakingly dark eyes.

“Izuna, you look very well.”

“Well enough considering he still can’t get a date,” Hikaku said.

He was sitting at the table sipping his tea. Unlike Izuna, Hikaku had not changed much. Still cheeky, still sharp, and still fearless. He spared Mito a bored glance.

“Hikaku, it’s nice to see you, too,” Mito said. “I’m surprised you’re up at this hour.”

He scowled. “Hey, what’s that supposed to mean?”

Izuna crossed his arms. “I’m sure I’ll find a lovely girl someday soon.”

“With such a handsome face, I’m sure you will,” Mito said.

Izuna blushed and looked away. Madara sat at the table and motioned for one of the civilian serving maids to bring breakfast.

“So, what brings you here?” Izuna asked. “Not that I blame you for wanting to get away from the Senju.”

Mito ignored the casual slight against her allies. “Actually, I’ve been training in the Shikkotsu Forest for the past year, and now that my training’s complete I thought I’d stop by and visit,” Mito said.

“How long can you stay? I mean, before the Senju start to yank on your leash.”

Mito frowned. “It’s not like that, Izuna. You know that.”

A middle-aged civilian woman entered with trays of food for the table.

“Ah, finally, I’m starving,” Hikaku announced.

“You’re always starving,” Izuna said.

“Listen, Izuna, when you work as hard as I do, you’ll know the feeling.”

Breakfast was served and the morning passed with upbeat conversation. It was always like this when Mito visited, unimportant leisure talk. She wasn’t an ally and thus had no business overhearing Uchiha affairs. But this was the side of them she appreciated the most, to see Izuna smiling and Madara relaxing. If only it could be like this always. After, Madara took Mito through
the camp for a walk.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” Mito said, rummaging through the sleeve of her robe. “I brought you something.”

She produced a small acorn and handed it to Madara, who accepted it with a look of suspicion.

“...An acorn. Just what I’ve always wanted.”

She rolled her eyes at his deadpan humor. “No, silly.”

She tapped it with a finger and the seed popped. A cloud of smoke burst from it, causing Madara to cough a bit. When it cleared, he held a long, tempered scythe in one hand and a lacquered, wooden gunbai in the other. The iron and woodwork was exquisite, very high quality that was not easy (or cheap) to come by.

“I had the Senju smiths make those,” she said. “So now when you fight, it will be partly with Senju strength.”

“What an ironic gift.”

She gave him a pointed look. “Consider this some incentive to make peace. Hashirama and I are putting together a proposal for you that I hope you’ll accept.”

Madara averted his gaze. “We’ll see.”

She sighed and put her hands on her hips. “Just think about it, okay? There’s no way anything will work without you, you know.”

Madara looked up at the sky, his expression placid. “Thank you for this. Although I can’t promise I won’t use them to kill Senju soldiers.”

“Madara...” She approached him but resisted the urge to touch him. “Let’s find a way to end this. Remember how strong we were together?”

“I remember.”

She pursed her lips, racking her brain for something to sway him, though she knew it would be futile. In the end, only Hashirama could convince him, just as in the end, only Madara could force Hashirama to accept reality. She was just the middleman. But if it meant getting the chance to see him like this, not quite an outsider but not really an ally, then she would take it.

“M’lord! Come quick!”

A woman in a brown dress with the sleeves rolled up to her elbows came sprinting toward them, huffing and puffing.

“What is it?” Madara demanded.

“It’s Lady Haruka! She’s in labor!”

Mito gasped.

Madara looked pale. “Already? But she’s only five months pregnant. It’s too soon.”

“Please, hurry and come!” the woman implored him.
“Lead the way.”

Mito took off after Madara, worried about her friend. Five months was far too soon to birth a child. Something was wrong, and the feeling of trepidation that followed Mito all the way to Haruka’s tent only grew more potent with every step she took.

When they arrived, a civilian midwife was there trying to deal with the situation. There were no medical ninja around; the Uchiha did not employ any. Haruka screamed on her bed, and Mito covered her mouth in horror.

“The baby is coming,” the midwife said, “but it’s too early.”

“What does that mean? What’s wrong?” Madara demanded.

“I’m not sure—”

Haruka let out a wail so piercing that Mito had to cover her ears. The woman was in severe pain, and something was terribly, terribly wrong with her child. Mito was no medical ninja, and right now having Hashirama around would have been optimal, but he wasn’t here. There was only her. Resolved, she stepped forward and took charge of the situation.

“Stand back, let me take a look,” Mito said to the fretting midwife.

“What are you doing?” Madara said, kneeling down next to Haruka.

“What am I doing?”

She tried to think. What would be the best thing to do in this situation?

“I’ll seal off her nerve endings so she’s not in so much pain. If she’s having this baby now, then it’s coming no matter what. You,” Mito said to the midwife, “deal with the birth. I’ll see that she lives through it.”

The midwife nodded nervously and positioned herself between Haruka’s legs. Mito executed a few hand seals and pressed her hand over Haruka’s enlarged belly. The network of nerves came to life in her mind’s eye, and she worked to shut them off one by one as Haruka screamed.

“She’s bleeding!” the midwife said.

Mito redirected her chakra to seal off the blood flow. “I have it.”

Haruka wailed and squirmed on her bed. Mito took her hand in hers and let her squeeze. “Haruka, can you hear me? It’s Mito, I’m right here.”

But Haruka couldn’t hear through her screams. The midwife gasped and readied her towels. Mito concentrated on keeping Haruka alive through this painful procedure. Thankfully, it did not last long, but when it was over, things only got worse.

“Oh no,” the midwife said, tearing up. “Lady Haruka, I’m so sorry.”

Madara took the bloodied towel from the midwife and stared down at the thing it held. A small, bloody mass of limbs, still and fragile. His dark eyes were wide and on the verge of trauma. Mito didn’t need to see the result to understand.

“My baby,” Haruka said. “Where is he? Let me see him.”
Mito squeezed her hand, willing herself to remain calm. The midwife, however, did not have her resolve and began to sob.

“Oh, oh. It wasn’t meant to be,” she lamented.

Haruka began to shake. “What? What do you mean? Where is my baby? Give him to me!”

Madara held the twisted, bloody bundle. “Haruka, it’s over.”

She began to breathe faster. “Madara, give him to me. Give him to me now.”

“But Lady Haruka,” the midwife said. “He’s—”

“I said, give him to me!” she shrieked.

Mito tensed, unable to move. Madara’s eyes were downcast, and his hands trembled. But he managed to lower the bundle to Haruka’s waiting arms, which she clutched to her bosom.

“My baby, my little boy,” she whispered, smiling even as her breath hitched.

Madara and Mito stared in morbid silence at the scene unfolding before them. Haruka held her child close even as she shook. Mito couldn’t hold back her tears any longer at the sight. It was so small...

“What’ll I name you? Something strong and beautiful, just like you,” Haruka said. “How about Tajima, after my father? You’d like that, right?”

Mito bit her lip to hold in the sob that wanted to escape. Madara had not moved an inch from his position. Haruka sniffled and dug her fingers into the bloody towel holding her dead child.

“Tajima, my beautiful boy,” she said.

No one said a word as Haruka continued to breathe deeply and audibly. She laughed, shaky and hoarse.

“You know, I can’t do anything right, can I? I can’t see, I can’t fight, and now I can’t even make a proper child. I’m nothing without my eyes.”

Madara put a gentle hand on Haruka’s shoulder. “Haruka—”

“Don’t touch me!” she screamed, recoiling violently from his touch.

Madara retracted his hand as though burned, his dark eyes wide and troubled.

“Don’t you fucking touch me!” She gritted her teeth and clutched the bloody bundle closer to her, crushing it. “I can’t... I can’t even do this right.”

Mito covered her mouth and slumped to her knees, trembling. She had no words, and more than anything she wanted to leave this place, to be gone.

“I can’t even cry for my dead child without eyes,” Haruka said. “I’m... I’m no one.”

Mito couldn’t take it anymore. She rose and ran out of the tent, tears falling behind her. The air outside burned her lungs as she sucked it in and cried. Her fingers tore at her hair, but even that didn’t blot out the pain.
She had to get out. And so, she ran. She ran out of the Uchiha camp towards the Naka River and flung herself into its icy depths, welcoming the freezing numbness. Her red hair billowed all around her, chasing the current, and she wished she could drown instead of live in a world where children died before their time and the man she loved probably would, too. But the instinct to survive pulled her back to the surface, and Mito gasped for air. Her long hair hung damp about her shoulders, weighing her down and drawing her into the tide, but she struggled against it.

“Why?” she asked, eyes burning with her tears while the rest of her was numb with cold. “Why?”

But there was no answer.

Later that night, when she couldn’t sleep and Madara refused to leave his desk and the plans he’d been working on for years, Haruka would ask the same question. Except she wouldn’t live with the silence of no answer. And in the morning, when they found her body, bloodless and cold just like that of her stillborn child, they would have no answer for her, either.
The Curse Between Us, Part I

Izuna commanded his platoon to fire a joint Great Fireball in unison, and they scrambled to obey. He ran down the length of them, thirty in total, with his signature twin tantō drawn.

“Steady!”

Fire-laced chakra popped in the air near his ears as he ran, invisible to the naked eye but so clear to him. The enemy, however, was fast moving for a counterstrike. The Hyūga clan was small but powerful, a distant cousin of the Uchiha and one Madara was keen on using to his advantage. There was much riding on today’s victory.

Izuna reached the end of the line. “Fire!”

The end of his long ponytail barely made it out of the blast range when his soldiers launched thirty enormous fireballs in tandem. The Hyūga forces across the rocky terrain of southern Earth Country were ready, however. They spun in succession and created an incredible wall of chakra thick enough to blur their forms even from Izuna’s gifted eyes. The fireballs lurched through the air and hit the spinning wall with a hiss that started to dissolve them, but the Uchiha channeled more power to their techniques. It wouldn’t be enough despite the effort, and beside him Izuna could see his comrades begin to pale and sweat from chakra exhaustion.

“Keep pushing!” he commanded.

His soldiers did their best to obey, and Izuna himself sheathed his swords. A burst of raw chakra hit his eyes and changed them into their Mangekyo form. The transformation brought with it a familiar lancing pain to his temples. He ignored it and let his chakra flow unrestricted.

“Amaterasu!”

Black tendrils appeared out of thin air and licked at the orange wall of fire the Uchiha were sustaining, slowly at first. They became more ravenous the longer Izuna concentrated, unblinking, until the ghost flames began to consume and grow the Great Fireballs. Shouts from the Hyūga soldiers soon turned to screams of agony and horror. Their general ordered a hasty anabasis in the face of the Uchiha’s ghastly tactics.

The Uchiha whooped at their victory as Izuna covered his burning eye and released the Sharingan. He turned away from them to wipe the bloody tears from his eyes, the only visible evidence of his oncoming migraine.

“We did it!”

“The Hyūga were no match for our fire!”

Nearby, Madara’s platoon was already converging on the stragglers in pursuit of their leader. Izuna picked him out from the crowd easily—his giant gunbai and scythe gave him away.

“Save the celebration for later, men,” Izuna said. “My brother’s still counting on us.”

Never ones to question Izuna’s authority, the team fell back into formation and marched to meet up with the rest of their kin. It didn’t take long to catch up. The rocky outcropping where the Hyūga
brigade had held up against Izuna’s platoon was reduced to magma and char. Amaterasu continued to burn and sink deeper into the lava. It would stay that way for seven days and seven nights regardless of victory or loss, festering with the passage of time like a demon’s grudge. Izuna eyed it as he passed. It smelled like wet ash and burning hair.

“Surrender. You’re beaten,” Madara said.

“The Hyūga will never bow to the Uchiha,” said the Hyūga General. “You’re nothing but a hiccup in our bloodline. An anomaly.”

He was dressed in his best silver armor—the Hyūga were known for their wealth and the desire to flaunt it. He was an older man, patrician and clean-shaven, and like the rest of his kin, he wore his dark hair long and tied at the end. Veins bulged around his eyes, engorged with chakra.

“It usually takes an anomaly to break away from the diseased majority and carve out a path for the future,” Madara said. He gestured with his arms all around. “I rest my case.”

“Arrogant bastard. As if the noble Hyūga would ever follow lowborn filth like you.”

Izuna went white and tried to move in time to stop Madara, but he was too slow. Madara dashed forward and swung his scythe in a cruel arc. It hit the general in the face and carved a line from his temple, through his lips and jaw, and down to his collarbone. Izuna stopped himself, stunned. The general cried out and stumbled backward. He pawed at his ruined face. A chunk of lip lay on the ground covered in blood, and one of his soldiers trampled it to get to him without even noticing. The Uchiha looked on at Madara in silence. His hand shook, and Izuna dared not speak a word. The Hyūga General should have been lying dead for his insult.

_He missed_, Izuna thought.

“Next time I won’t be so lenient,” Madara said loudly enough for the rest of the Uchiha to hear. He pointed the bloody scythe at the rest of the gathered Hyūga. “Now, where’s your leader? As Uchiha, we believe in parley between **equals.**”

The Hyūga soldiers whispered among themselves while their general groaned in pain. They eventually parted, and a tall woman stepped forward. She wore battle armor, but nothing ostentatious. A ploy to throw off the enemy. It was a common defensive tactic among nobles. She was middle-aged but had a comely face, youthful. Izuna was reminded of the noble ladies he used to see as a child walking around the camps and gossiping, back when he was no better than a gnat in their eyes, if they saw him at all.

“That’s enough. Madara Uchiha, your reputation for violence precedes you.” She didn’t bow, not even in greeting. “I am Hikaru Hyūga, first-born daughter of Hio, the third of her name. I am the leader of the great and noble Hyūga clan. You’ve slaughtered many good soldiers today. I hope you’re pleased with yourself.”

“Lady Hikaru, please stand back,” said a Hyūga soldier.

He bore a strange tattoo across his forehead. In fact, most of the soldiers they had fought today bore those same tattoos. But Hikaru and the General didn’t have them.

“So, it’s true that you segregate those you deem beneath you,” Madara said. “It’s no wonder you lost today when you don’t even value your own kin.”

Hikaru ignored the slight. “You must know that I have no intention of taking orders from the likes
of you. Instead, I propose a treaty. My people remain autonomous, and in return we’ll supply you with silver.”

Madara chuckled. “What is it with the rich thinking they can solve all their problems with money? I’m a soldier. The only silver I covet is a sharp blade.”

Hikaru frowned. “Then what do you want? Subservience? We’ll die before we bend the knee to you.”

“I don’t need you to bend anything on my behalf. Nature has its way of crowning kings, and all I have to do is wait. As for you, you can keep your precious jewels. They’re obviously worth more to you than these soldiers you’ve branded. I’ll be glad to take them off your hands.”

Hikaru looked horrified. “Absolutely not. These are my men, sworn to protect the Main House with their lives. If you think I’m just going to auction them off to you—”

“Auction? Are your soldiers no better than chattel to you?” Madara said, his anger palpable. “Very well, then. Consider my bid a promise not to burn you where you stand. Going once, going twice…”

With a choice between death and compliance, in the end Madara got what he wanted. A platoon of nearly thirty Hyūga Branch House soldiers left with the Uchiha that day, and the rest of their kin were allowed to return home on the condition that more soldiers would replace those that would fall in later battles. Madara barked out orders to the Uchiha to integrate the new Hyūga soldiers into the training regimen and get them up to speed on Uchiha battle formations and strategies.

“Brother,” Izuna said as he caught up with Madara later that night once they made camp.

“What do you want, Izuna?”

Izuna hovered at the entrance to his brother’s makeshift tent. They were a few days’ travel away from the main camp in Fire Country where they’d left their civilian and child population under the care of a couple trusted garrisons. Madara was busy looking over some new battle formations he’d been working on and hadn’t wanted to leave behind at the main camp. He held them close to his face under candlelight and didn’t bother looking up.

“The soldiers fought well today,” Izuna said. “The Hyūga were strong.”

“Not strong enough.”

They both wore their usual navy yukata with the Uchiha fan emblazoned on the back. Madara’s gunbai and the scythe he’d used to rip open the Hyūga General’s face sat perched against the tent’s far wall, cleaned and polished.

“What I mean is, they deserve a reward for all their hard work.” Izuna paused, but Madara said nothing. “…Lately, we’ve been fighting non-stop. The Senju are one thing, but it seems like for every battle we fight with them, we wage two or three more against other clans.”

Madara put down the scroll he was reading and finally looked up. “Do you have a problem with the way I’m commanding my soldiers?”

“No, I just meant—”

“Then what’s the point of this conversation?”
Madara’s eyes were red with the Sharingan, and Izuna frowned. “Were you reading that with the Sharingan activated?”

Madara rose from his chair, and his eyes faded back to black. “Did you come here to waste my time, or did you have something useful to say?”

Izuna tried to keep his face calm. This wasn’t Madara leader of the Uchiha, but Madara his big brother. The only person he trusted implicitly. There was nothing to fear from being frank with him. “I came here to tell you that the soldiers need a break. You’ve been driving them hard with all the back-to-back campaigns, and they’re exhausted. I think now that we’ve got the Hyūga on our side, it’d be a good time to show them a side of us that isn’t killing their clansmen.”

“They’re resting now.”

Izuna shook his head. “I mean a real break. Let our soldiers go home to their families, be with loved ones. Live their lives a little.”

“I don’t dictate the tides of war, Izuna; I’m just navigating them to our advantage. You know as well as I do that lassitude is the surest path of defeat. The Senju—”

“—aren’t here right now. They haven’t pursued us in months, not since we ambushed them during one of their jobs for Lord Kenshin.” Izuna stepped forward and put a hand on Madara’s shoulder. “Brother, please. I understand your situation. But ever since Haruka and your son...” He trailed off, even after so many weeks unwilling to pursue that particular subject. “For some time now, you’ve been digging us into a dark hole, and I’m afraid none of us will make it out at this rate.”

Madara pushed Izuna’s hand away. He showed him his back and crossed his arms. “Don’t bring them into this. I’m just doing what’s best for the Uchiha.”

“No, you’re drowning out the pain and forcing the Uchiha to shoulder it in your place. You’ve changed, Madara.”

Madara spun around. The Sharingan blazed bright once more, and Izuna had to fight the urge to step back. “Are you accusing me of something? By all means, let’s hear it. Today’s fight wasn’t quite enough to get me going, anyway.”

Izuna activated the Sharingan on instinct, smelling the fighting spirit Madara exuded, but he put his hands up in surrender. “I don’t want to fight you. Our mother would be turning in her grave to see you even suggest it.”

At the mention of their mother, Madara scowled and receded back into himself. The red faded from his eyes, and after a protracted silence, he just stared at Izuna with a combination of bewilderment and regret. “Forgive me, Brother. I didn’t mean it like that.”

Izuna deactivated the Sharingan and dared to approach his fearsome leader again. He rested his hands on Madara’s shoulders and held his gaze, searching. “I don’t want to fight you. Our mother would be turning in her grave to see you even suggest it.”

At the mention of their mother, Madara scowled and receded back into himself. The red faded from his eyes, and after a protracted silence, he just stared at Izuna with a combination of bewilderment and regret. “Forgive me, Brother. I didn’t mean it like that.”

Izuna deactivated the Sharingan and dared to approach his fearsome leader again. He rested his hands on Madara’s shoulders and held his gaze, searching. “You don’t have to say anything. I understand, believe me. You can’t let it go, and I get it. But this isn’t you. We talked about reinventing this clan, but all we’re doing is driving it to an early grave.” He paused and thought about how Madara had viciously lashed out at the Hyūga General earlier. “Sometimes it’s like I don’t even recognize you anymore.”

Madara put his hands over Izuna’s wrists and breathed deeply. “You’re right. I can’t let it go. And I shouldn’t have to. Not until I make sure nothing like that ever happens again. You get that, don’t you? I can’t stop, not now.”
Izuna sighed. “And I can’t stop you. Just...be careful. Put those scrolls away and rest. Mourn, and let our soldiers do the same.”

“I’ve been mourning. I never want to mourn again.”

Izuna just nodded. “I know.”

They stood in silence a moment, and Izuna remembered all the times as kids when Madara would just sit with him at night after he had a bad dream. Silent, but always present. Madara had always been the stronger of the two of them. Seeing him like this was something Izuna was sure he would never get used to.

“By the way, I thought I should tell you,” Izuna said, wanting to change the subject. “I met someone.”

Madara frowned. “We know everyone in the clan. Who could you possibly have met?”

Izuna grinned. “No, I mean a girl. Well, a woman. A noble woman, actually.”

“Is she pregnant?”

Izuna paled. “W-What? No! Of course not. Why would you even ask that?”

Madara shrugged like it was obvious. “I don’t know why else you would tell me about your conquests.”

*Maybe he hasn’t changed much, after all.*

Izuna ran his fingers through his long bangs and began to pace. “I don’t even have conquests, or whatever. And anyway, Kasumi’s different.”

“General Yurima’s daughter? Does he know about this?”

“Well, it’s...kind of private.”

“You can’t sleep with a general’s daughter and hope to get away with it. If he finds out, he’ll want you punished, and I won’t be able to deny—”

“I love her, okay?” Izuna blurted out.

Silence ensued, and Izuna turned beet red as he realized what he’d just admitted. He sank to the floor and buried his face in his hands. “Oh, shit,” he groaned.

“Huh,” Madara said at length.

“Huh? That’s all you have to say?!”

“I just didn’t think you could work so fast. Perhaps there’s hope for you yet.”

Izuna gaped. “What does *that* mean?”

“You’re trying to ask for my blessing to marry her. Aren’t you?”

Izuna could have cried. “*No!* God, it’s like you’re not even listening!”

“Then why’re you even telling me this?”
“Because you’re my brother! And I just, you know, I thought you’d wanna know. I thought you’d be happy for me.”

Madara’s expression softened, and he sank to the floor to sit next to Izuna. He had the decency to look abashed. “Oh. Well, of course I’m happy for you. I didn’t think that was ever a question.”

Izuna nudged him with his shoulder, and Madara nudged him back. “I mean, yeah, I want your blessing to marry her. But we’ve been so busy with these campaigns, and I haven’t even gotten around to asking General Yurima. I’m just sick of keeping this all to myself. And on top of it, I haven’t even seen her in weeks.”

Kasumi, like all the noble ladies, remained at the main camp in Fire Country whenever the soldiers left for their campaigns, which could take upwards of months depending on the mission.

“Oh, I get it now,” Madara said. “You wanted a break so you could see Kasumi soon.”

Izuna blushed again. “I mean, that’s not really the reason, but it’s a nice benefit.”

Madara smirked. “Fine. Go home to your woman. And ask General Yurima for her hand before I have to do it for you.”

“What about the soldiers?”

Madara considered this. “Take a platoon. You can return after a month and switch with the other platoon.”

“Switch? You mean, you’re staying?”

“The Kamizuru clan is marching through Earth Country to the south. I’m going to stop them.”

“Madara, we just talked about this. Everyone needs a rest sometime.”

“War doesn’t sleep. Neither can I.”

Izuna rose. Madara had made up his mind, and there would be no changing it now. “Fine, but after you should come home and rest. It’s only a matter of time before you or the soldiers get sloppy and make a mistake out there. Even you need sleep.”

“Yes, yes. Now go and let me figure out how I’ll eradicate these vermin. Did you know they use bees to fight? Bizarre.”

Izuna chuckled. “Sounds weird. I’ll be sure to tell Kasumi about it when I see her.”

“Good. Perhaps once you’ve married her, we’ll finally be able to produce an heir to help us out in the future.”

Izuna’s breath caught in his throat, but Madara had already turned away and gone back to his plans. He wasn’t even looking at Izuna.

“Tajima,” Madara had confided to Izuna just hours after Haruka’s suicide. “That’s the name she chose for our son.”

Izuna pulled back the tent flap gingerly, like he was afraid to make too much noise. “Goodnight, Brother.”

He left, and Madara was so absorbed in his plans and tactics that he did not see him go.
It had been a little over seven months since she’d last seen him. Seven months since the tragedy that had shaken her to the core, and it hadn’t even been her tragedy. She would never forget the way Haruka shut down as she cooed to the baby that had never taken a breath of life, and never would. Like waking from a dream, only to find out reality was the true nightmare. Even the rushing waters of the Naka River hadn’t been loud enough to drown out Haruka’s wails.

Mito had returned to the Uchiha camp that evening still soaking wet from her ablutions. Madara wasn’t there, and she didn’t look for him. All night she waited, and he never returned to the tent. It wasn’t until the next morning that Izuna woke her before dawn and told her that Haruka committed suicide earlier that morning.

She’d found him in Haruka’s tent after the body had already been cleared away. The sheets were rumpled and stained with blood from where she’d stabbed herself in the gut. In the end, she chose the honorable warrior’s death. Disgraced in life, perhaps in death she could find some chance of redemption.

“Madara,” Mito had called to him.

He didn’t answer, so she approached and touched a hand to his shoulder. When he shied away, Mito didn’t press him.

“I’m so sorry.”

Still nothing. All he could do was stare at the bloody sheets, unmoving, unblinking. Mito wanted nothing more than to hold him, tell him it would be okay even though it wasn’t. Maybe he’d believe it if she said it. His hands were bloody, dried with the stuff. Mito blinked to hide her tears and turned away, but he heard her moving and faced her.

Those eyes she’d found so captivating were empty and cold now. There was no sadness there, or even anger. There was just nothing, and he was looking right at her.

“You should leave,” he’d said.

Mito had never been afraid of Madara, not even when they’d first met on the beach as strangers so many years ago. All he ever needed was patience and sometimes a strong spine to stand up to him when no one else would. But this was something unknown, something so foreign coming from him. He looked at her like she was an outsider, a nameless face that didn’t belong here with him. The enemy.

She’d left that day without another word, rationalizing that this was a horrific family tragedy and she didn’t have a right to intrude. But the memory of that look in his eyes kept her away even long after. They hadn’t gone so long without seeing each other since she was occupied with her solo training in the Shikkotsu Forest.

And now, she was running to meet him in Earth Country with a small garrison of Uzumaki shinobi to deliver an invitation for peace talks with the Senju clan. Hashirama had considered just sending a bird, but Mito insisted on delivering it in person so Madara wouldn’t be able to ignore it. And it was a good excuse to finally see him after so much time apart.

“Lady Mito, we’re coming up on the Uchiha camp. Five miles out,” said Mako Uzumaki.

He was the young general Ensui had sent to lead the Uzumaki garrison that would accompany the
Senju clan. Like most Uzumaki, his hair was blood red and he wore it in a high bun. He was a tall, strapping man with a square jaw and bright, blue eyes clearer than the sky. While a bright and capable military leader and sensor shinobi, he was all business all the time. Mito was sure she’d never heard him laugh, not even once.

“Good. Let’s go ahead and announce ourselves,” Mito said. “Madara doesn’t like surprises, and we don’t want to deal with any miscommunications.”

Mako prepared a bird to deliver the message, and the rest of the group slowed their pace as they approached the Uchiha camp. Earth Country was a desolate place, and since it was farther north, its climate was harsher than Fire Country’s. Mountains reached for the sky to the north, and between here and there wide crags in the rock dove down hundreds of feet to subterranean rivers and gorges. Hardy plants brave enough to withstand the unforgiving climate grew from every crevice and cranny Mito could spy. There was no other discernible life. Such a harsh, lonely place.

It took them another half hour to reach the Uchiha camp, and since no scouts tried to attack them, Mito figured Madara was at least in a good mood. There was no telling how he would react to her after so long. Their parting had haunted her many a sleepless night, and not a day passed that she didn’t think of him. The scroll that contained his first Amaterasu was strapped to her lower back, as usual. She placed the back of a hand over it to feel its warmth through her glove.

The Uchiha camp was makeshift and temporary as they marched north on whatever mission they were on. As the Uzumaki garrison walked through the camp, they received passing stares and whispers, but Mito was long used to that kind of reception. Even their coloring was all wrong next to the Uchiha. As they wandered deeper, they began to pass some of the soldiers Madara had recruited from conquered shinobi clans. They trained alongside the Uchiha and paid Mito’s group no mind. But she was surprised to see Hyūga shinobi among them. The Hyūga were a proud and powerful clan possessed of the formidable Byakugan doujutsu. If they were here now, had Madara defeated them in battle? Mito averted her eyes and swallowed.

“Well, well, look who’s a sore sight for my eyes.”

Mito stopped her group and resisted the urge to roll her eyes. “Hikaku, I see you’re still alive and well. And it’s ‘sight for sore eyes’. I’m sure that was an innocent mistake.”

“Right, my bad,” he sang. He fell into step beside Mito. “So, it’s been a while. I see you brought the party this time. Should I be worried?”

“Not at all. I’m here to deliver a message, nothing more.”

Hikaku grinned wolfishly. “Nothing more? What’s it been, like, six or seven months? I guess I don’t blame you for getting spooked after everything.”

Mito stopped the whole group abruptly. Her expression was as stony and unforgiving as the environment. “Whatever you might think, I’m not afraid of Madara. I never have been. Now, if you’ll please show us to him, we can finish our business and be on our way.”

Hikaku narrowed his eyes, but she didn’t back down. Mako and the other Uzumaki shinobi behind Mito waited patiently, but their weapons were very visible in their scabbards. Hikaku shrugged.

“Sure, he’s this way.”

Madara’s tent was near the back of the camp. It was evening, but the sun had not yet set. Even so, Mito could detect the faint glow of candlelight emanating from between the tent flaps. Hikaku
stood by the entrance and crossed his arms. Apparently, he was sticking around.

“Mako,” Mito said. “Please wait here. I’ll speak with Madara alone.”

“Are you sure?”

She nodded. “Positive. I’ll let you know if I require your assistance.”

Mako reluctantly nodded, and his soldiers positioned themselves outside the tent to wait for her.

Mito entered the tent to find Madara standing with his back to her. He had a board set up to which he’d pinned bits of paper—drawings, mostly—and he was studying them intently. A lantern hung from the side of the board to offer light. He didn’t turn.

“Madara,” she said softly. “It’s been a long time.”

Silence hung in the air between them. Mito hesitated in approaching.

“Six months, twenty-four days, and...about eight hours,” he said at length.

Mito’s throat clenched at the sound of his voice, the same after so long, just like she remembered. She took a step forward, and he finally faced her. At the sight of him, she stopped dead in her tracks. The stress lines under his eyes had deepened, and his hair seemed longer. He looked older than he had the last time, older than he should have.

“But who’s counting?” he added.

Every muscle in her body ached to go to him, to embrace him, but something held her back. The last time they’d been this close, he’d looked at her like she was dead to him.

“You look weary,” she said. “I hear you’ve been very busy with all the campaigns.”

“You sound like Izuna. He tells me I should take a break.”

At the mention of Izuna, Mito smiled a little. “Well, I agree with him. Where is he?”

“Home with his woman, apparently. I gave him the month.”

Mito’s smile grew despite the chilly air between them. “Oh, I didn’t know he found someone. I’m really happy to hear it.”

Madara didn’t respond to that, and Mito’s smile began to fade. When it didn’t look like he would say anything further, she cleared her throat and unlatched a scroll from a strap around her thigh.

“I’m here to deliver this. It’s a rough draft of the peace proposal Hashirama and I drew up for you. Things have been a bit hectic over the last few months, so this is coming to you later than I’d anticipated. But, well, here it is.” She set it on the table to the right and unfolded it.

Madara watched her move, but he didn’t follow. Mito smoothed out the edges of the scroll she’d written up herself. “I’m sure you’ll want to review everything before the meeting. After all, the best deals end with both sides leaving a little disappointed.” She shook her head. “I tried explaining that to Hashirama, he didn’t really get it.”

Madara still hadn’t said anything or made any move to approach, and the silence was grating on her nerves. Mito rose and chanced a look at him, but his gaze was hidden by his long bangs.

“Madara?”
“Why didn’t you come back?”

Mito’s hands began to sweat, so she wiped them on the linen in between the joints of her armor. “You told me to leave.”

He let out a sharp breath and looked up at her. The anger in his dark eyes made her gasp. “I didn’t mean for half a year.”

Mito swallowed hard and slowly approached him, as though he were some exotic beast pacing his cage. “You were pretty clear that I didn’t belong there...with you.”

“Think about the circumstances. You know what I meant.”

Tentative, Mito laid a hand on his cheek. He set his jaw, but he didn’t pull away. “I do know. But I don’t think you did.”

“So it’s my fault.”

Mito let her hand fall to the back of his neck and squeezed lightly. “It’s no one’s fault. No one could have predicted what happened.”

He snaked a hand around her neck. Her long ponytail bumped his knuckles. “Then why did you leave me until now?” He searched her eyes. “Was it the Senju? Did Hashirama say something to keep you away?”

Surprised and a little upset that he would say such a thing, Mito pulled away. “Hashirama has nothing to do with it.”

“There was me. I frightened you away.”

“No,” she said quickly. “I’ve never been afraid of you, Madara, and I’m not about to start today.” Mito showed him her back to try to calm down before she said something she might regret. “I just wanted to give you time.”

She couldn’t tell him the real reason. Telling him would make it real and give it power.

His hands on her arms were warm, long fingers and pressure, and his breath was warm against the shell of her ear as he whispered, “Don’t ever do it again.”

Mito closed her eyes and let herself sink into him, into the memory of the boy she’d met on a lonely beach so many years ago. He was still here, still warm and hers. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close, and she let him. His lips were dry but soft against the bare skin of her neck and jawline. She leaned into him, wanting to fall, but the reminder of her business here stopped her.

“Madara, the peace talk.”

His hands searched for soft skin under her folds of her gi. “Stop, don’t ruin it.”

Reluctantly, she wrested free of his wandering touch. “My men are outside waiting for me. I need your agreement to meet with Hashirama on the specified date so we can make this talk happen.”

He paused and eyed the scroll Mito had spread out on his desk. The handwriting was a looping calligraphy, clearly hers. “How much of that was your input?”

“Does it matter? It’s coming from the Senju.”
“The fact that our feud’s been going on for a thousand years should give you an idea of the Senju’s negotiating skills.”

Despite herself, Mito bit back a smirk. The earlier chilly atmosphere was all but gone, and she felt more like herself around him now, like no time had passed. Feeling a bit mischievous, she grabbed his collar and yanked him down to her eye level.

“I assure you, I’m very good at getting what I want.”

“Oh, you think so?” There was a glint of mischief in his dark eyes, too.

“Oh-huh,” she whispered against his lips.

“Then you’ll recall that to get what you want, you have to leave a deal a little disappointed.”

“What are you trying to say?”

He seemed reluctant to put a stop to her flirting. “I’m scheduled to push back the Kamizuru clan tomorrow. I’ll deal with them, then we’ll discuss this peace talk you’re so excited about.”

She hung her head and beat a fist against his chest. “Madara, come on. I just need your written approval to meet. I’m not even asking for you to agree to the terms right now.”

He lifted her chin, and she shivered at the sight of the Sharingan staring back at her. “I’m good at getting what I want, too.”

Mito’s fingers fisted in his shirt at the sight of him like this, so close, and she swallowed. “Fine. But you have to promise to sign it when you’re finished so I can get it back to Hashirama. Deal?”

He smirked. “You have to stay until I sign it, right?”

“Hey, none of that, now. I’m supposed to be back in Fire Country next week, so I don’t have a lot of time. You’re going to sign this damn thing, and that’s final. Got it?”

“Hey Madara, Gendoru’s asking for you over at the training grounds. Something about the Hyūga,” Hikaku called through the tent flap.

“On my way,” Madara called back.

He still had that damnable smirk that had always worn her down after a while. But he was needed elsewhere, so Mito made to leave him to his business. He caught her by the elbow and pulled her back in for a kiss that robbed her of all thought and feeling. He pinned her at the waist and dug fingers into the back of her neck. Mito tried to stifle a moan to no avail—god, but she’d missed him—and he kissed her harder.

As soon as it had begun, it was over. Madara pushed past her toward the exit. “Stay a while.”

He was gone before she could answer him, and Mako entered the tent to find her just standing there, prettily flushed.

“Lady Mito, were you successful?” he asked.

Mito snapped out of it and smoothed her bangs behind her ear. “Um, yes, I think so.”

He’s the same man.
She didn’t bother to hide her smile at the thought even though Mako gave her a questioning look. Mito gathered up the scroll she’d brought and headed outside. The stars were peeking through the dark sky, thousands of them.

He’s the same.

Her fears had been for nothing, after all. Everything would be okay.

Mito woke the next morning to the sound of Madara setting up his armor. She yawned and squinted to see better. It wasn’t yet dawn, and only an oil lamp burned in the darkness to guide him. She stretched in bed among the animal furs that padded the wooden frame and shivered a little as the cold, morning air hit her naked skin.

“You’re up early,” she said.

“People need killing.”

Mito frowned and rolled over. “Why’re you attacking the Kamizuru clan, anyway?”

“They’re headed south for the Fire Country. I don’t want them there.”

“Shinobi of all clans are welcome in the Fire Country as long as they pay Lord Kenshin’s tithe.”

Madara snapped the buckle for his arm guard in place with a loud click. “Not these shinobi.”

Mito slipped out of bed draped in fur and walked to his side.

“I want to go with you,” she said.

Madara stopped what he was doing. “You never fight with us.”

“I didn’t say I wanted to fight, I said I wanted to go. To observe. Izuna isn’t here, right? Who’s going to make sure you don’t get yourself killed out there?”

Madara let his gloved hands roam over the fur covering her and pushed it back to get to the soft skin underneath.

“What happened to your faith in me?” he asked.

Mito smirked and caught his hands. “Careful, your arrogance is showing.”

“Good.”

He pushed her back to the bed with his weight and caught her by the thighs. She fell flush against him and gasped at the biting chill of his armor against her bare flesh. Practiced hands found the buckles he’d worked diligently to secure and released them. Pieces of armor clattered to the floor at their feet, followed shortly after by the fur blanket Mito had wrapped herself in. They sank back into bed together and pulled at each other. Clothes, hair, until it was hard to breathe and impossible to forget. His hands were as warm as the humming scroll she always kept with her, almost too warm, and their heat was welcome on this chilly morning.

She held him there as they rested and waited for the high to settle. He played with her hair, and she traced circles on his chest.
“I wasn’t joking before,” he said. “Don’t leave again.”

Mito smiled. “I can’t leave until you sign that meeting agreement so I know you’ll take it seriously.”

“No, I mean, don’t leave at all.”

Mito sat up so she could look him in the eye. “What’re you saying?”

“Stay with me.”

“Madara...”

“I should’ve offered the Uzumaki an alliance back then, but I didn’t. That was my mistake, and I’m not going to make it again. So stay with me.”

She searched his face for the lie, but there was none. He was really serious... “I don’t know what to say. Are you sure you’re feeling okay to fight today?”

He chuckled and sat up in a sitting position. “I feel fine. Better than I have in a long time.” He glanced at her over his shoulder. “Mito, I need you. So stay with me...please.”

Tears stung her eyes as the weight of his request finally hit her. This was not a dream, and he was really asking. She had always known Madara wouldn’t last forever, not with the clan politics that divided them. But forever was a long time off, and she’d told herself she would worry about it later. Now, with what he was suggesting, forever would no longer matter.

“Madara...”

A horn blew outside, the call to battle. Madara rose from bed and began to collect his armor. “We can finish talking about it later. But think about it. I know there’s a lot of red tape, but none of that matters.”

Mito sat up in bed and rubbed her temples. “You caught me off guard.”

He threw her the linen she’d been wearing the other day to get dressed. “You still want to come, right? We have to go now.”

Mito nodded and dressed mechanically. Even when they were outside and she met up with Mako and the other Uzumaki, she was still reeling from Madara’s whispered entreaty.

“You look pale,” Mako said. “Everything all right?”

Mito snapped out of her thoughts. “Oh, yeah, sorry. Let’s get going.”

“We should stay back behind the infantry line. I don’t want to be in range of those bees.”

“Yes, of course. We’re just here to observe.”

The Uzumaki marched out of camp with the Uchiha, but they hung back at the edges of the platoon. Mito noticed that the Hyūga shinobi were also present and marching alongside the Uchiha. The Kamizuru clan appeared about ten miles to the north as they marched south, and by the time the two opposing groups stood across a chasm from each other, the sun was high in the sky. Mito waited for the parley and exchange of terms, but it never came.

As soon as the Kamizuru appeared, the battle began. Douton users summoned makeshift bridges
from the natural rock environment to close the chasm, and the Uchiha soldiers ran across them to meet the enemy. Fire techniques soon heated the air, and the buzzing of bees made it impossible to hear anything going on in the battle itself.

“This is madness,” Mako said. “They just charged in without exchanging terms or demands!”

Mito watched in shock at the bloodshed unraveling before her. Hyūga shinobi spun amidst incredible whirlwinds of chakra, blasting anything that came too close. The Uchiha employed various elemental attacks that devastated the landscape, while the Kamizuru shinobi relied on their bees. Several of the Kamizuru worked together to combine their hives and summon a giant wave of honey that pinned a few of the Uchiha to the ground and left them vulnerable to a mass stinging attack. They began to scream for help as the killer bees descended.

“Oh my god,” Mito said as she caught sight of Madara.

He ran into the thick of battle with the gunbai and scythe she’d given him the last time she’d visited. He used the gunbai to summon a sharp gale and cut through both the honey wave and the bees too slow to fly away, saving his kin. Several Uchiha tailed him and launched fire techniques, but Madara was more concerned with the Kamizuru clan that had nearly murdered his soldiers. He faced them across the chasm and let loose Amaterasu. The black flames latched onto anything they could find—the bees, the dead, the hardening honey, and the fleeing Kamizuru shinobi themselves. Unlike the first few times Mito had seen him use it, now Madara’s technique was ruthless and controlled as it zigzagged around the landscape and aimed for the enemy shinobi en masse even as they attempted escape.

“This is not war,” Mako said, disgusted, “it’s a slaughter.”

It was over in less than an hour.

The few survivors of the Kamizuru clan that had managed to escape the devil’s fire retreated back up north and left their dead to burn under orange and black flames. There were no prisoners, only corpses and utter devastation.

“Lady Mito, are you okay?”

Mito sank to one knee and squeezed her eyes shut to battle the nausea threatening to manifest in more physical forms. In her mind, she saw Madara with that half grin that could persuade her into anything. She felt his fingers in her hair, heard the sound of his voice as he confessed his weakness and insecurity to her under the cover of night, so earnest and full of all the doubts that plague young people with dreams.

“Stay with me.”

She nearly choked on a whiff of Amaterasu burning through flesh and bone and blood.

“Lady Mito!” Mako kneeled down next to her and helped her stand.

The Uchiha were regrouping with Madara at the helm. It looked like they were preparing to chase down any stragglers that hadn’t retreated fast enough with the rest of the Kamizuru. Mito wiped a clammy hand across her mouth and forced herself to swallow down the bile that had nearly escaped her earlier.

“Yes, General. I’m okay now.” Hard, green eyes followed Madara’s form as he directed his soldiers. “Come on, we’re going back to the camp. I think we’ve seen more than enough,” she said.
Mito waited in Madara’s tent for him to return from the battle. Night had already fallen, but there was no moon tonight, only stars. Voices drifted through the camp as the Uchiha soldiers finally trickled back after the day’s fighting. She had kept her armor on and pulled her hair back in a bun, and she paced in his tent now, silent. The peace talk proposal sat unrolled on the desk nearby.

Madara returned soon enough. There was dried blood on his armor and faint smears of soot on his cheeks. At the sight of her, he set down his gunbai and scythe.

“Princess,” he said.

“You’re back.” She ceased her pacing and faced him.

He quirked an eyebrow. “I am. You left before the battle was finished.”

Mito averted her gaze. “I’d seen enough.”

He walked around her and started removing his armor. It fell to the floor with a loud clink, piece by piece. Underneath, the Uchiha emblem was embroidered ostentatiously on the back of his gi.

“Did you think about my offer?” he asked.

“What was that today, Madara?”

He frowned at her changing the subject. “The battle?”

“That was no battle, it was senseless killing.”

His expression fell, wiped clean of any emotion as he sized her up. “Violence is the only language most shinobi understand.”

“But you didn’t even try to compromise with them. You just went in and started killing anyone in sight without warning. What was that?”

“Is there something you want to say to me? Because last time I checked, I’m the leader of the Uchiha, not you.”

Mito glared up at him, unafraid. “You murdered those shinobi in cold blood for no reason at all. And from where I was standing, it looked like you enjoyed it.”

Madara narrowed his eyes. “I fight to protect the Uchiha, like any good leader should. My intel told me that the Kamizuru were headed for Fire Country, and I couldn’t let them threaten my kin stationed there.”

Mito recoiled. “So it’s a crime now to move south? How do you even know they were after the Uchiha?”

“It doesn’t matter. They’re no longer a threat.”

“Listen to yourself. You can’t just attack people for no reason!”

Madara grabbed her arm. “I’m the leader of the most powerful shinobi clan on the continent. And if I don’t protect them, then no one else will. I have to be strong or our enemies will hunt us down and tear us apart. I know you’ve gotten comfortable with the Senju, but don’t you dare make light of my situation.”
Mito yanked away from his grip and put a hand on his chest to keep him from coming any closer. “Don’t drag the Senju into this, they had nothing to do with today. That was all you. What the hell is happening to you, Madara?”

He sneered. “I should ask you the same thing. You were born with everything. I didn’t even have a name, and now look how far I’ve come. I thought you understood that.”

Mito softened a little. “I do understand that. I always had faith in you and your dream. I still do.”

“Apparently, you don’t.” His teeth were bared as he receded into himself. “I lost my parents, my wife, even my son. All my family save for Izuna, gone. I’m not about to lose anyone else. The Uchiha come first—before me, before you, and before the Senju.”

“I’m not saying they shouldn’t, but your name doesn’t dictate your choices—you do.”

“My name is all I am!”

Silence befell them, deafening in the aftermath of their shouting match. Madara’s eyes bled to red, and Mito’s hands began to shake, ready to defend. He closed his eyes and let out a bitter laugh.

“I was ready to share my name with you, but I can see your answer all over your face.”

Her heart wrenched. “Madara...”

“Hear me now, Mito. From now on, as long as you ally with Hashirama, you’re no friend to the Uchiha.”

Mito began to tremble with anger. “How can you even say that? I came here to propose peace talks. It’s all Hashirama’s ever wanted. It’s all I’ve ever wanted. Why do you think I refused to participate in your feud? All I want is for this to end so we can be together!”

He grabbed the scroll from the desk and crushed it in his hands. “You think this piece of paper can fix everything? There are a thousand years of bad blood between us, and you’re right in the middle of it. Don’t even pretend you’re not involved.”

Tears stung at Mito’s eyes. “I didn’t want to think you’d changed, but you have. And something tells me you’ll only get worse.”

“Changed? The only thing that’s changed is my focus. I’m taking the Uchiha to new heights. And one day, there’ll be no more reason for anyone to die.”

Mito shook her head and turned for the exit. There was no talking to him now, and she had the urge to put as much distance between them as possible.

“Go ahead, leave. You’ve had plenty of practice,” he said cruelly.

Mito bit back a sob and cast him a look over her shoulder. “You’re not the man I love. I don’t even know who you are anymore.”

She stormed out without looking back and searched for the rest of the Uzumaki. They would depart tonight, the sooner the better.

She didn’t notice the way Madara’s face fell at her confession, or the trembling hand that reached for her before he could stop it. She was already long gone.
Tōka led her four-man team east across the Fire Country. They had just completed a short retrieval mission for Lord Kenshin, and they were due to meet him at his main fortress in the northeast by the shore. The scroll her team had been tasked to retrieve fit snugly at her hip, and they’d encountered little resistance during the mission. All in all, it was shaping up to be a good day. The sun was even out, and somehow the barren landscape didn’t seem so drab today.

The Uchiha camp was somewhere in this vicinity, but the main force was away on a campaign in Earth Country, where Mito was currently hunting them down to propose peace talks on behalf of the Senju. Even so, Tōka made sure to give the camp as wide a berth as possible. No sense in stirring up trouble when she was outnumbered.

“Man, I can’t wait to get home,” a Senju kunoichi said as they ran along. “I feel like we’ve been gone for ages!”

The young shinobi running beside her grinned. “It’s only been, like, five days, Kino. You miss it that much?”

“Five days is five days too long to be without family, Akito. So what if I miss them?”

The fourth member of Tōka’s team, Hisao, remained silent as she brought up the rear. The three of them were cousins and different as night and day, but they worked best together. Their specialty was stealth and reconnaissance, so they had been an easy choice for this particular mission despite their extreme youth. Hisao, the eldest, was only sixteen.

“We’ll be home soon enough,” Tōka reassured her young team. “Just as soon as we deliver the package to Lord Kenshin and collect our fee.”

“As long as we’re there before Sasuke’s wedding, I’m cool with it,” Akito said. “It’s gonna be a great, big party!”

“Oh, yeah!” Kino said. “I forgot that was happening.”

“We’ve known about the wedding for a couple weeks now,” Hisao said. “Why would you forget?”

Akito sighed dramatically. “I know, right?”

“Hey, don’t gang up on me!”

Tōka smiled at their excitement. She had always enjoyed working with children and young people. After spending most of her time with Tobirama, it was often nice to interact with people who didn’t see the worst in everything, even if it was sometimes an unrealistic view of the world.

“Sasuke and Lena’s wedding will be a night for everyone to have a little fun,” Tōka said. “All the more reason for us to hurry up and deliver our mission objective, right?”

“Hell yeah!” Akito said.

Tōka laughed and they pressed forward. They passed the occasional weathered tree, the only sources of shade spread out over miles of otherwise desiccated, hilly land. Few animals were out and about, but Tōka could feel their life forces if she concentrated. A lizard in a nearby hole underground, a brown mother bird sheltering eggs in a twisted tree. There was life here, but only the strong could survive the desolation left over after Indra’s fabled Amaterasu razed this land to the ground a millennium ago. Fire Country was aptly named.
The problem with concentrating on the small signs of wildlife was that she missed the signs of bigger life. Dangerous life. Kino gasped and hit the ground with a thud. By the time Tōka realized what had happened, Kino was already dead. A thick kunai was embedded in the base of her skull.

“Kino!” Akito wailed.

No time to mourn, Tōka ran in front of Akito and Hisao and began channeling chakra. A genjutsu slithered from her fingertips and wove around the many hills that dotted the land like pock marks. It didn’t have far to go before it hit its target—three shinobi. They weren’t alone.

“Hisao, there are two more at our nine o’clock. Take them out fast,” Tōka commanded.

Hisao hesitated as she looked between Kino and a distraught Akito, shaking with the trauma of what they’d both just witnessed.

“Hisao!” Tōka said more forcefully.

“R-Right, I’m going.” She sprinted away and powered up an Earth style technique as she went.

“Akito, I need you to focus,” Tōka said, hating her harsh tone. “Kino’s dead. Leave her.”

Akito sniffled and forced himself to look away from Kino’s bleeding corpse. “Bastards. I’ll kill whoever did this!”

Tōka narrowed her eyes as her senses extended further. Something hot and searing burned at the edges. A fire technique.

“Uchiha,” she spat.

Akito flew through a round of hand seals. “Scum. They’re dead!”

“Akito, wait!”

But he was already running. The earth rumbled beneath his feet and rose to do his bidding. Over the nearest hill, two Uchiha soldiers appeared and began launching fire-based attacks, which Akito blocked with a wall of earth.

“Damnit,” Tōka swore. She ran after him and powered up another genjutsu.

How did they find us?

The illusion hit the two attackers like a ton of bricks and sent them crumbling to their knees. Akito then bludgeoned them with a sentient rock under his command.

“Senju trash! Die!”

Tōka had nearly reached Akito’s side when out of nowhere, a powerful gust of wind cut through the air and hit him in the side. It cleaved him in half like a knife through butter. Tōka stumbled, eyes wide with shock and horror as she watched pieces of Akito fall to the ground in a bloody pile. He hadn’t even had time to scream.

“Ahhh!”

Hisao’s cry spurred Tōka into action. The girl had taken a sword to the gut and fell to her knees, while an Uchiha shinobi towered over her ready to deliver the final blow. Tōka let out a battle cry and slammed a hand forward. Her chakra hit him so hard that he stumbled, and the illusion had
him clawing at his face. He dropped his sword and fell to the ground. Chunks of skin and tissue sluiced off his face under his fingernails as they dug deeper, painting him in ribbons of red.

“Hisao!” Tōka shouted.

The girl managed to draw the knife out of her middle and cried out again as she sank to the ground. Tōka reached her side and helped her up, but she was losing a lot of blood.

“Just go,” she wheezed. “There’s more of them!”

Tōka bit her lip and drew blood. Hisao was not wrong. More Uchiha were closing in from the north. Tōka and her team must have passed by a scouting brigade and not even realized it. Tobirama would have skinned her alive if he could see her carelessness now.

“I don’t have a choice,” she hissed as the reinforcements arrived from over the hills.

It was untested and untried, just a concept she’d dreamed up in a particularly bad nightmare and tinkered with in her spare time, as she did with all her nightmares. So simple, but the most frightening things always were. And if she could pull it off now, she might escape with her life and Hisao’s. She brought her hands together, palms flat, and summoned as much chakra as she could for one, wide burst. The Uchiha were fifty feet away and fast closing.

At the height of her chakra output, Tōka closed her eyes and the world went dark—for her, and for the encroaching enemies. The sun was gone, plunged into perpetual night. Their shouts of confusion and fear confirmed her technique’s success, and when she opened her eyes, it was to Uchiha soldiers fumbling about and pawing at their eyes—eyes that had turned as black as the technique she’d cursed them with. Taking them out now would be child’s play.

Tōka drew her chokutō and ran for the nearest Uchiha. She slashed at his throat without slowing, and he toppled to the ground behind her. The next one went down with a clean stab through the gut. One by one by one, and no one stood a chance of resisting her—

Whoosh!

The sound of metal slicing air veered her off-course as instinct alone threw her into a barrel roll to avoid decapitation. A lone Uchiha remained standing, the best of them.

“Izuna,” she said as she scrambled to her feet.

His eyes were dyed black like his comrades’, but he was moving and unfettered by the stygian curse that blinded him. He twitched at the sound of her voice and lunged again. He flung one of his tantō at her, and it grazed her shoulder. She swore and rolled again to regroup.

“That voice...Tōka. I can hear you,” Izuna said.

“Not for long.”

She retrieved his tantō and flung it back at him, but he managed to avoid it.

Fast!

Izuna laughed. “Didn’t anyone ever tell you? Uchiha see best in the dark!”

He lunged at her and forced her into close combat. Unbelievably, he was keeping up with her punches by touch and sound alone. As a stealth fighter, Tōka avoided direct combat whenever
possible, and it showed. If not for his handicap, she was sure he would have bested her already.

“You sure about that?” she taunted.

She took a kick to the shin to buy time to draw a kunai, which she slashed across his chest. Izuna grunted in pain and stumbled backwards while Tōka took a knee and panted. The Bringer of Darkness technique consumed a vast amount of chakra, and maintaining it for so long was taking its toll. She wiped sticky sweat from her brow.

Izuna stood up straight as if to forfeit, but his blackened gaze found hers instinctively. “I’ll let you be the judge.”

Before she had the sense to look away, the Mangekyo Sharingan’s lurid glow pierced through her technique and sucked her in.

“Tsukuyomi,” he whispered.

Tōka opened her mouth to scream as darkness befell her. It was so thick and cold that she couldn’t discern which way was up and which was down. There was only Izuna against a black and white backdrop of her own making and a full, red moon where the sun should have been.

Refusing to give in to the illusion, she ran at him with her chokutō drawn and rammed him in the gut. He grunted and doubled over her as her blade passed through him, but he didn’t fall.

“Did you know? There are things even I can’t see,” he said.

His hand was heavy on her shoulder, and she pulled away.

Those haunting eyes of his were steeped in shadows that leaked down his face. No, not shadows—blood. His blood. As soon as she saw their ruined state, she felt it herself. Blood poured from her own eyes, and she couldn’t blink. The agony was so intense that she was sure this couldn’t be a mirage. No illusion could ever be this strong. Her chokutō fell to the floor, forgotten, as she clung to Izuna for support and he to her.

“Let me out of here!” she screamed.

His breath was hot on her face, and his blood mixed with hers as it dripped on her, in her hair, in the chinks of her armor. The red moon glowed sinister above, the only illumination in this endless darkness.

She fisted his collar and felt his heartbeat through their armor. “Izuna!”

The illusion shattered, and Tōka fell to the ground. The solid, dry earth of her familiar Fire Country. She heaved and spit up bile, and the earth crunched under her tightening fingers. But she was awake and alive, and the sun was shining. As an afterthought, she felt her face for signs of blood, but there were none. The pain was gone, and she could see fine.

*Izuna.*

She scrambled to her feet and looked around, Izuna was several yards away, and he’d also suffered from a violent bout of nausea. He staggered to his feet on wobbly knees, but he was otherwise fine. His eyes glowed with the heightened Mangekyo Sharingan, and to her horror blood ran down his cheeks like tears. He merely stared at her, guarded.

“That was a powerful genjutsu you used. Powerful enough to break my ultimate Tsukuyomi. No
Tōka swallowed. Those eyes... She’d never seen his elevated Sharingan up close before, and now that she had she was wishing otherwise. Just looking at him sent a shiver of dread up her spine. This wasn’t the same gaze she’d held when they’d fought together on Uzushiogakure. This wasn’t Izuna at all.

“You’re bleeding,” she said.

“You brought it out of me.”

Tōka took a step back. There was something decidedly sinister about him right now, something she couldn’t place. It hadn’t been there before. “Izuna...”

He watched her carefully, but he made no further move to attack. Tōka continued to back away.

“Be careful,” he said at last. “Soon, darkness will be the least of your fears.”

She froze in her place. *Her* fears... Had he seen her nightmare? The deep-seated nyctophobia she’d harbored since she was a child, the inspiration for the terrible Bringer of Darkness genjutsu? Could he smell it on her? Tōka shivered, feeling exposed under his all-seeing Sharingan. All around, Uchiha and Senju bodies lay bleeding and festering under the afternoon sun. Their smell was musty and sour on her nose, and it brought tears to her eyes.

“What’re you talking about?” she demanded, trying to mask her fear.

She drew a kunai and brandished it at him.

He blinked and the Sharingan faded. Blood dripped from his chin where it continued to run down his cheeks from his bloodshot eyes. Like this, it was almost like he was crying. Sad, and lonely.

“The only thing darkness was ever good for was to give light a place to shine.”

When he showed her his back and retreated, Tōka could only stare. It didn’t even cross her mind to sneak attack him. All she could think of were his words, cryptic omens that left her more afraid than even her crippling fear of the dark that he’d discovered so easily in that black and white and red world he’d trapped her in.

That, and the darkness lingering at the edges of her vision, a world from which there was truly no escape.
The journey back to the Senju main camp in Fire Country was a long one for Mito. Every step of the way, she questioned her actions. Had she been rash? Most things in her life had had perfectly good explanations, even if she didn’t want to hear them. But with Madara, nothing ever made sense. She couldn’t ignore her gut feeling that something was very wrong.

“Stay with me.”

She squeezed her eyes shut to blot out the memory. There was no way she could have stayed, not after what he’d done. Not after who he’d shown himself to be.

“We’ve arrived, Lady Mito,” Mako announced.

The Senju camp was a sprawling settlement guarded around the clock by sentries and teams of shinobi ready for battle at the drop of a hat. One such team greeted the returning Uzumaki.

“Welcome back,” one of the young Senju sentries said.

The camp was a mess of tightly-packed tents that housed everything from smithies to food stalls to private homes. Everything was laid out in districts for convenience, and as befitting this era of warring states, everything was easily collapsible in case of invasion or the need for hasty retreat. Even so, people bustled among the tents and stalls with purpose. Life went on.

“General Mako, thank you for accompanying me. Please let your soldiers rest. I’ll meet with Hashirama and bring him up to speed on things,” Mito said.

Mako bowed stiffly. “As you wish.”

Mito watched him and the other Uzumaki shinobi depart in the direction of their quarters, which was intermixed with the Senju’s habitation. People passed by her on their daily errands, and some greeted her. Mito hardly heard them as she thought about her meeting with Madara.

I failed.

He hadn’t signed the agreement to sit for peace talks, and worse, she’d left on a bad note. Perhaps an irreparable one. Hashirama would be disappointed, but more vexing was Madara’s behavior.

“I don’t even know who you are anymore.”

Mito set her jaw and moved on autopilot toward the Senju meeting tent where she, Hashirama, Tobirama, Tōka, and Sasuke usually met to discuss strategy and the next campaign. It was late in the afternoon and warm, and she was sweating in her armor. Once she arrived, the tent’s interior was cool and shady. Tobirama was there.

“You’re back,” he said, looking up from the map he’d been studying. “How’d it go?”

Instead of answering she said, “Where’s Hashirama?”

Tobirama’s red eyes flashed with anger. “He’s a little busy.”

“Tōka was out on a mission. Simple retrieval, nothing big. But she ran into trouble with enemy shinobi on the way back.”

Mito’s heart raced at the bad news. “Is she okay? Where is she?”

“She’s okay, but she pretty much collapsed when she got back here. Been in a coma for the last few days sleeping it off. We don’t know who she ran into or why, but I can make a pretty good guess.”

“I want to see her. What about her team?”

“Killed, all of them. They were kids, too. Hashi’s visiting their families right now.”

Mito covered her mouth. “Oh my god.”

Tobirama’s dour mood filled the tent. “You should go find him. He was saying he wanted to see you when you got back, see how things went.”

Mito nodded numbly. “Right, thanks, Tobirama.”

“Are you okay?”

“Hm? Why do you ask?”

“You look like you’re expecting an ambush.” He watched her carefully. Tobirama had always been very perceptive, much more so than his brother.

“I’m fine, just tired and ready for this to be over. Where can I find Hashirama?”

Tobirama directed her to the west ward. Mito headed there after stopping by her private quarters to remove her armor. Dressed in a white yukata secured with a green obi, she treaded lightly in search of Hashirama. The sun was setting and cast a thick, orange glow over the camp. Sunsets in Fire Country had always been beautiful, so different from her native Whirlpool where everything was tempered by ocean and mist. Here, there was nothing but the harsh sun and those who could stand to walk in it.

Hashirama emerged from a small tent, and sobs of despair followed him out. His expression was somber and his shoulders were stiff, like it hurt him just to remain upright. Mito watched him for a moment. His face was gaunt, the product of many sleepless nights. She wondered when he’d last eaten.

“Hashirama.”

Hashirama blinked and soon located her standing there several yards away. He immediately lit up and flashed her a smile—weary, but genuine.

“Mito, you’re back.”

“Yeah, sooner than expected.”

Some of his weariness melted away as he approached. “Man, am I glad to see you.”

Mito touched a comforting hand to his arm. “I heard about what happened with Tōka and her team. I’m so sorry.”

He sighed and ran a hand through his bangs. “Yeah, it’s awful. I’m glad she’s okay, but it’s been
days and she’s still not waking up. I don’t even know who did this.”

“Tobirama seems to think it was the Uchiha.”

“He said that?”

“He may as well have. But if it was and they were strong enough to take out her whole team, it
doesn’t make sense that they’d spare only her.”

Hashirama looked deep in thought. “Yeah, that’s a good point.”

Senju shinobi and civilians passed them by on the path that wound between the tents, but no one
bothered them. News of this most recent loss had people keeping their heads down and biding their
time. Mito bit her cheek as she remembered why she’d come looking for Hashirama in the first
place.

“Listen, Hashirama. About those peace talk proposals...” she began.

“Oh yeah, thanks for that. I got Madara’s response yesterday. Guess you were right about
convincing him in person, after all.”

Mito was not sure she’d heard him right. “Wait, what? He agreed?”

“Well, yeah! He sent Dawnclaw with the signed proposal yesterday.”

“Um, Dawnclaw?”

“His favorite falcon. It’s how we’ve communicated over the years.”

Mito frowned. “You communicate with Madara on a regular basis?”

Hashirama shrugged. “Not regular, no. But, you know, he’s my best friend.”

Mito could hardly believe her ears. After Madara’s inimical response to her criticism of his violent
war practices, she was sure she’d cost them any chance of a peace talk. Had she misjudged him?

“You okay?” Hashirama waved a hand in front of her face.

“Oh, yes, I’m fine, sorry. Just...tired from the journey back.”

Hashirama smiled. “I bet you are. Hey, why don’t you go rest a little and we’ll have dinner. Lena
offered to cook tonight, so you know it’s gonna be fantastic!”

“That sounds great. I’ll find you later, okay?”

“Sure thing.” Hashirama turned to leave, but he remembered something and and said, “I really am
happy you’re back.”

“Stay with me,” Madara had entreated her softly. She could not tell Hashirama how badly, if only
for a little while, she had wanted to say yes. Just the thought of such a betrayal... Was that how
things would be now? Did staying with one of them mean she was betraying the other? Did it
matter that she loved Madara? Did it matter that she’d promised Hashirama her loyalty? Did it
matter that she still was not sure she’d made the right decision?

But Hashirama’s smile was contagious, and she couldn’t help but return it. “Of course,” she said at
length. “I...wouldn’t have it any other way.”
He left, and Mito just stood there for a moment.

Is that true?

People passing were beginning to stare as she just stood there in the middle of the road, so she trudged back to her tent. She did not know if it was true. But as she passed the tent of one of the mourning families Hashirama had visited and heard their inconsolable grief, her aching heart told her that somehow, it would have to be. She had made her choice, after all.

Hashirama was sweating, he was so nervous. Nervous! It was only Madara, after all. It wasn’t like they were going to fight to the death and this could be his last night among the living. But truthfully, that kind of situation was more familiar to Hashirama than the current one.

He sat opposite Madara at a wide, oaken table, the one he used when Sasuke would run him through new military strategies and battle formation plans he had devised. The tent that covered them was lit by burning oil lamps, none bright enough to ward off the shadows that lingered in the corners. In accordance with the formalities of peace talks, all present wore no armor, and that lack of weight felt strange on Hashirama’s shoulders as he sat opposite from Madara.

“So you’re proposing a widespread military downsizing?” Madara asked. His arms were crossed as he slouched in his chair like he didn’t care, but his eyes were sharp and alert. “I don’t think I have to explain even to you why that’s completely out of the question.”

Hashirama leaned forward over the table a little. “We’re our own worst enemies, literally, so scaling down makes a whole lotta sense. That way we don’t have to train up kids as much.”

“We have many enemies, Hashirama. Don’t be so naïve. The only reason we’re where we are is because of our strength. How do you think peace is sustained? Through the threat of total annihilation.”

“You’re misunderstanding,” Mito said. “No one’s proposing any scale back right now. It’s a gradual process that’ll take months, even years. And it depends on the mutual trust this alliance will ultimately build between Uchiha and Senju.”

She stood between them at the end of the table. Her expression was severe even as she calmly explained what Hashirama hadn’t quite articulated. He swallowed a shiver that wanted to creep up his spine.

Madara wasn’t as fazed by Mito’s icy, business persona. “Trust is a big assumption to make. Or did you forget that not all of us are like Hashirama and me?”

“You’re misunderstanding,” Mito said. “No one’s proposing any scale back right now. It’s a gradual process that’ll take months, even years. And it depends on the mutual trust this alliance will ultimately build between Uchiha and Senju.”

Madara smirked. “Pretty words. If only things were so simple.”

“They are,” Hashirama said. “They will be once we actually give this thing a shot. C’mon, Madara, don’t tell me you don’t even wanna try.”

“I’m one man, and my clan depends on me. They trust me. How would it look if suddenly I told them to forget the past and hold hands? Come on, Hashirama. Don’t pretend like the Senju would
be happy to let the past go and sing kumbaya around the campfire together. We’re not that different in the end.”

Hashirama clenched a fist. He was right, of course. Even Tobirama, his own brother, had always been dismissive at best of an alliance with the Uchiha. They’d lost brothers to the Uchiha, and no peace, no matter how lasting, could ever change that.

“You’re right, Madara,” Mito said. “You’re not so different in the end. And that’s why I know that somehow, you’ll agree to peace just like you agreed to today’s meeting despite everything that happened in the past.”

Mito and Madara exchanged a loaded look, and Hashirama was left to wonder. The two of them were alike in many ways, not the least of which was that he could never predict what they would do next. But he had a pretty good idea of what they’d already done. That was personal, though, and it was neither here nor there. Hashirama could not let it cloud his judgment.

“I can’t change the past, Madara,” he said. “It’s like you’ve said before. None of this’ll bring back the people we’ve lost. I’ll never see my little brothers again. But we can change the future. We can make sure no one else has to lose a brother. That’s gotta count for something.”

Madara’s gaze was far away, remembering. “It does count for something, but it’s not enough. What would I tell my clan? You and I aren’t the only ones who’ve lost people.” He waved a hand in front of him. “My soldiers and yours fight under our orders. They’re the ones who lose the most. How can I tell them to let it all go? That’s not how the world works.”

“Then change the world,” Mito said. “Hashirama promised my father that if there’s such a thing as peace, he’d find it. But he can’t find it without you, Madara.”

Madara stood up. “But your father’s still alive, Princess. Mine won’t ever see peace, and I owe it to him to uphold his legacy.”

“Don’t drag her into it, Madara,” Hashirama said, standing. “This is between Senju and Uchiha. It’s our problem.”

Madara laughed. “Are you really that blind? She and anyone else who gets close to us is involved. They’re in the goddamned middle of it!” He narrowed his eyes, and they flashed red for a brief instant. “And that’s how people get killed.”

He headed for the exit, but Hashirama wasn’t about to let him leave like this. He walked around the length of the table and placed himself in between Madara and the escape. Mito hovered behind Madara. There was nowhere for him to go unless he went through one of them.

“I thought this was supposed to be a peaceful meeting,” Madara said venomously. “If you wanted a fight, you didn’t have to go through all this pretense.”

Hashirama held his ground. “I made a promise to my father, too. I promised I would end this as he died in my arms, and I’m gonna keep that promise. But I’m doing it our way, not his.” He spread his arms and exposed his unarmored chest as he entreated Madara to listen. “Don’t you get it? We can make our dream a reality and still honor the dead. You and me, Madara. We can end this together.”

He caught Mito’s eye over Madara’s shoulder, and she nodded in encouragement. Madara let out a sharp breath.

“You make it sound so simple. All I have to do is say ‘yes’, right? And everything will magically
Hashirama lowered his arms. “I mean, it’ll take a lot of work, but it starts with a ‘yes’.”

Mito moved before Hashirama could wonder why, and by the time he realized the danger, it was too late. Madara’s hand was clenched over his windpipe, and the Mangekyo Sharingan glared up at him. Hashirama struggled to suck in a breath.

“Madara!” Mito hissed. Her palm glowed blue with deadly sealing chakra, but Madara squeezed harder.

“Don’t interfere. I’ve almost made my point,” he said.

She froze. The threat in his voice was low and feral. Hashirama resisted the urge to squirm and fight back.

“Did you know, Hashirama? If I killed you now, everything would be okay. My people would be safe. It’d be so simple.”

Hashirama wrapped his hands around Madara’s wrist and forced a smile despite the sharp, crushing pain against his windpipe. “You’re wrong.”

He squeezed harder, and Hashirama gasped for breath. “Am I?”

Mito trembled behind Madara, unsure whether or how to intervene. She wouldn’t make it in time to stop Madara and save Hashirama, he was too fast, too good. “Stop this, Madara,” she pleaded with him, voice shaky. “You know damn well that killing Hashirama would only make everything worse! You’re the one who keeps saying how this feud’s gone on forever.”

Madara was unmoved by her entreaty. “My father wouldn’t hesitate in my position.”

Hashirama struggled to suck in air, and he began to feel dangerously light-headed. “But you are.”

Madara bared his teeth in a snarl.

“Madara, stop,” Mito warned.

Hashirama began to see spots as his eyelids fluttered. “It’s n-not so simple,” he wheezed, “to kill...someone you love.”

The seconds ticked by, and Mito looked about ready to punch Madara into next week. Her hands glowed with powerful sealing chakra, and all it would take was one touch. But just as she was finally on her last threat and ready to risk intervening, Madara’s grip relaxed and he released Hashirama, who fell to the floor on his knees and heaved. Madara looked down at him in silence, and Mito dashed between Hashirama and him, hands still aglow with fighting chakra.

Tears blurred Hashirama’s vision from the lack of oxygen, and he had a hard time making out what was going on above him. Mito and Madara stood in silence as they faced off, but neither spoke. He wiped his eyes and sent healing chakra to his throat to ease the pain.

“No,” Madara said at length, “it’s not. And that’s just the problem.”

Hashirama put a hand on the table to steady himself and try to stand. Mito hadn’t moved an inch.

“Madara...” She sounded on the verge of tears.
“I’ve had enough for one night,” he said.

Before Hashirama could get to his feet, Madara pushed past Mito and headed outside. She let him go.

“Wait, Madara!” he called. “Damnit, we have to stop him—” A coughing fit cut into Hashirama’s words, and pain lanced through his throat.

Mito’s hands were on him in an instant as she supported his weight. “Let him go, Hashirama. He’s right, we’ve had enough for one night.”

Tobirama shifted his weight from his heels to the balls of his feet and back again. He scratched an imaginary itch on the back of his head, and his studded leather armor stretched and squeaked. Torches crackled softly over the entrance to the meeting tent. It was the only sign of human life around for miles, and he was stuck outside in the chilly, night air wishing he could hit something, the waiting was killing him.

“Will you just stand still? Your fidgeting’s giving me a headache.”

Tobirama shot a venomous glance at his company tonight and fought with every fiber of his being to be the bigger man and not start punching. “Well your breathing’s giving me a headache.”

Izuna sighed but said nothing. Somehow, that was worse than hearing him talk.

“Peace talks never worked before, and they sure as hell won’t work now,” Tobirama said.

Izuna remained silent once again.

Tobirama crossed his arms. “They’re living in a dreamland, our brothers. Makes me wonder when they’ll finally wake up for good and realize all this is useless.”

“Dream or nightmare, they’ll never stop trying. It’s in their nature,” Izuna said at length.

“So you agree with me?”

Izuna chuckled, but it only sent shivers down Tobirama’s spine. “Peace isn’t something that’ll ever concern me.”

When they were younger, it had been easy to hate Izuna blindly. He was the face of the enemy, the ghost that kept Tobirama awake at night and wondering whether tomorrow the sun would still rise. Tonight, there was no sun and no one around, no one to see them waiting in the shadows while their brothers talked each other in circles. Tomorrow, the sun would rise again, and there would be no shadows left in which to hide.

“This is a waste of time,” Tobirama said.

“I guess it depends on whose time you’re talking about,” Izuna said. “For me, it makes no difference. They should know by now that without war, there can be no peace.”

Tobirama frowned. Izuna hadn’t looked at him once during their entire sentry. Something about him was off today. Still, he had a point.

“Funny how you just get what my brother has always refused to accept. I guess in a fucked up a
way, you know me better than him.”

Izuna looked up, and Tobirama’s heart skipped a beat at the unwelcome sight of the Mangekyo Sharingan. His hand went for the tantō at his hip.

“Maybe,” Izuna said. “But you don’t know me, Tobirama. You don’t know this hatred.”

“Hey, put that away before I gut you. We’re supposed to be on neutral ground here.”

Izuna’s red eyes glowed and seemed to plunge the rest of him into darkness. “This hatred is a curse.”

Tobirama’s hand gripped the tantō’s hilt like a lifeline as he prepared for a fight, but Izuna blinked and dispelled the Sharingan all of a sudden. In the torches’ dim lighting, Tobirama could just make out the bags under his eyes. Had those been there before?

Tobirama let out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding. “What’re you talking about?”

“Madara!”

Mito’s shout drew their attention, and both Tobirama and Izuna bolted for the tent. Madara stormed out just as they got there.

“Izuna, we’re leaving,” he said.

Izuna shot Tobirama a look, but before Tobirama could read much into it, he left to follow Madara. Mito was next to exit, and Hashirama stumbled out after her. Tobirama shook with anger at the signs of struggle on his brother.

“Damn it. What’d that asshole do this time?” he demanded.

Mito put out a hand and blocked Tobirama from pursuing the Uchiha brothers.

“I’m fine, Tobi,” Hashirama said. “You know Mito wouldn’t ever let anything happen to me, right?”

“This isn’t a goddamned joke, Hashi! Did he attack you?”

“I said I was fine,” Hashirama insisted.

“Calm down, both of you,” Mito said.

Tobirama could have spit. “Calm down!?”

“More importantly, I have to stop Madara from leaving,” Hashirama said.

“Forget about him for once and think about yourself,” Tobirama said. “I knew this was a bad idea from the start.”

“Cut it out, Tobi,” Hashirama said a bit harshly. “I already know how you feel about peace with the Uchiha, and I still think you’re wrong about them. That’s not gonna change just ‘cause of one night.”

“It doesn’t matter anymore,” Mito said. She was gazing off into the dark distance where Madara and Izuna had disappeared.
“Mito...” Hashirama said.

The look in her eyes when she turned back to them was a look Tobirama would never forget. Something twisted inside and ached just looking at her, like she wanted to cry but could not remember how.

“He’s gone,” she said.

Mito pulled a brush through Lena’s perfumed, brown hair as she sat on a stool before a small vanity. Lena wore a thick, white kimono and a light pink sash. Her makeup was sparing but perfect.

“You look so beautiful,” Mito said with a smile.

Lena giggled softly. “I feel so strange! I was always the one getting you ready for parties, and now it’s like we’ve switched roles for a day.”

Mito leaned down so their faces were level and they could see their reflections in the mirror. “Well, I did learn from the best.”

They laughed together. Outside, the Senju camp was buzzing with last minute wedding preparations. The ceremony was due to start within the hour, and it would go on all night for three days. Mito was glad for the occasion after the botched peace talks with Madara. Everyone could use a little celebration in their lives.

Mito selected a pink jade comb from a wooden box nearby and twisted it into Lena’s hair. It held up half of her hair, while the rest hung loose over her shoulder.

“Consider this my wedding gift to you,” she said.

Lena reached up and touched the intricate comb. Its handle was carved in the shape of breaking waves. “But this is yours. You’ve had it since you were a girl. I couldn’t possibly—”

“You can, and you must. I insist. It’s perfect for you.”

Mito smoothed out Lena’s hair, pleased with how it had turned out.

“Thank you so much. I love it.”

“So, are you ready to become Lena Sarutobi?”

Lena blushed. “Oh, it sounds so weird out loud!”

“Nonsense! Now, let’s take a look at you.”

Lena rose and spun slowly for Mito to see. The kimono was elegant, and its train was dusted pink with embroidered flowers to match the obi and the comb Mito had gifted her. The pale colors brought out her dark complexion and haunting, brown eyes. Mito smiled.

“Stunning,” she said. “Sasuke’s gonna faint at the altar when he sees you.”

Lena’s eyes began to water, and she let her eyes fall. She smiled and placed her hands on her belly over the obi. “I’m just so happy.”
“And I’m happy for you.”

Lena shook her head. “No, I mean...” She looked up, and Mito frowned at the tears in her eyes—tears of joy. “Today isn’t just for Sasuke and me.”

Mito caught the way she clutched her belly, and understanding dawned. “Wait, Lena... You’re expecting?”

“Yes! I just found out. I haven’t even told Sasuke yet. I was planning to do it tonight after the ceremony.”

Mito’s heart soared at the news, full of joy for the older woman who had been one of her closest companions since she was a girl. She pulled Lena into a fierce hug. “That’s wonderful news! Oh, he’s going to be thrilled!”

Lena laughed through her tears as she hugged Mito back. “Oh no, now all that lovely makeup you put on me’s going to smear.”

Mito grabbed a handkerchief from the box where the jade comb had been and dabbed at Lena’s tears. “There, no harm done.”

“Thank you. I just can’t believe this is all happening. I’ve always dreamed of having a family. And I know things are difficult between the Senju and Uchiha clans, but I have to believe that if this kind of miracle is possible, then surely anything is.”

Mito hesitated just a moment and hoped Lena could not sense her thoughts behind her smile. “Of course. Now, I’m going to wait with the others. You get ready to walk down that aisle, okay?”

Lena thanked her again, and Mito left to join the rest of the Senju and Uzumaki clans waiting for the ceremony to begin. She paused just outside Lena’s tent and took a deep breath.

“I’ve always dreamed of having a family.”

Mito covered her mouth and trembled. Tears stung her eyes and blurred her vision as she remembered Haruka and how her dreams of a child had been cruelly crushed.

“I’m no one.”

That haunted curse, despondent and hopeless, still tormented her even now.

“What made her any less worthy?” Mito whispered, knowing that as before, she would have no answer. Life was simply a blessing for some and a curse for others.

Some Senju children, shinobi-in-training that Mito recognized, ran by and waved to her. “Lady Mito! C’mon, the wedding’s about to start!”

Mito blinked her tears away and smoothed the forest green kimono she wore. She plastered a smile to her face and waved back. Today was not a day for tears and sadness. “Hey, slow down, I can’t run in this thing!”

The kids laughed and gathered around her. Two of them took her hands led her to the crowd gathered to watch the ceremony. Towards the front, a few civilians had set up a band stand and were tuning their instruments.

“Mito! Hey, over here!”
Hashirama jogged toward her, careless of his fine ceremonial robes and the dirt he was kicking up. The kids giggled and ran off as he reached her.

“Hashirama, you’re supposed to be officiating,” Mito said, eyeing his dusty hem with dismay. “Get up there!”

He put his hands on her shoulders and looked her up and down. “Wow, you look great.”

Despite her earlier despair, Mito couldn’t help but smile. “Thanks. I’d return the compliment, but you look like you’ll need a bath soon.”

“How?” He looked down and noticed the dust settling into his socks and the hem of his robes. “Oh, oops.”

She swatted him lightly on the chest. “At least you’re on time. I was sure you’d get lost trying to find the ceremony.”

“Noope, I made sure to walk over with Tobirama just in case.” He was very proud of this.

She laughed. “Ah yes, how very wise of you, Lord Hashirama.”

His smile was kind and warm as he looked down at her. He was close enough to lean on if she chose to take an extra step, but the thought died before it could manifest. The last time he’d leaned on her was because Madara had nearly crushed his windpipe. She did not want to think about that, not today. This was Sasuke and Lena’s day, and the memory of Madara had no place darkening it.

Hashirama sensed a change in her and frowned. “Something the matter?”

She met his gaze and held it. He was so earnest and sincere. Only days earlier, that same gaze had been bloodshot and fading in Madara’s grip.

“It’s Madara, isn’t it?” he said.

“How did you know?”

“Lately, you look a little sad when you think about him. I guess...I know the feeling.”

The band had began to play a melodious tune on strings and keys. Tobirama was pushing his way through the crowd towards Mito and Hashirama.

“Hashi! Sasuke’s waiting, in case you forgot! What the hell’re you dinking around here for?”

“Oh, crap! Okay, I’m coming!” Hashirama jogged past Tobirama towards the front of the crowd, kicking up a cloud of dust in his wake.

Mito watched him go, too stunned to move or speak.

*How did he know? Am I so obvious to him?*

“How did you know?”

“Mito, you okay? You look like you saw a ghost.” Tobirama peered at her suspiciously.

“Hm? Oh, yeah, I’m okay, sorry. Let’s go sit down.”

“Okay. Tōka saved us a place, this way.”

Mito let him lead her through the settling crowd to a row of seats up front. Sasuke stood at the head
of the crowd next to Hashirama, clean-shaven and spiffed up in a black ceremonial kimono. He’d retained his signature ponytail, though, probably over Lena’s futile protests.

“You found her,” Tōka said as Mito and Tobirama sat down with her.

“I’m so glad you’re feeling better,” Mito said.

Tōka grinned. “Like I’d miss seeing Sasuke in full kimono. Look how uncomfortable he looks.”

Mito returned her smirk. “He does, doesn’t he?”

Tobirama rolled his eyes. “Oh, give the poor guy a break. He looks pretty good.”

Tōka leaned over Mito to better see Tobirama. “Hm, someone sounds a little jealous. Can’t wait for the day it’s you up there in seven layers and geta?”

Tobirama flushed. “I’m in no hurry to get married, obviously.”

Tōka and Mito exchanged a knowing look. “Obviously,” they said at the same time.

“Huh? Hey, what the hell’s that supposed to mean, anyway?”

“Shh, Tobirama, it’s starting,” Mito said.

He gaped at them in disbelief. “Are you saying no one wants marry me?”

The music changed, and all eyes turned to the back of the crowd. Lena appeared carrying a bouquet of calla lilies and began to walk slowly toward the front in time with the crescendoing music. Mito stole a look at Sasuke and caught him staring open-mouthed. She bit her lip to rein in a wide, satisfied smile. Lena made it to the front and took Sasuke’s hand.

Hashirama grinned from ear to ear. “Well, Lena, since Sasuke’s busy catching flies over here, lemme say you look gorgeous!”

The gathered guests laughed, and he launched into the wedding rites. Mito looked on between Tōka and Tobirama. Lena’s happiness was contagious and permeating the whole crowd of attendees. Soon, the official ceremony was finished, and Sasuke dipped Lena at the waist and sealed the union with a kiss that drew a standing ovation. Mito stood with them and clapped. She caught Hashirama’s eyes, bright with joy, and he held her gaze.

“Everyone, meet my wife!” Sasuke said.

He picked her up bridal style and spun around. The cheers intensified, and the band picked up the pace of their music. People started dancing, and some civilians on duty brought food to tables set up near the back.

Mito was swept away with the celebration, laughing all the while.

The party was everything a party should be. The sun had long set, and both Senju and Uzumaki, shinobi and civilian, celebrated Sasuke and Lena’s marriage with food, drink, and endless dancing. There were open-fire spits roasting whole goats and wild fowl, as well as large pots with barley stew boiling over smoking embers. Wine and ale flowed as fluidly as the music that hadn’t stopped playing since the start of the ceremony. Some stalls had even been set up for the children to play
darts and bob for apples.

Hashirama had gotten wrangled into a rather intense game of apple-bobbing with some kids, which was a surprise to no one, and his head was currently dunked in a bucket as his teeth chomped in search of an elusive fruit.

“Hey, he’s gonna win!” one boy cheered.

“No way, he can’t beat my record!” another boy said, puffing out his little chest.

Hashirama surfaced for air and sluiced water all over the front of his formal kimono—he would eventually be needing that bath Mito had teased him about earlier—but he had an apple in his mouth to show for his valiant efforts.

“Wow, he did it!” a little girl said.

Hashirama grinned behind the apple. “Ah courf I deh!”

The little girl giggled at his rather poor attempt to talk around the apple.

A slender hand suddenly took hold of the apple still in his mouth and pulled. Hashirama bit down without thinking and came away with a hunk of sweet fruit in his mouth.

“Hashirama Senju, is there anything can’t do?”

Mito held the apple in her hand and looked down at him expectantly. The kids snickered and whispered among themselves.

Hashirama swallowed the chunk of apple and grinned. “Plenty of things. But I guess I lucked out and got the good apple-bobbing genes.”

Mito smirked. “I guess you did.” She took a bite of his hard-won apple, and his mouth went dry at the sight.

“Lord Hashirama, come play darts with us!” a little boy pleaded as he tugged on Hashirama’s hand.

“Yeah, come on!”

Hashirama laughed and stood up. “Aw man, I’d love to, guys! But I’d like to talk to Lady Mito now, so how about next time, okay? I promise.”

The kids ran off to play darts and left Hashirama and Mito alone. She tossed him the apple.

“The children all adore you,” she said.

Hashirama shrugged and chewed on the apple. “I’ve always liked kids. They’re a good bunch, too.”

“I can tell.”

Hashirama tossed the cleaned apple core into a nearby bin. He fell into step with Mito, and they began to walk together.

“Today was so much fun,” Mito said.
“Yeah,” he said dreamily. “I just love weddings! I wish we could have more of them. They make everybody so happy.”

“Me, too. It’s nice to have an excuse for everyone to relax and have fun.”

They meandered among groups of friends drinking and toasting to good health, children playing tag, and women carving up meat from the spits to serve to anyone who was hungry. Torches cast a dim light over the camp and reflected in Mito’s green eyes. A group of Uzumaki shinobi were dancing together, and they spilled over onto the path. Hashirama put a hand on the small of Mito’s back and maneuvered her around them. Her natural warmth was comforting against the slight night chill, and he leaned closer without thinking.

Mito stopped near the edge of the crowd, and Hashirama let his hand fall. She was gazing at a nearby bonfire. “Why don’t you ever ask me about him?” she said all of a sudden.

Hashirama did not have to ask to know she was thinking about Madara. “I guess...because there was never anything to ask. Things were always pretty clear.”

“I see.”

She wasn’t looking at him, and he began to fidget. The partygoers continued to laugh and drink together, but Hashirama felt none of their warmth as Madara’s shadow filled the space between him and Mito. He struggled for the right words.

“I just meant, I mean, there’s no problem. Not that it’s any of my business, you know. I mean, of course you know, but I just want you to know that I know, you know? Um... Is that a problem?”

“Are you asking if it’s a problem that it’s not a problem?”

Hashirama rubbed his eyes. “Why do I feel like we’ve had this conversation before?”

When he looked up again, she looked softer. More like herself.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “It wasn’t fair of me to put you on the spot like that. I just thought that with the alliance between our clans, and Madara being Uchiha... We’ve just never really talked about it.” She shook her head. “It’s fine. Don’t think anything of it.”

He reached for her hand. It was clammy and cold. “It’s not fine, is it? Something’s different.”

Mito smiled sadly. “I’ve been asking myself that same question lately.”

“Mito,” Hashirama said gently, tempted to hold her close, “what happened?”

She told him about her last encounter with Madara in Earth Country when he attacked the Kamizuru clan and Madara’s reaction when she’d disapproved of his violent actions. She also told him about Haruka’s suicide, about the baby Madara had lost. About how she’d been there, seen it all happen. It all came pouring out, jumbled and tangled with emotions she’d been keeping to herself for so long, and he could scarcely keep up with it all.

“It was awful,” Mito said, her voice strained. “There was nothing anyone could do for Haruka, and she just... Oh, Hashirama, it was so awful.”

Hashirama could hardly believe what he was hearing. “My god, he never told me. I knew Haruka died and their child with her, but I had no idea...”
“You know, he wouldn’t even look at me after that. I’ve never been afraid of Madara, but that day something in him changed. I felt like an outsider, and that scared me. It was the same after the Kamizuru clan massacre. Worse, even.”

Hashirama heard her words but not her voice. In his memory, all he could imagine was Madara.

“You don’t know what it’s like.”

“How can I let you live when they’re dead?”

Hashirama rubbed his tired eyes. *Some dream, huh?*

“I’m sorry, Hashirama.” Mito’s voice brought Hashirama back to the present, where she was forcing a smile like nothing was the matter. “I’m being really selfish by saying all this to you, of all people. You and Madara have been through so much, but you still manage to hold onto your dream. And your friendship.”

“Nah, it’s okay. I guess I’ve got a little more experience with loving a person like Madara.” He reached for her and smoothed her bangs behind her ear. “So lemme take on some of that burden for you. I’m a little bigger than you, so I can handle the extra weight.”

Mito’s glassy eyes were dark and stormy despite the flickering firelight. If he didn’t know her better, he was sure she would shatter under his touch right there. “Why are you so wonderful?”

Hashirama’s heart wrenched at the sight of her, those words, the sadness and the desperation and the longing reflected in her firelit eyes. Fear froze him in place, but he wished with all his heart that he could touch her now. It was like staring deep into a dark wood—surely monsters lurked within, but the forest was so lovely, so deep and silent with no one around for miles except the two of them, no one to leer and judge and whisper, not that he had ever cared about such things. He only really cared about her.

“Oi, Hashirama! Mito!” Sasuke waved at them by one of the bonfires. He had an enormous drumstick in his hand that he’d already taken a few bites from. “Get your asses over here and have a drink with me! It’s my party, and tonight I’m the boss, hah!”

The spell was broken, and suddenly Hashirama could move again. But Mito moved first and swallowed the raw emotions she’d only moments ago laid bare for him to see.

She smiled and waved back. “We’re coming, save us a seat!” She went to catch up with an already quite drunk Sasuke and called back to Hashirama, “Come on, I think we both deserve to have a little fun.”

She waited. Hashirama rubbed his eyes hard. “Yeah, I’m coming.” He flashed her a bright smile and trotted after her at a sedate pace.

There was no room for shadows in the subterranean shrine where Madara kneeled on the earthen floor and peered at the ancient, stone tablet enshrined just inches from his face. Candles flickered beneath it, and oil lamps he’d brought in himself on earlier occasions glowed with manmade light. He traced the cryptic words with his Mangekyō Sharingan, searching for a way to fill in the gaps in his understanding.

“But when the two come together,” Madara read aloud, “they can create a perfect and harmonious
union.’ What the hell does that mean?”

*Come together with the Senju?*

He shook his head. “Damn you, Hashirama. As if I could accept any olive branch after everything we’ve been through. Not yet.”

*Then when? What’s it going to take?*

Madara blinked hard and rubbed his eyes to force them to water. They itched and stung, but he rubbed harder.

“I know the answers are in here, dammit, so why can’t I see them? What am I missing?”

“It’s your eyes,” a voice answered him. “They’re not good enough.”

Madara let his hand fall. He allowed himself a moment to deactivate the Sharingan and blink away the artificial tears he’d created to soothe the pain in his eyes. “Izuna, you know I don’t like to be disturbed down here.”

Izuna ignored the warning and bravely approached his taciturn brother. He dimmed the lanterns hanging near the tablet, silent. The small shrine soon invited shadows to its corners.

“It was so bright in here I thought you might be missing the sun. It’ll be up in a few hours,” Izuna said.

“I’m a little busy here. If you don’t have any urgent news, then leave.”

Izuna activated his own Mangekyo Sharingan and stared at the tablet. “One thing’s for sure: there’s more written here than what we can decipher. And that means the Sharingan isn’t enough.”

Madara rose. “I know that.”

“Even all this light won’t help you get any closer to the truth.”

Madara grabbed Izuna by the collar. “Be careful. I’m your brother, but I’m also your leader.”

Izuna deactivated the Sharingan and put his hands over Madara’s. The look in his eyes reminded Madara of when they were kids, how Izuna would gaze up at him with those big, dark eyes so full of wonder and awe at his big brother who could carry the world on his shoulders. Izuna smiled sadly.

“My eyes were always sharper than yours, Brother. You can’t lie to me.”

Madara’s hands shook, and he released Izuna. Anger and shame made him feel warm, and he ran his hands through his long bangs to hide the tremble. Izuna waited, ever patient and understanding.

Madara stared at one of the candles slowly burning beneath the suspended tablet.

“Who else knows?” he demanded.

“Only me. Only because I was looking.”

“Good. I only need one last campaign to defeat the Senju once and for all, anyway. After that, nothing else will matter.”

Izuna gasped. “You can’t say that. The Uchiha need you.”
“If this is the price I have to pay, then so be it. It’s nothing compared to what Father had to endure.”

“It’s everything. Father taught us that the Uchiha come first, but to me, you come first. I’m not about to let what happened to Haruka happen to you.”

Madara sighed. “There’s nothing you can do. It’s not your job to take care of me.”

“You always told me that we were one, like the brightest light that casts the darkest shadow. There can’t be one without the other.”

Izuna drew a kunai from his sleeve. Madara paled.

“Izuna, what’re you doing? Stop!”

But in the dim lighting, Madara’s deteriorating eyes missed his target by just enough to count. Izuna avoided his brother’s grasp easily. Blood squirted across Madara’s cheeks, warm, and dripped down his chin.

“Izuna!”

Madara caught him as he staggered to the floor. Madara’s eyes were wide with fear and adrenaline. The guards outside heard Madara’s shouting and rushed in to help. But they were too late.

Izuna shook in Madara’s arms, but he smiled. “I’m not afraid of the dark. I’ll stay here in the shadows so you can fight in the light.”

Madara’s fingers smeared with Izuna’s blood as he cupped his little brother’s cheek. Any words he may have spoken died in his throat. The Uchiha guards arrived with hands and echoing footsteps and shouts for a medic, something to stop the bleeding. And all Madara could do was stare in shock at the blurry image just inches from his face.

He couldn’t even make out Izuna’s smile.

Mito woke early the morning after the festivities were officially over. They had lasted for three days, and she’d had more to drink than she’d ever had in her life. She groaned in her bed and rolled over, cursing the sun for shining.

“What the hell time is it?” she grumbled to no one.

The smells of breakfast were in the air, and she could hear people talking and working outside somewhere. She groaned again for good measure and pulled herself to the edge of the bed. A jug of water sat near the head of the bed, and she greedily gulped down half of it. Thirst quenched, she sat up and put a hand on her forehead. To continue sleeping, or to find some food? This was the eternal struggle on mornings after a night of heavy drinking and merriment, or in this case three nights.

But the answer was always food in Mito’s case. It was too much to hope for Lena’s cooking since it had been her wedding, but Lena wasn’t the only one who knew how to cure a hangover. With dreams of breakfast in mind, Mito rolled out of bed and dressed as quickly as she could.

She wandered to the tent where she and the other clan leaders usually dined together. She greeted the people she passed, but no one seemed to notice her yawning. Perhaps they, too, were exhausted
from having so much fun over the last three days. Voices drifted from the dining tent, and Mito paused to listen before entering. Tobirama must have been quite hungover not to have sensed her approach.

“I’m telling you, it was weird. Even for Izuna,” Tobirama said.

“So he said something to you, too,” Tōka said. “I don’t like this. I’ve got a really bad feeling.”

“Listen, I always have a bad feeling when it comes to Izuna. But this was something... I dunno, it was just—”

“Ominous? Yeah, I know what you mean, but I don’t know what it means.”

“Okay, so the Uchiha have always been batshit crazy.”

“But this is different,” Tōka said. “You know it is.”

There was a pause, and Mito strained to listen.

“He said... He said, ‘This hatred is a curse’,” Tobirama said. “That mean anything to you?”

“I really hope not.”

Mito decided she’d eavesdropped enough and made her presence known by entering the tent.

“Good morning.”

Tobirama and Tōka perked up and greeted her.

“Oh, good morning, Mito,” Tōka said. She passed her a plate. “You look like you could use some breakfast.”

Tobirama snorted. “Don’t we all. Damn, I dunno if this migraine’s ever going away.”

Mito smirked and took a seat across the table. “It’s been a long three days.”

She piled her plate high with food and began to eat. A comfortable silence reigned for a few minutes as everyone filled their bellies. The food’s healing effect was almost immediate, and Mito sighed as the night’s festivities faded to a pleasant memory.

“Tōka, it looks like you’re fully recovered,” Mito said.

“Yeah, I’m back to my usual self, I think. I’m just glad I was able to be here for the wedding.”

“Remind me to ban weddings when I’m head of the Senju clan,” Tobirama said. “That was more alcohol and socializing than I’ve ever had to put up with in my life. Never again.”


Tobirama rubbed his side and shot his cousin a dirty look. “Who said I’m not happy for them? But come on, three days to celebrate? That’s just ridiculous.”

Tōka rolled her eyes. “I’ll say it again. Izuna definitely had a point about you.”

Mito took a sip of orange juice. “Speaking of Izuna, I couldn’t help but overhear some of what you were talking about just before I got here. I didn’t mean to eavesdrop, but what was that all about?”
Tōka and Tobirama exchanged a look, playful banter forgotten.

“How much did you hear?” Tobirama asked.

“Enough to wonder why you think he’s cursed. Did something happen? Because if it did, then I think you better tell me what’s going on. Does Hashirama know anything about this?”

Tobirama made a face. “That’s just the problem—Hashi doesn’t listen. You of all people know that, Mito.”

“Tobirama,” Tōka warned.

“Listen to what?” Mito asked. Nobody said a word, and she forced herself to lean back in her chair and count to five in her head. With Tobirama, a lost temper was a lost chance to reason with him, no matter the subject. And Tōka almost always stood with him. “Since the Uzumaki and I came out here with you, I’ve gotten to know you all pretty well. I recognize that you two are in each other’s confidence, and that sometimes Hashirama can be a frustrating person to reason with. I suspect this time it’s something pretty important if you think even I won’t be able to hear you out. But I’m not Hashirama, and I’m listening. So please, enlighten me.”

Tōka remained tight-lipped, but Tobirama looked about ready to break something.

“Tobirama?” Mito said.

“There’s something wrong with Izuna. With the Uchiha,” he said at length.

“What, specifically?”

“...We’re not sure,” Tōka said. “But we... We think Izuna might’ve tried to warn us somehow. I don’t know if he realized what he was saying. There’s something wrong with him.”

“I don’t even know who you are anymore,” Mito had accused Madara. Her neck felt warm at the memory, and the beginnings of worry niggled at the back of her mind. Why did this all feel so familiar?

Mito swallowed hard. “He’s changed, you mean.”

“Yes. You sound like you know something, too.”

“...Madara, he’s not the man I used to know.”

“Probably better not to have known him at all, if you ask me,” Tobirama said with a touch of venom.

“Tobirama!” Tōka hissed.

“I know about you and Madara, you know,” Tobirama said. “We all do. Normally I don’t give a shit what people do in their personal lives, but this is different. This is the Uchiha, and you... You’re...”

His outrage was no surprise. Mito had always known that Madara would not be an easy man to love. He was Uchiha, and she was Uzumaki.

“A man’s name is his identity; it’s everything.”

Back then, Mito had not known how right Madara was. To Tobirama, and to the rest of the Senju,
his name was proof of her betrayal, not of her love. A part of Mito wanted to scream. A traitorous part of her agreed with Tobirama.

“That’s enough,” Tōka said, the anger in her voice almost palpable in the small tent. “That was way out of line, Tobirama, even for you.”

“I’m out of line?” Tobirama said, incredulous.

“It’s all right, Tōka,” Mito said. “I don’t blame anyone for holding a grudge against the Uchiha.” She rose and held Tobirama’s gaze. “But you don’t know Madara like I do, and that’s why you cannot understand why Hashirama and I will never give up on him. As for the rest, I hope that by now you know me well enough to know where my loyalties lie. No matter what.”

Tobirama’s expression faltered, and he had the decency to look ashamed. “I’m sorry, that came out wrong. Mito, I... Of course I know you’d never turn on us, I only meant...”

“I know exactly what you meant,” Mito said, cool and calm. “But there are things you don’t know. Loyalty, trust, love... They’re not always so black and white.” She looked between Tōka and Tobirama, their gazes lowered in frustration and shame. “I wonder if you haven’t already seen a little of that for yourselves. Izuna... He’s not like the others, is he?”

The tension in the tent had reached its limit, and so had Tobirama. He had no words for her, no smart retort or rude quip. He met her gaze, and Mito’s face fell at how young he looked in that moment, small and unsure and a little afraid.

“I think...” Tōka began. “I think part of the problem is that Hashirama doesn’t listen to us. I know he wants peace, and it’s not that I don’t agree, but some things do feel like they’re more black and white than he’s willing to admit.”

“Yeah,” Tobirama said, drawing confidence from Tōka. “He just doesn’t get it. This isn’t just about Madara, it’s about all of them.”

Mito nodded. “I know that Hashirama doesn’t understand your concerns. But you have to understand that you are not your brother. He doesn’t see the world the way any of us do. I know that may feel like a weakness, but I don’t think it is. I really believe he can fix this.”

Tobirama wrinkled his nose, and for a moment Mito thought he might still try to argue. “Hey, do you smell that?” he said.

Tōka stood up and sniffed the air. “It smells like smoke.”

Mito smelled it, too, and when she stopped to listen, she thought she heard something crash. Then, screaming. She and the two Senju cousins ran outside in alarm, their previous animosity forgotten, to see what the commotion was.

“You’re right, Mito,” Tobirama said. “I’m not my brother. And I’m not gonna waste my breath trying to talk us out of this one.”

Mito followed his gaze to a banner raised high in the distance. It bore the Uchiha fan sigil.

“Oh my god,” Tōka said. “They’re here?”

“Are you really surprised?” Tobirama said. “Whatever, let’s just go before they burn the whole camp down!”
Mito watched them run off to get their armor as she stood there a moment in shock.

*The Uchiha are here.*

What was Madara thinking? This was insane even for the Uchiha. Her first thoughts were of the innocent civilians that lived in the Senju camp, defenseless save for the shinobi sworn to protect them.

“Lady Mito!”

Mako ran toward her with two other Uzumaki soldiers in tow. They were all dressed in their armor and ready for battle as though they’d been expecting it.

“General Mako,” she said, forcing her worries to a dark corner of her mind so she could focus on the task at hand.

“The Uchiha are attacking. I realize that part of our alliance says that we’re under no obligation to engage the Uchiha, but in my professional opinion, I don’t think we have a choice.”

A small explosion went off nearby. The fires were spreading. Mito bit her lip.

“We’ll focus on guarding the Senju civilian population. I understand your concerns, but our alliance conditions still stand. We don’t interfere with Senju-Uchiha disputes.”

“But Lady Mito, they’re attacking the camp. This is an unmitigated disaster.” Mako was usually so stoic and unemotional, but now he was truly concerned and willing to question her decision.

Mito could not ignore his justified fear. “Protect the civilians. And if the Uchiha attack you, defend yourselves. I don’t mean to condemn us all to a complacent death.”

Mako was not completely mollified, but he didn’t question her any further. “Yes, my lady. And what will you do?”

“I’ll join you as soon as I retrieve my armor. You go on ahead. Round up the civilians and get them out via the southwest exit. It’s the farthest away from the Uchiha from what I can gather.”

Mako bowed and ran off to do her bidding. Mito returned to her tent to gear up. All the while, her thoughts were on the conversation she’d had with Tōka and Tobirama.

*This hatred is a curse.*

“Madara, what are you doing?” she asked herself as she strapped on a whalebone arm brace.

Outside it was chaos. When she was ready to go, Mito made her way toward the civilian ward. People were running, screaming in fear. Some bore burns, women and men and children alike. Mito shouted for everyone to head to the southwest exit, where Uzumaki shinobi would guide them to safety. They scrambled to follow her orders, but the Uchiha soldiers responsible for attacking them were not far behind. As they approached, Mito positioned herself between them and the fleeing civilians.

The boldest of the Uchiha thought he could run right through her. He slashed at her with a kunai, Sharingan red and angry, but Mito met his attack head on and grabbed his arm. She twisted around him and took his arm with her until it cracked. He wailed in pain and crumbled to his knees.

“Not another step, Uchiha,” she bellowed at the rest of them.
“Lady Mito!” Mako ran to join her. “The rest of my men are herding the civilians to safety, but more are scattered around the camp.”

“That’s fine. We’ll hold off the Uchiha here.”

“Well, well, what do we have here? We really have to stop meeting like this, Mito.”

Mito narrowed her eyes at the Uchiha General that approached at a lazy saunter. “Hikaku. I suggest you turn around and go home. I’d rather not fight you.”

“You know, I never really liked you,” Hikaku said. “Never saw what Madara did, I guess.” He let her see his blazing Sharingan trail up and down the length of her, as though he was examining a choice piece of meat. “From here, you don’t really look worth it.”

Mito tried to ignore the skin-crawling disgust his taunting elicited. She knew Hikaku well, well enough to know that he was every bit as smart and cunning as Madara. He knew exactly what to say to rattle her. “This is your last warning,” she said. “Our feud is not with the Uchiha, but we’re obligated to defend the Senju civilians if you choose to attack them.”

Hikaku’s Sharingan glowed in the morning sun. The pretense was gone. He was just a soldier now, a killer with blood on the mind. “I think I’ll take my chances.”

Fool.

Mito clapped her hands together and quickened her chakra. A familiar poison fused with her rushing blood and awakened a power deep inside that she had spent an entire year of her life honing. The venomous, raw power pricked upon her skin and escaped through her pores to coat her in a second skin, but the only outward sign of the change in her was the blue rings around her now golden eyes. The Yin seal on her forehead pulsed with Slug Sage chakra.

“Then you gamble with your life,” she said.

She pulled her hands apart and released the natural sage energy she’d built up between them. It rolled out in a wave and hit the nearest Uchiha soldiers so hard that they flew back twenty feet.

“Bitch,” Hikaku spat.

He ran at her with fire at his back and she rose to defend against him, determined not to let him or any of his men get past her.

Hashirama was on his way back to camp when he noticed that something was terribly wrong. An early riser by nature, he never missed his morning meditation away from the hustle and bustle of the Senju camp. But after three days of celebration, he was looking forward to a hot, long breakfast with his favorite people.

His hunger disappeared at the sight of smoke and fire surrounding the northern entrance to the Senju camp and the banners that flew behind it.

“Damnit, Madara. What the hell are you doing?”

Hashirama ran back to camp, but he went a bit out of his way to get behind the brunt of the Uchiha infantry. They didn’t know what hit them when the ground split under their feet and roots thicker
around than three men burst from the earth.

“Hashirama! ‘Bout time you showed up!”

Sasuke and Mashira were already in the thick of things fighting, but they made their way toward Hashirama as he jumped off one of the vines he’d summoned.

“Have you seen him?” Hashirama demanded.

“Not yet,” Sasuke said grimly. His face was smudged with soot from the Uchiha’s fire attacks as well as his own. “Looks like he brought the whole family with him this time.”

The Uchiha attacked from all sides with fire and lightning. But as soon as the Senju soldiers saw their leader, their morale was restored and they fought harder to push back the invaders. They shouted battle cries of ‘Senju!’ and ‘Justice!’ and ‘Hashirama! Hashirama! Hashirama!’

“Hashirama!”

Madara’s voice cut through the cheers and rang out over the clang of steel and the roar of fire. He descended on the battlefield like a hurricane, upsetting everyone in his path as they scrambled to rush out of his way.

“Does he have to be so goddamned dramatic about it?” Sasuke said.

Hashirama was not in a joking mood. “Leave him to me.”

Sasuke was way ahead of him as he teamed up with Mashira and kicked back three Great Fireballs at the Uchiha, who didn’t anticipate their own attacks turned against them. Hashirama summoned more tree roots and launched them at Madara. Madara’s scythe sliced clean through one that would have impaled him.

“What’re you doing here? There are innocent civilians here!” Hashirama shouted at him.

“All’s fair in love and war, old friend,” Madara sneered. “Prepare to die!”

Hashirama’s summoned roots burned when Madara launched a slew of fireballs at them. He swung his wooden gunbai and unleashed a gusting wind technique that grew the fires to colossal heights. Hashirama fell back and threw up a thick wall of earth to protect himself from the molten onslaught. Sasuke was somewhere nearby fending off Uchiha soldiers alongside more Senju shinobi, but most of them had cleared out to avoid Hashirama and Madara’s battle.

I have no choice, Hashirama thought dismally as Madara summoned his trademark black fire. He wasn’t fooling around today.

He fell still and concentrated on the feel of the earth beneath his feet, drawing energy from it as he had a thousand times before. He’d always told Tobirama that there was power in the world around them if only shinobi bothered to learn how to tap into it. Power enough to defeat Madara once and for all? He would find out today.

Natural energy engorged Hashirama’s veins and pumped him full of power. Its effects manifested upon his skin in curling, red markings around his eyes and forehead, down his arms to his fingertips. He slammed his hand on the ground and forced massive, fleshy leaves to grow and smother Amaterasu before it could spread out of control. Madara could only gape in shock.

“You put out Amaterasu,” he said.
“We made a promise to get stronger, didn’t we? I haven’t forgotten it!”

Madara bared his teeth in a snarl. “Neither have I.”

Hashirama gasped at the voice in his ear so close even though Madara had been a hundred feet away just a second ago. He spun and caught Madara’s katana on his arm guard. They were inches apart, eye to eye.

“What the—” Hashirama gasped.

“You can’t escape me anymore, Hashirama.”

Madara’s Sharingan spun in patterns Hashirama had never seen before, and the world lost all its color as they plunged together into a black and white and red void where the moon was full and Madara had free rein.

Somewhere in the chaos, Tōka lost Tobirama. But there were so many enemies that she barely had time to worry about him as she executed genjutsu after genjutsu and cut down anyone in her path. The fire made it hard to breath, though, and she found herself forced to take temporary cover in a tent to escape asphyxiation. It turned out that inside was worse.

“Die, Senju!” an Uchiha kunoichi screamed as she launched a bolt of lightning at Tōka.

Tōka fell back and took the hit as a graze to her flank, crying out as the searing pain boiled her skin under her armor and raised painful, swollen welts that popped. The lightning destroyed the back wall of the tent, charring it until there was nothing left. Tōka used the destruction to craft a genjutsu powerful enough to make the kunoichi think her own attack was coming back for her. In her fear, she stumbled backwards, tripped, and slashed up her neck on a broken medicine jar that had shattered when the lightning passed through it. She didn’t get up, and Tōka didn’t wait around to see if she would.

Outside, Tōka drew her chokutō and prepared for the next battle, which ended up being the one she was dreading the most.

“Lightning,” he said. “I can smell it on you.”

Tōka had the sense to dodge instead of defend against the sparking tantō aimed at her head. She rolled and righted herself.

“Izuna?” she said.

Izuna retrieved his electrified blades from the ground and turned toward her. He wore a blindfold.

“I liked the genjutsu you used on me last time we met, Tōka.”

_How does he know it’s me?_

He lunged, and Tōka rolled again. This time, she tore the earth up with her in a last-minute Douton technique. Izuna’s tantō connected with the rolling rock, and their electricity dissipated. Tōka was quick to follow up with taijutsu. They clashed in a flurry of blades and popping electricity, and he was scary fast for a guy wearing a blindfold. Tōka cried out when he managed to slash the small of her back, a shallow cut through her thick armor, but a hit nonetheless. She fell into a roll and put
some distance between them.

“Izuna, what happened to you?” she said, fighting to catch her breath.

The bottom of his blindfold was starting to turn red with blood, but he did not appear concerned.

“You wouldn’t understand,” he said.

“Try me!”

His fingers began to spark with electricity again, and Tōka hauled herself to her feet. He lunged, blind to the world but so sensitive to her every move. Her genjutsu wouldn’t save her now that he could not see and be ensnared. Resigned to the fate she’d always known would catch up to her someday, Tōka held out her chokutō and prepared to meet his attack.

Only, it never came.

Hikaku’s Great Fireball was disgustingly immense, as powerful as Madara’s. Mito braced herself for impact and drew senjutsu to her palms. They glowed with invisible seals she’d painted on them over the years that looped up her forearms, like a cage. But this cage was not meant for her.

The fire hit her palms and she dug her fingers into it. The heat made her sweat and the flames singed the ends of her bangs. Sage chakra flooded to her hands and mixed with the fire until she could feel every part of it, as though it were a living, breathing thing. The heat, the greed, the desperation, the anger—all an extension of the man powering it. Little by little, it shrank and disappeared through her palms until there was nothing left.

“What the fuck?” Hikaku said.

Between them, the bodies had piled up. Uchiha, Senju, and civilians. Children. There was only one of her, and she couldn’t protect everyone coming through here. But she could sure as hell try.

“Now, it’s your turn to burn,” she said.

The seals on her palms released and she twisted. Fire rings swept around her in 360 degrees as she spun, growing fat and hot with the chakra Hikaku had so graciously imbued them. And then they flew. Hikaku and a few Uchiha soldiers near him scrambled to escape, but the fire was fast. It hit the slowest of them and incinerated everything it touched. Their armor melted through their skin and weighed them down. Within seconds, the fire had died down to a simmer as it slowly cooked them in their armor and devoured their flesh. A few escaped, but Hikaku did not.

Mito shook as she watched the bodies smolder and burn. Their guts had liquefied and oozed out in smoking, gelatinous puddles, aflame and foul with the stench of cooked flesh. Her fingers were raw and black with soot and stung as though she’d dipped them in embers. The sage chakra had amplified the fire to many times its original force and magnitude to the point where her seals almost couldn’t protect her body from it.

“Lady Mito,” Mako said.

He was bleeding from a wound in his side, and his face and armor were smeared with soot and the blood of the enemy, but he was standing. A few of the Uzumaki soldiers under his command were scattered about, helping each other stand and regroup after the Uchiha’s retreat.
“General.”

He was looking at her with a guarded expression—fear?—and he swallowed like it pained him.
“You need to rest.”

Mito looked around. There had to be at least an entire garrison of Uchiha soldiers on the ground
either dead or dying between the surviving Uzumaki and Senju shinobi that had gathered to defend
the civilians. She went cold despite the tingling burn in her hands. Hikaku’s body was contorted
nearly beyond recognition, food for his own fire at her feet.

_I did this?

“Most of the civilians got to safety. We were successful,” Mako said.

The fighting wasn’t over yet, though. In the distance, she could hear the telltale booming sounds of
Hashirama’s battle with Madara. They tended to restructure the landscape when they fought.

“There’s no time to waste. Make sure there’s no further danger to the civilians. I leave you in
charge,” Mito said.

“What’re you going to do?”

Mito glanced in the direction of Hashirama and Madara’s apocalyptic fight. “I’m going to stop this
fighting once and for all.”

She took off past the burning Uchiha corpses and ran towards the center of the fighting.

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“Welcome to Tsukuyomi,” Madara’s voice echoed from every direction all at once.

Hashirama looked around, but all he could see were open fields of black on white and a red moon
above. Fire burned behind him, black like this place, but it gave off no heat.

“Tsukuyomi,” Hashirama repeated. “But this is Izuna’s technique.”

“Not anymore.”

Hashirama was tired of these illusory games. “Madara! Show yourself!”

The ground rumbled beneath Hashirama’s feet, and a hand yanked him down before he could
escape. He opened his mouth to cry out, but he was soon dragged underground. Or rather,
underwater. He drifted in a black sea, and below him the red moon flickered beyond the surface.
This whole place was a Wonderland turned on its head, and Hashirama was lost in its mad space
and time completely at Madara’s mercy.

“Izuna was right,” Madara’s voice echoed. “There’s no Uchiha clan without me.”

Hashirama swam in the direction he thought was up and eventually breached the black sea’s
surface and gulped in a breath. Madara hovered above in the sky, silhouetted against the red moon.

“What did you do?” Hashirama said, afraid of the answer.

“It’s not what I did,” Madara said. “It’s what I’m going to do next!”
Hashirama channeled his senjutsu and churned the black water until it lifted him into the air atop a waterspout. “Madara!”

But just as he was about to connect, his vision shattered. The blackness cracked and fell away, and a light too bright took its place. Hashirama shielded his eyes and lost control of his technique. Before he knew what was up and what was down, solid ground met the soles of his feet. He was back in the real world.

“Woman, get out of my way!” Madara shouted.

“Mito?” Hashirama said.

She stood between them, shaking with barely contained rage. Golden chakra chains extended from her sleeves and wrapped around both Madara and Hashirama, trapping them. The chain was beginning to burn through Hashirama’s armor. She glared at Madara.

“And let you two kill each other? Not a chance.”

“What happened to your promise not to interfere?” Madara said. “All I see is the two of you plotting against me!”

“Enough already! I’m not against you, and neither is Hashirama!”

Hashirama was about to try to break free of her grip with an earth technique, but she retracted the chains.

“Oh, Madara... What have you done?” she asked. The elemental fury that had fueled her before was gone, replaced by a deep-seated despair as she pleaded with the man Hashirama knew she loved.

Hashirama approached her carefully from behind. He got another look at Madara, this time not within Tsukuyomi’s shadowy realm.

“The Uchiha always thought the Sharingan was the epitome of doujutsu, but they were wrong. There are levels beyond it, and I’ll find them.” Madara raised a hand to his temple, and Hashirama once again looked into the eyes he didn’t recognize. “The first step was to make my sight eternal by taking Izuna’s eyes.”

Mito gasped and covered her mouth.

“You stole your own brother’s eyes?” Hashirama said, scarcely believing his own words. Surely Madara, who loved his brother as much as Hashirama loved his own, could never be capable of such violence...

“Steal? Never. It was Izuna’s idea. I’ve told you both before—if you want something, you have to work for it. I’m not about to let Izuna’s sacrifice be in vain.”

“Madara, so help me—if you take another step, I won’t hold back,” Mito warned.

Hashirama put a heavy hand on her shoulder. “Madara’s my responsibility. Stay out of this, Mito.”

Mito was about to protest when Tōka’s voice cut through the din of battle.

“Izuna!” she shrieked.

Hashirama’s mouth went dry at the way Madara’s expression warped from cold fury to
desperation. When he ran off in the direction of the scream, Hashirama was quick to follow with Mito.

Tobirama’s hand did not shake, and he did not relent. Since the time he was old enough to walk, he’d held a sword in his hand. Every strike made him steadier, more precise, and this one was no different.

Except this one was different. This one wasn’t supposed to happen. Blood splattered over his sword’s hilt and coated his hand, sticky.

“Izuna!” Tōka screamed.

The shunshin wasn’t perfected, but Tobirama had been practicing. He was already so fast, but Izuna was fast, too. So he had to practice, make it better, because the blink of an eye could mean the difference between life and death. The blink of an eye was an eternity when he was moving as fast as the sun’s rays can light up the morning sky—an eternity for eyes that can see the future, eyes that had always seen Tobirama coming no matter how quick he was. In his imagination, Tobirama had always assumed this would go on forever, just as he imagined the Senju-Uchiha feud would continue until the end of time. It was just the way things were, the way they had always been. That would never change, until it did.

“Tobirama,” Izuna said. Blood coated his lips and teeth and dribbled onto his chin.

Tobirama’s eyes were wide, incredulous at what he’d done, and finally he began to tremble. Izuna’s extra weight on his blade made them teeter, and they would have collapsed together if Tōka hadn’t been there to catch them. Tobirama’s katana slipped out of his blood-slicked hand, and Izuna fell back into Tōka’s waiting arms on the ground.

“Oh my god,” she said, hands shaking as she had no idea what to do with them. “Oh my god.”

Tobirama sank to his knees, the weight of reality bearing down. His breathing was shallow and tasted sour on his tongue. He still could not believe what he was seeing.

“You were supposed to avoid that,” he said more to himself than to Izuna. “You always see me coming.”

Izuna coughed, and more blood dribbled down his pale chin.

“He’s blind, Tobirama,” Tōka said, sniffling to hide a sob. “He was like this when I found him.”

“Blind?” He’d already noticed the blindfold, but now it made sense. Blood was seeping through it where Izuna’s eyes should have been. “Dammit, Izuna, what the fuck are you doing out here fighting blind?”

“Couldn’t leave you here all by yourself.” The teasing in his tone fell upon deaf ears when he coughed on his own blood. It bubbled up from his wounds like it could not wait to get out.

The wound was mortal, but Tobirama didn’t have to look at it to know. He didn’t know any other way to fight Izuna.

“You were supposed to avoid it,” Tobirama said again, like a mantra that would reset what had just happened if he just kept repeating it. “Damn you to hell.”
Izuna smirked, a ghastly sight that reminded Tobirama of a weeping wound. “I’ll wait for you there.”

“It wasn’t supposed to be like this,” Tōka choked out over her tears. She fisted her hand in Izuna’s shirt front.

Izuna searched for her hand weakly and smeared her knuckles with his blood. “Yes, it was.”

Tobirama’s vision blurred with traitorous tears. This was no way for things to end, so suddenly and so sloppily. Izuna was a warrior, one of the best, and he deserved better, Uchiha or no. Izuna shuddered.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

Tobirama stared in shock as Izuna faded. There was no light that left his eyes or a final, quivering breath. As before, there was only darkness, and Izuna smiled. The seconds ticked by, but it wasn’t until Izuna’s hand slipped out of Tōka’s that Tobirama jerked awake and wiped an arm across his face to hide the tears. Izuna’s blood smeared on his cheeks, and his chest constricted.

“Izuna!”

Tobirama and Tōka looked up to see Madara sprinting toward them. They scrambled out of his way in a fright just as he sank to the earth and held his little brother in his arms.

Mito caught up to Hashirama and Madara just as they arrived at the place where they’d heard Tōka scream. Madara fell to the ground and cradled a body, while Tōka and Tobirama practically stepped over each other to get out of his way. They were covered in blood, but it wasn’t theirs.

“Oh god, no,” Hashirama said, horrified.

Mito covered her mouth in shock at the sight. Izuna lay unmoving with a katana protruding from his chest. Madara held him in his arms and shouted his name over and over. Izuna’s blindfold was soaked through with blood where his eyes should have been. A knot formed in Mito’s throat as she continued to watch, and she could not help the tears that began to fall as her heart ached for Madara in this moment.

“Izuna,” Madara said again, this time softly.

He shuddered and lowered his forehead to Izuna’s, and Mito realized that he must be crying. She’d never seen Madara cry, not even when Haruka died. Not even when Tajima had died in his arms years ago. Gently, he lowered Izuna to the ground and pulled the katana out of him.

“Tobi, what happened?” Hashirama asked.

Madara perked up and whirled around. He wielded the bloody katana that killed Izuna. “You,” he snarled, his tear tracks shining on his cheeks. “You did this!”

Tobirama took a step back and felt his hip for a weapon, but Madara held it. Tōka placed herself in between them.

“Madara, please, you don’t understand!” she tried to reason with him.

Madara didn’t hear her as he focused on Tobirama. “You did this! Murderer!”
Tobirama looked like he might shrivel up at any moment. “It was an accident,” he stammered. “I-I didn’t know he was blind!”

Madara’s eternal Sharingan spun with malevolent chakra as his fury and hatred began to consume him. By now, the fighting that had been going on around them had all but stopped as both Senju and Uchiha looked on at the tragedy unfolding between their leaders. No one dared to interfere as Madara’s hatred became almost palpable. Mito’s stomach twisted with the urge to retch.

Hashirama put himself between Madara and Tobirama and spread his arms. “Madara, stop!”

“Get out of my way! I’m going to rip him apart!”

“No, you’re not! This is over—look around you!”

He did, and he saw the hundreds of eyes, Senju and Uchiha alike, watching on in fear and trepidation. The anger warping his features began to fade as he stared back at them and saw something, something Mito could not name.

“Madara,” Hashirama tried again. He lowered his arms and approached carefully. “I know what you’re feeling right now, believe me, I do. War’s no excuse for losing a brother.”

“No, you don’t know. The brothers you lost? They were boys you hardly knew. Izuna—” His voice cracked, but he didn’t bother hiding his tears. “Izuna is my other half. He is everything. You can’t possibly understand!”

Hashirama had nothing to say to that. There was nothing to say.

Madara shuddered, and his tears fell to the ground for all to see. “He was all I had left,” he said in a small voice that did not sound like him at all.

“Madara,” Hashirama said, his own tears glistening in his dark eyes as he ached for his truest friend, “I’m so sorry.”

They held each other’s gazes for a few seconds, and they were the longest of Mito’s life as she wondered what the hell was going to happen next.

“You’re sorry?” Madara said, barely above a whisper.

“I would give anything to undo this, you know I would,” Hashirama said.

Madara had composed himself a bit, and his voice was steadier. He held out the bloody katana to Hashirama. “Then... Then kill Tobirama yourself. Then you’ll truly understand.”

Tōka snarled and pushed Tobirama behind her. The crowd of Senju and Uchiha soldiers that had gathered to watch began to whisper. Hashirama stared at the offered katana in shock.

“You can’t be serious,” he said.

“I’ve never been more serious in my life. You want to understand? You want all this to stop? Then kill him. Your brother’s life for mine—it’s that simple.”

“Hashi,” Tobirama said, his voice quavering.

Hashirama gritted his teeth and caught Mito’s eye over Madara’s shoulder, but she had no words for him. What could she or anyone else possibly say to fix this?
“I can’t do that, Madara,” he said at last. And yet, he reached for the katana, anyway. “But I’ll give you my life instead.”

“Hashirama, no!” Mito said before she could stop herself.

Madara caught her arm as she tried to get past him and put a stop to this. His grip was painfully strong, and she bit her lip to keep herself from crying out.

“Hashi, stop!” Tobirama shouted, desperate.

But Hashirama raised the katana and aimed its blade at his stomach. “If this is the only way to make our dream come true, then I’m happy to die for it.”

“Madara!” Mito shouted as she struggled to free herself.

His grip was iron clad, and if he didn’t let go she was going to draw a kunai on him, promises be damned. Madara’s pride was not worth Hashirama’s death. Hashirama’s hand was steady as he lifted the sword and prepared to plunge it into himself.

Mito’s vision blurred with unshed tears as panic and hysteria began to take control her of senses. “Madara, stop this!”

Hashirama closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Suddenly, Madara released Mito and grabbed Hashirama’s wrist just as he was about to stab himself. The tip of the katana pierced his flesh and he bled, but it was a shallow wound. The tense silence that followed was only broken when Tobirama sank to his knees and cradled his head in his hands, sobbing.

“All right,” Madara said, as though someone else were speaking through him, hollow and detached. “Enough. It’s over.”

Hashirama dropped the katana, and it clattered on the ground in between them. It was all Mito could do not to collapse on the ground as he knees shook with the fear of what had almost just happened.

“It’s over,” Madara said again. “I’ll accept your terms for peace.”

She didn’t recognize his voice at all, or the empty eyes that had once gazed upon her with nothing short of the most ardent longing and affection. Even as the onlooking soldiers began to chatter and help each other walk, relieved that the battle was finally over, Mito could not share in their relief.

Hikaku and his men were still burning where she’d left them. The bodies, Senju and Uchiha alike, lay in pieces as far as the eye could see. Izuna lay a stone’s throw away where the sun was curdling his blood and putrefying his cold flesh. And all Mito could think was that Satto had been right in the end: some people are worth the lives of hundreds.

Whether they like it or not.
Tobirama was sweating under the scorching, summer sun as he hid behind a tree out of sight. Even at this distance, the funeral pyre’s heat reddened his face and seared his vision. But he looked on as the Uchiha gathered to send off their fallen. Bodies, those that had been recoverable and recognizable, were cleaned and dressed before ending up on wooden beds stacked around and on top of each other. The Uchiha always burned their dead, an efficient practice, and a beautiful one, if Tobirama was being honest. Izuna’s body lay at the top of the pyre where only the smoke separated him from the clear, blue sky above.

Tobirama wasn’t sure why he’d risked coming here. Hashirama had all but ordered the Senju to leave the Uchiha in peace as they sent off their dead. The fighting was over, this time for good, he insisted. But Tobirama wasn’t here to fight.

“Thank you.”

He rubbed his eyes, which stung with sweat that accumulated on his brow and slowly dripped down his face. Izuna’s last words haunted him. He hadn’t slept much since then, and the days seemed to blur together. He was supposed to be back at the camp finishing up preparations for the journey to Uzushiogakure, where the formalities of the alliance would take place, but instead he was here cooking in the sun and watching black smoke rise to the heavens, taking the last of Izuna with it.

Someone began to speak, probably Madara, and Tobirama decided he better leave now before anyone noticed his presence. He activated his shunshin technique and teleported back to his tent, where he’d left a kunai with the Thunder God seal for quick retreats such as this one. He wiped his brow on his sleeve and took a shuddering breath.

“Tobi, there are you! I’ve been looking all over for you.” Hashirama let himself into the tent. He was carrying an armful of folded tarps, which he set down on the floor. “These’re for your tent. We’re gonna leave mine up until the last day, so you’ll have to room with me until then.”

Tobirama nodded numbly but didn’t make any attempt to start getting to work.

“Hey, you don’t look so good,” Hashirama said. “Is that a sunburn?”

“I just came from Izuna’s funeral pyre.”

Hashirama frowned. “I thought I told everyone to leave the Uchiha alone for that. They deserve to mourn their dead in peace.”

“I wasn’t there to disturb them.”

“Then why?”

Tobirama sank down onto his bed. He leaned forward over his knees and ran his hands through his sweaty hair. Hashirama took a seat next to him and put a hand on his back.

“It’s not your fault, you know,” Hashirama said at length. “You just did your job, like always. You couldn’t know Izuna was blind.”

As appreciated as Hashirama’s sympathy was, it didn’t convince Tobirama in the least. “That’s just it, though. Why the hell would he be out there in the first place fighting blind? He would’ve known
I’d go all out. We always did.”

“I don’t know. But I do know Izuna wasn’t one to let Madara fight alone, no matter what.” Hashirama patted Tobirama on the back for comfort. “But in a roundabout way, his death made the alliance a reality. I wish it could be different and that he was still here, but I have to see the good in it all the same.”

Tobirama got up and paced to the other side of the tent. “No, see, that’s just the problem. The price for this so-called alliance was way too high. And honestly? I don’t see much good in it knowing where we’re all coming from. It’s like... It’s like Madara had no choice after what happened, like we coerced them into it. That’s not a real alliance, Hashi, come on.”

Hashirama stood up. His expression was somber and stern. “Tobi, we’ve been over this. The fighting is over, and the alliance is happening, just like Madara and I hoped it would one day. We always talked about the day when all the fighting would stop, and it’s finally here.”

“Yeah, and you were ready to kill yourself to make it happen!”

“Is that what this is about? You’re angry with me?”

“Oh my god.” Tobirama laughed bitterly. “You really never listen to a word I say, do you? All our lives, you’ve been the golden boy. The leader. But you know what? You can’t lead anyone if you’re dead.”

Hashirama frowned. “But I’m not dead. Madara was never gonna let it happen.”

“Are you so fucking delusional that you can’t see what’s going on?” Tobirama spat. “You were ready to take your own life to appease him! What the hell do you think would’ve happened to us after that? To me and Tōka? To the Uzumaki?”

“Tobi—”

“No, you’re gonna listen to me now!” Tobirama had worked himself up, and fuck if Hashirama was going to brush him aside now like he usually did. “I’m sick of this hero bullshit you got stuck in your head. You can’t keep doing everything by yourself. You know what happens to guys who operate alone? They die. No one’s watching their back and they die. But Hashi, you got me. And you got Sasuke and Tōka and Mito. God, Mito chose to stay with you over Madara, and we both know what was going on there.”

“Tobi, I don’t—” Hashirama tried.

But Tobirama was not finished. “No, you don’t get to interrupt me! You made a decision that would’ve fucked us all! You always do this, and I’m done, okay? I’m fucking done. You walk around like you’re a martyr waiting to happen, like you don’t have people who would seriously rather be dead than lose you, and you’re the best of us, you always were. I mean, shit. Even Madara had Izuna. And Izuna, he... He just...”

Tobirama shook with emotion as he tried to compose himself. Hashirama was stunned into silence for once. At length, Tobirama took a steadying breath and clenched his fists to keep them from trembling.

“Izuna was trying to warn me. He knew I’d understand. That’s why I went to his funeral pyre.”

Hashirama shook his head in confusion. “What? What are you saying? Izuna tried to warn you about what?”
“Izuna, you know, he was so... Well, you never really knew him. Guess I didn’t, either. But I listened, so maybe that’s why he came to me. Maybe Madara never heard him, like you never hear me. He talked about a curse.”

Hashirama placed a hand on Tobirama’s shoulder. “Listen, I...think you better get some rest. You were in the heat for too long, and with everything that’s happened lately, I think—”

“For once just listen to what I think!” Tobirama shouted. He wrenched out of Hashirama’s grip. “Izuna talked about a curse, a curse of hatred. I can’t explain it, but he always saw me coming. He always saw what no one else could, and I think he saw something bad. Really bad. He tried to warn me and Tōka, but it was too late. And damnit, Hashi, he thanked me.”

“Thanked you?”

“When he died. His last words to me were ‘thank you’, like he was happy to go. And I just—”

Tobirama ran his hands through his hair again and pulled. “I don’t know, I think he didn’t see another way out. A guy like him who saw everything, every little detail...”

“I do listen to you, Tobi. But you have to listen to me when I tell you that Madara wouldn’t have let me die. This is our dream, and we’re gonna build it together.”

“Don’t you get it? That curse Izuna was talking about wasn’t just about him. It’s something that affects Madara, too. Hell, probably all the Uchiha.”

“They do have every right to hate us since we’ve killed hundreds of their kin.”

“No, it’s more than that. Izuna was different lately. I can’t explain it, but I think whatever he thought this curse was changed him. Just like it’s changing Madara.”

Hashirama looked tired just listening to this. “Tobi, this is ridiculous. There’s no curse. There’s no such thing as curses.”

“Oh yeah? And what if there is? What if Izuna was right, and it’s only gonna get worse? He thought death was his only way out. Well, he’s free now, but Madara sure as hell isn’t. You saw how he charged in here like a goddamned hellhound killing innocent civilians, and you’re telling me he hasn’t changed? Wake up!”

Hashirama’s eyes flashed with anger; he was about done indulging Tobirama’s paranoia. “You don’t know him like I do.”

“Maybe that’s your problem! You got this image in your head of Madara when you were kids before all this shit happened, but I got news for you: that’s not the same Madara out there now.”

“I can’t believe you. I know you’ve always held a grudge against the Uchiha, but I thought you’d be on board for the alliance. For peace.”

Tobirama was shocked that Hashirama still could not see the truth. “We’re never going to have peace with the Uchiha! Why can’t you get that through your thick skull? Father made a lot of mistakes, but he was right about that, at least. Izuna said—”

“I don’t care what Izuna said!” Hashirama shouted.

Tobirama was taken aback at the uncharacteristic outburst, but Hashirama wasn’t finished.

“How dare you try to jeopardize this alliance. Yes, Izuna’s death and so many others were a steep
price to pay, and I deeply regret that. But if you think for one minute that it was a mistake to go through with this, then you’re blinder than Izuna was when you killed him.”

“But Hashi—”

“No, enough! I’ve heard more than enough out of you! You’ve always been against the Uchiha, even now when they’re willing to work with us. You think I do things by myself? You think I don’t listen to you? Well, how can I when everything you say is an attack on everything I’ve worked so hard to achieve?”

Tobirama stared in shock at Hashirama, who’d hardly ever raised his voice to him or to anyone else in such a manner.

“The alliance is happening, whether you like it or not. And you will cooperate with the Uchiha, just like Madara’ll make sure they cooperate with us. Is that clear?” Hashirama said.

Tobirama swallowed and his throat clenched. “Oh, your position’s always been clear to me, Brother.”

He stormed out of the tent.

Gendoru Uchiha looked on in silence as Madara and Hashirama stood before clan regent Ensui Uzumaki, the lordling Inari Uzumaki, and the lady Mito Uzumaki. The great hall in Uzushiogakure where the alliance ceremony was taking place was grand indeed, with hand-carved wall panels in cherrywood, mahogany, and ginkgo. Perfect for the gravity of this particular ceremony.

The Uchiha Generals stood to his left, all equally armored and stiff. General Yurima was looking especially serious today, no doubt still reeling from the shock of losing his soon-to-be son in law, Izuna. As a clan elder, Gendoru was obligated to witness any momentous political, social, or military event. Never in his sixty-seven years had he expected to oversee an alliance between Uchiha and Senju, though. He thought of Tajima and let his eyes fall.

I wonder what you would think of the runt of the litter now?

Ensui spoke of the hardships both Uchiha and Senju had experienced over the past one thousand years, of the chaos and bloodshed they had wrought upon each other seemingly without end. And, of course, of the new beginning ahead of them.

“You stand apart from your predecessors as scions of hope, prosperity, and peace for a future that is yours to mold,” Ensui said. “I cannot say I know what the future holds or how it will unfold. But I can say that the Uzumaki will support you to the best of our ability.”

General Goro was whispering something to General Risa. She frowned, but her hawkish gaze was settled on Madara’s back. Gendoru averted his eyes before he was caught eavesdropping. He didn’t need to listen in to know what they were saying. Everyone was skeptical of this alliance, of Madara’s acquiescence. He’d lost his brother—was that the only reason they were here?

“My daughter once asked me why we must seek alliances with those we do not know, with those stronger than us. Sometimes, even, with our enemies. I like to think that my answer informed her later judgment in one such matter.” He nodded to Mito. “I will tell you the same thing I told her that day. The sun may evaporate a single drop of rain, but it stands no chance against a mighty
ocean. Hashirama, Madara. Together, you can command the seas and the stars. But alone, you can only drown.

“My daughter has been my eyes and ears in the battlefield with you. Through her, I have witnessed your feats and accomplishments, as well as your failures. And now I see two men, no different from myself, who are unafraid to stand together and ask for peace. Mito?"

Mito unrolled a thick scroll she had been holding and held it out for Hashirama. She nudged Inari, who suddenly remembered his job. He passed Hashirama a quill pen, and Hashirama accepted it with a small smile.

“With your signatures, you agree to always support one another through times of peace and strife alike, until the end of time,” Ensui said.

Hashirama signed his name and passed the scroll and quill to Madara to do the same. Once signed, Ensui accepted the scroll and held it up for all to see.

“The Uchiha, Senju, and Uzumaki shinobi present here today bear witness to this noble act of bravery. Please show your respect.”

Everyone took a knee. Gendoru sank down with a huff. The humid, summer air was making him sweat in his armor. Mito stepped forward with a thick, embroidered ribbon dyed red and gold, the Uzumaki colors.

“All that’s left is to seal the alliance with a handshake,” she said.

Madara and Hashirama faced each other. Gendoru peered at his young leader, but Madara’s expression was difficult to discern from this angle. Madara and Hashirama clapped their hands together and shook. Mito laid the sash over their hands and wrapped it around them three times. She then lay her hand top theirs, holding them together.

“We thrice bless your union and pray for your future successes,” Ensui said.

Risa and Goro were whispering again. Gendoru pressed his lips together but said nothing. The ceremony ended, and almost immediately Uchiha and Senju went their separate ways.

A hand reached down to help him up. “General Yurima, thank you, but I’m perfectly capable of standing on my own.”

Yurima took Gendoru’s hand in his slender one anyway and helped him up. The silver of Yurima’s hair gleamed in the sunlight. “And I’m perfectly capable to looking out for an esteemed elder.”

Goro and Risa had walked off together, still in conversation, and Gendoru watched their retreating backs. Yurima followed his gaze and cut in front of it.

“Allow me to offer you tea at my quarters,” he said.

“Ah, that would be very good, thank you.”

Gendoru fell into step beside the taller man, and they proceeded in silence until they were out of earshot of the rest of the ceremony’s attendees.

“They’re not alone, you know,” Yurima said. “Others are concerned, too.”

Gendoru frowned. He hated all this secrecy and political duplicity, but even he couldn’t ignore
what had been right in front of him. “It doesn’t matter. No one will challenge Madara now.”

They arrived at Yurima’s quarters, which took up three rooms in the southern Uzumaki family compound. Yurima escorted Gendoru to a table on the balcony while he prepared a pot of tea.

“Whispers are much slower and softer than direct confrontation,” Yurima said. “But even a slow death is still death in the end.”

Gendoru scowled. “Don’t know why you’re tellin’ me this. I’m just the trainer. I don’t have any part in the politics, never have.”

Yurima served the tea and sat down opposite Gendoru. “Because you’ve known Madara all his life, Tajima before him, and his father before that. You’ve been around the Uchiha longer than almost anyone. I wonder, what do you think of all this?”

Gendoru sipped his tea and took a moment to look beyond the balcony to the verdant gardens that covered the earth to the shoreline.

“We won’t be overheard here,” Yurima said. “I made sure of it.”

Gendoru shook his head. “My opinion doesn’t matter. Madara’s the leader, and I haven’t seen a better one in all my years.”

“But good leaders don’t always do good things. Look at the Senju. Hashirama’s proven himself a capable leader, but that never stopped him from slaughtering our kind.”

“Never stopped us, either. You’re a general; you oughtta know.”

Yurima smiled softly. Gendoru decided he didn’t like that curling smile at all. “Forgive me. I, too, am pleased the fighting will officially end. It bores me so.”

“Cut the crap. You know as well as I do the fighting will never stop. There’s more than one way to skin a cat.”

“Yes, I remember you taught that lesson well when I was under your tutelage. Still, doesn’t it bother you a little that the Uchiha have the short end of the stick here? Decisions will now be made by assembly. Hashirama, Tobirama, and Tōka each have one vote, but only Madara speaks for the Uchiha. And the Uzumaki will always side with the Senju as long as Mito speaks for them. Four to one aren’t the best odds, even for a shinobi with Madara’s...unique talents.”

“Like I said, I don’t know much about the politics of it all, and I don’t care.”

“Father?”

A young woman emerged from inside, and Gendoru recognized her as Yurima’s daughter.

“Kasumi, you look radiant this morning.” Yurima said.

Kasumi wore a black kimono and a white obi embroidered with blooming, red flowers. Though her face was naturally soft and comely to any admiring eye, the dark rings around her eyes and tightly-wound bun holding her hair back spoke of sleepless nights and compounded stress.

“Lady Kasumi,” Gendoru said. “Are you well?”

Kasumi bowed respectfully. “Forgive me, it is lovely to see you, Gendoru. I’m as well as can be expected.”
“You’re still in mourning,” Gendoru said politely. “I imagine the last battle must have been difficult on you and the other women.”

Kasumi averted her eyes to hide the flash of emotion that betrayed her feelings, but she only nodded.

“Excuse my daughter,” Yurima said. “As you said, it’s been a trying time what with all the shinobi and kunoichi we lost recently. Izuna, especially, has been a tragic loss for the clan.”

Kasumi suddenly bowed low again. “Please excuse me, I did not mean to intrude.”

Gendoru frowned at her sudden eagerness to leave, but Yurima dismissed her and she scuttled back inside behind closed doors.

“Young bride grows more beautiful every time I see her. When do you plan on marrying her off?” Gendoru took another sip of his tea and savored the mild flavor.

“No time soon. What with this turn of events, I imagine I’ll have some difficulty finding a suitable Uchiha shinobi still alive and worthy of her hand. Perhaps I should look among the Senju for candidates.”

Gendoru choked on his tea and coughed. “You can’t be serious.”

“Really, old man, has going senile robbed you of your sense of humor?”

“That wasn’t funny. And this senile old goat could still best you in a duel of swords.”

“All in the name of peace, hm?” Yurima traced the rim of his tea cup with a pale finger. “You say you want no part of the politics, but I sense you won’t have a choice for much longer, if you know what’s good for you.”

“Is that some kind of threat?”

Yurima chuckled. “Of course not. Think of it as a friendly warning. With Izuna and Hikaku out of the picture, Madara stands alone. He’ll need capable advisors he can trust.”

“Madara never trusted anyone but Izuna.”

“See, that’s where I’m afraid you’re wrong. Now that we’re all friends, Madara will be spending more time with Hashirama. You know the rumors, I’m sure.”

“That they’ve secretly been friends all these years? I know them, and I don’t trust them any more than I trust the Senju.”

Perhaps, but Madara’s surrender was rather poignant. You should’ve seen it, how he all but begged Hashirama not to end his own life. And then there’s Mito. Well, we all know what vexes all men, and Madara is no exception.”

Gendoru did not much like where this was going. “What’re you getting at?”

Yurima shrugged. “Like I said, just a friendly warning. So much hangs in the balance, and a little push in the wrong direction could mean the end of the Uchiha clan as we know it.”

“Madara would never let that happen. I may not know much, but I know him. If there’s anything I’m sure of, it’s Madara’s devotion to the clan and to protecting it.”
“But who will protect Madara?”

Gendoru said nothing to that.

“Do you think Risa and Goro will? I’m sure they’d like the chance, but you know what happens when you give rabid dogs free run of the chicken coop. No, Madara will turn to the ones closest to him in his hour of need. You may not care for rumors and secret trysts, but I’m not willing to bet my life or my daughter’s future on them. Someone has to step up before it’s too late for all of us.”

“I get it. And you think you’re the perfect man for the job, is that it? What’s your agenda? Become Madara’s new right hand man until the Senju kill you, too? They seem to have a pretty good track record with that sort of thing.”

“Why would the Senju kill the new champion of their cause?”

Gendoru leaned back as he processed what Yurima was telling him. “So, you’ll go along with the alliance so long as you come out on top.”

Yurima smirked. “Now you’re thinking like a politician. If you can’t beat them, join them and let them adore you for it.”

Gendoru stood up. “Well, good luck to you. I’m sure you’ll need it. I’ll see myself out.”

Yurima stood up and got in front of him before he could leave. “I can’t convince Madara alone. He doesn’t trust me.”

“The last person he trusted is dead, so you won’t get much help there.”

Gendoru tried to get past him, but Yurima blocked his path again. “Perhaps, but even the staunchest skeptics can be persuaded. You said yourself that you’ve known him since he was a boy, before he became Madara Uchiha. That means something to him.”

“I told you, I want no part of this.” He muscled past Yurima.

“So you’d rather let the likes of Goro and Risa start a civil war that’ll kill us all instead of doing your duty to the clan?”

Gendoru stopped in his tracks and lay a hand over the hilt of his sword.

“Because that’s exactly what will happen if we let those jingoist buffoons gather support,” Yurima continued. “They’ve already started, as you noticed. If we don’t nip this in the bud now, there won’t be an Uchiha clan to save. Madara may be the best of us, but he’s only one of us. As a trainer of soldiers, you know best that numbers will always crush even the most proficient genius if he stands alone.”

Gendoru glared back at Yurima. “I don’t like all these games.”

“Unfortunately, there’s no choice in the matter. We play to win, or we die along with the rest of the clan when Goro and Risa get their way. What shall it be, old man? Die, or fight to live another day?”

The hilt of Gendoru’s sword was little comfort in this moment. Death and war were familiar enemies on the battlefield with his sword to guide him, but in a game of shadows his sword would fare poorly against lies, secrets, and intrigue. But what choice did he have? Alone, even Madara was only a man. He had been the one to bring Tajima and Madara together. If not for Gendoru,
they would not be here now. Perhaps, they would not be at all.

“All right,” Gendoru said. “I’m listening.”

——

Madara stood on the Uzushiogakure shoreline in sandals and his ceremonial kimono. The Uchiha fan was proudly embroidered upon the back under his loose, long hair, but his weapons were nowhere to be seen. The ceremony that sealed the Senju and Uchiha alliance had just finished, and after shaking hands with Hashirama, he’d been eager to get away from all the strange eyes. No one had stopped him, and he didn’t wait to wonder why.

The ceremony had been fast but elegant, a courtesy he was sure he owed the Uzumaki overseeing the treaty signage. Mito herself sealed the handshake that joined the Senju and Uchiha clans. After that it was a bit of wax, a signature here, and the past was forgotten. Sort of. Even out here in a silence broken only by the sounds of breaking waves, Madara’s head was a jumble of voices shouting for his ear and memories fighting to be heard. One rang out above the rest:

_The Uchiha come first._

The treaty didn’t put the Uchiha first, but Madara had known that from the onset. With their numbers slashed and the Uzumaki padding the Senju’s headcount, the cards were not in Madara’s favor. But he did have one thing going for him—a best friend and now brother in arms who truly only wanted the best for him.

“We’ll become the strongest and make our dream come true!”

Was it worth the cost Madara had paid? For the dream he’d longed for his whole life?

“We’ll do it together. Promise me.”

Was a child’s dream worth the life he still had?

“I’d like to see it one day. More than anything.”

Mito’s laughter echoed at the very edge of his memory, alive in this place that was like no other. It was in the breaking waves that soaked the rocky beach, the endless blue skies at the edge of the earth, the pale moon flowers and the lightning bugs glowing softly in the night’s they’d shared here, a lifetime ago. Was it worth it?

Madara picked up one of the many rocks smoothed and weathered by years of ocean beatings. The sky was clear and endless blue, and gulls cooed high in the sky, circling and searching for food. The whirlpools swirled around dark, depthless centers to the bottom of the sea or beyond to worlds unseen. He squeezed the stone between his fingers and let it fly with all his might across the sea, where it skipped three, four, five times before it sank beneath the churning waves, swept away in the deadly undercurrents that weaved in between the whirlpools.

Madara closed his eyes, and he imagined the skipping stone’s fall to the bottom, pulled and pushed along with the submerged eddies.

“This is the last time you cry, Brother.”

“I’m sorry, Izuna,” he said, giving in to the urge to cry all over again. “I couldn’t help it.”
Dark eyes followed the skipping stone’s downward plummet as it sank deeper to a place even Madara couldn’t follow. But the whirlpools continued to roar in their feral way, this way and that way. Always.

“I’ll stay here in the shadows so you can fight in the light.”

Was it worth it?

Madara shuddered and furiously wiped his stinging eyes.

“I thought I might find you out here.”

The salt air was coarse and a little sour on Madara’s tongue, but when he opened his eyes, the wind and sun filled his sight with endless, clear sky and the sun shining far to the west. He caught his breath and faced Mito and the answer that was so easy if only he’d let himself have it.

“You shouldn’t be here,” he said.

The last time they met on a beach, he’d found her. This time, she was the one wandering in search of something, and he was the one lost at sea. Her hair was tied back in a braided bun off her shoulders, and she wore a traditional navy kimono decorated with almond blossoms for the ceremony earlier. The Uzumaki crest was emblazoned upon her obi.

“This isn’t your beach,” she said.

Madara averted his gaze. She didn’t say anything further or draw nearer. She’d learned something of him since their first encounter on a beach much like this one so many years ago.

“I came here to remember,” he said.

Slowly, Mito approached and stood beside him. “What do you remember?”

“Everything. And I don’t know...” He eyed her askance, but she kept her gaze ahead on the distant whirlpools. “I don’t know if it’s enough.”

“I remember something about this place, too. And back then, it was more than enough.”

The wind loosened her bangs and pulled short flyaways from her neatly wound bun. This close, he wondered what she saw in the eyes that weren’t his.

“It’s not that simple,” he said.

“What if it is?”

He shook his head. “That idiot’s rubbing off on you.”

Mito’s expression softened and she tucked some loose hair behind her ear. “The last time we were here, you helped save a lot of people.”

“The last time I was here, I helped make a nightmare come true.”

“Madara...”

“I’ve let a lot of nightmares run free chasing our stupid dream. And I just don’t know.”

She took his hands in hers and looked up at him. “Then let me show you. Do you see that?”
The island was small, but it was dense with trees, gardens, and dwellings. From the beach, Madara could see the outlying civilian houses built of stone. Nearer to the center lay the Uzumaki shinobi’s quarters, wood-paneled houses interconnected by weaving gardens and natural tree tunnels. Even people were visible from the shore walking around, chatting, living.

“That’s my home, and those are my people,” Mito said. “When you fought off the Kyuubi, you saved them.”

“That wasn’t just me, and we didn’t kill the beast in the end, in case you forgot.”

She searched his face for something recognizable. “You just don’t see it, do you? It’s nothing to you because you think you failed. But it’s everything to me because you tried. Because you helped Hashirama and me back then, just like you’re doing now.”

“It’s nothing to get so worked up about,” he said.

“It’s not nothing, it’s your dream. And you promised to show me one day.”

She let him go, and he stared at nothing. By now, the skipping stone he’d thrown into the ocean may have reached the bottom. It would remain there on a lonely throne in the tidal abyss, somewhere the sun would never shine and even the whirlpools in all their quiet might couldn’t persuade it.

“We’ll show you together,” Hashirama said. He was approaching from the direction of the shinobi dwellings where the treaty signage had taken place earlier. “What do you say, Madara?”

Madara looked between the two of them. “Two against one again, huh?”

“Nah.” Hashirama put a hand on his shoulder. “You’re not alone. You have us.”

Hashirama held his gaze in silence as unspoken words passed between them.

Was it worth it?

“And hey, the three of us together are pretty much unstoppable,” Hashirama said.

Madara slipped free and averted his gaze to the seascape. “No, we’re not. There’s always going to be something out there we can’t stop.”

“Well, then let’s go get it.”

“Wait, what?” Mito said.

“The Kyuubi, right? Let’s finish what we started here, once and for all,” Hashirama said.

Madara scowled. “It must be pleasant living in that cotton-stuffed head of yours.”

“No, I’m serious. Our dream can wait a little longer.”

“What exactly are you suggesting?” Mito asked.

Hashirama’s expression was grim but determined. “Let’s hunt down the Bijuu. All of ‘em, not just the Kyuubi.”

“Changing the future won’t fix the past,” Madara said. “No matter how noble your intentions.”
“No, it won’t,” Hashirama said softly. “We’re not ready to forget the past, and I don’t ever want to. So instead of trying, I wanna do something for the future, something together. I’m not gonna let what happened here happen to the place we’ve been dreaming of building since we were kids. And I know that has to count for something even if it doesn’t bring back the people we lost.”

“To me, you come first,” Izuna had confided in Madara that fateful night at the Naka Shrine.

“What do you say? Three against the monsters?” Hashirama said.

Madara set his jaw. Even here, Izuna’s fatidic confession still echoed as though he were standing here with him. But Izuna wasn’t here any more than the skipping stone Madara had thrown in the ocean was.

“You’re sure about this, Hashirama?” Mito asked. “The last time we fought the Kyuubi, we barely escaped with our lives. And now—”

“And now we’re the best. Together, I know we’re the best. If not us, then who?”

Mito’s expression softened as she thought about Hashirama’s proposal. Madara’s fingers curled around the empty space where the stone he’d thrown used to rest.

“I’ll stay here in the shadows so you can fight in the light.”

Even in the bone-crushing darkness at the bottom of the sea, the only way to go was up against the swirling currents laced with light. Was it worth it? Madara didn’t have his brother’s foresight to know the answer. All he had in this vast, lonely world now were the two people standing right here with him, the ones who had not given up on him and the dream they had yet to accomplish.

“Let’s do it,” Madara said. “We’re the only ones who can.”

Hashirama grinned. “Exactly! So, Mito?”

“You realize we could die out there, and then everything we’ve done up until now will fall apart,” she said.

“I won’t die,” Madara said. “I still have something I have to do.”

“We all do,” Hashirama said.

She bit her lip and smiled. “I can’t believe you two. But...I know you’re right. You won’t die out there because there’s no way I’ll let you.”

Hashirama laughed and looped an arm each around Mito and Madara in an uncomfortably firm grip. “That’s the way!”

Mito groused playfully as Hashirama laughed. And Madara looked to the sea, wondering. Was it worth it?

I still have something I have to do.

Hashirama’s arm hung loosely around his shoulder, and Mito’s eyes sparkled with the kind of possibility he’d never been able to grasp. He let them drag him back towards the the Uzumaki compound, apparently resigned to his fate that would always bring him back to them.
Madara’s temporary quarters were nothing too lavish, but they had the advantage of being secluded from the rest of the clan. It was night and the moon was fat and full in the sky. Lightning bugs flickered in the garden outside, and waves crashed softly against the shore beyond. Gendoru sat across from Madara as Yurima pitched their proposal to him. He hadn’t said a word as Yurima explained the possibility of conflict within the clan in the wake of the new alliance and how best to circumvent it. Madara was surprisingly silent and calm as he let Yurima speak.

“To be brief, I feel that Gendoru and I could be helpful to you as we make the transition from a single, nomadic clan to, well, this. I want this alliance to succeed as much as you do, and I would hate for anything internal to jeopardize that.”

Gendoru watched Madara think, and his eyes were drawn to the eerie, red glow of Madara’s Eternal Mangekyo Sharingan. They were unlike any Sharingan Gendoru had ever seen, and he hadn’t seen Madara deactivate it once since he’d acquired it. Was it because he couldn’t? Or wouldn’t?

“What do you think about all this, Gendoru?”

Madara’s sudden question startled him. Yurima was also looking at Gendoru expectantly. He cleared his throat. “Madara, I’ve known you since you were too small to pick up a sword. You know I don’t like all this political nonsense.”

“All the same, you’re here now. I’ll hear your opinion.”

Gendoru shifted in his chair. “I’ve heard the talk of rebellion and civil war. It’s nothing serious right now, but talk spreads like wildfire. If there’s anything I can do to ensure the Uchiha’s future, I’ll lay down my sword and my life.”

Madara leaned forward on the table and clasped his hands together. “I’m aware that the alliance isn’t popular among many Uchiha. But they’ll have to get used to it. This is the reality.”

“Support will take time,” Yurima reminded him. “But I believe with the right message, we can convince the rest of the clan to accept the peace you and Hashirama have created.”

Madara peered between the two of them. Just when it looked like he might say something, he stood up abruptly. “I’m going away for a while.”


“The Kyuubi. I have unfinished business with it. Mito and Hashirama will be accompanying me. I don’t know how long we’ll be away.”

Gendoru was about ready to fall over in shock. “Madara, what’re you thinking? The clan needs you right now!”

Madara smiled softly. “I think the clan needs a little less of me and a little more time to recover. Someone told me I was working them too hard, that I was... That I’d changed. Maybe I have.”

“Madara, if you leave now, Goro and Risa could use your absence to rally support,” Yurima said.

“Then I guess you and Gendoru will have to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

Gendoru got up. “If you’re not here, there’s no telling what could happen.”

“You speak as if I’m leaving you all alone. The Senju will still be here.” He looked between the
two of them. “Don’t misunderstand, I know exactly what you’re up to, Yurima. If you want to prove yourself, then show me you can work with the Senju. My brother didn’t die for some petty civil war.”

Gendoru could only stare in shock. A game, huh? Once more, he wondered what Tajima would think of his protégé now.

“And what of Goro and Risa?” Yurima asked.

“Kill them if you must, I don’t care. I don’t want anything to stand in the way of the new peace,” Madara said.

Yurima bowed to hide his smirk and excused himself. Gendoru, however, lingered.

“You’re not a child anymore, and I’m not your training master. I’ll respect your decisions as my leader without question,” Gendoru said.

Madara looked at him expectantly. “Speak freely, old man. You never had a problem with it before.”

“If you leave and Yurima and I can’t get the clan under control, everything will be lost.”

Madara smiled, but there was no joy in it. “If I leave and the Uchiha are lost, then I never deserved to be leader in the first place. It’s not as if I can live forever.”

“No, obviously not. But... Do you have to leave now? Can’t it wait?”

Madara’s gaze was far away. “No. I have something in me, something I can’t explain, and I need to get it out. I don’t want them to see me like this.”

Gendoru sighed and, despite his wariness, he put a heavy hand on Madara’s shoulder. “I’m truly sorry about Izuna. He was a good man and a better fighter. I suppose even you deserve to mourn in your own way.”

Madara closed his eyes. “Thank you.”

Gendoru nodded and turned to leave.

“Gendoru, don’t let Yurima out of your sight.”

Gendoru snorted. “Don’t have to tell me twice. I wipe my ass with his type.”

Madara chuckled, and Gendoru left him in peace.

In a week’s time, Hashirama, Mito, and Madara were ready to start their hunt for the nine Bijuu. Ensui had prepared a barge for their passage back to the mainland. Once the rest of the Senju and Uchiha clans had recovered from the most recent battle, they, too, would return to the mainland and resume their lives as shinobi for hire until the day their leaders returned. All three clans had gathered to see the departure and wish them well.

Whispers among Senju, Uchiha, and Uzumaki about the Bijuu spread like wildfire. Was it even possible to tame the legendary beasts? Did they even really exist? What would happen once they were caught? Questions abounded without answers, and for the first time since the attack on
Uzushiogakure four years ago, it seemed all were eager to engage with one another on the subject.

Hashirama had formally left Tobirama and Sasuke in charge, the former to keep the Senju under control and the latter to ensure Tobirama didn’t do anything to antagonize the Uchiha in the process. They stood side by side now with Gendoru and Yurima, the appointed interim leaders of the Uchiha clan in Madara’s absence. Gendoru only hoped Madara wouldn’t be gone long.

Yurima looked as regal and unapproachable as ever with his silver hair hanging loose over his shoulders and his severe gaze following the barge as it sailed west.

“Quite the show of solidarity, wouldn’t you say?” Yurima said.

Tobirama side-eyed him. “That’s one way to look at it.”

Sasuke grinned. “Well, if anyone can stop the Bijuu, it’s those three. I’d say that’s a morale booster for everyone.”

“Indeed,” Yurima said.

“Well, that’s it,” Tobirama said. “They’re gone, and we’re still here.”

“Yeah, and why don’t we all shake on it? We’ll be seein’ a lot of each other until they get back,” Sasuke said.

“An excellent idea,” Yurima said. He held out his hand to Tobirama.

For a moment, Tobirama looked like he might slap the man, but he reluctantly shook Yurima’s hand. “I’m sure we’ll get along just great.”

“I’m sure we will.”

Once everyone had had the opportunity to shake hands, Tobirama and Sasuke left. Gendoru and Yurima stuck around and oversaw the rest of the shinobi dispersing back to their assigned quarters.

“That could have gone much worse,” Gendoru allowed.

“Yes, it could have. I think we have much to look forward to.”

Gendoru walked with Yurima along the shoreline. The rocks crunched underfoot, a pleasant sound and feel. “I didn’t see Goro or Risa in the crowd.”

“I imagine they were otherwise detained.”

Gendoru said nothing to that. It wasn’t his place to question Madara’s wishes or how they were carried out. Still, he gripped the hilt of his sword just a little more firmly. Midnight assassinations were not the Uchiha way.

Footsteps behind them drew his attention. Kasumi had run to catch up with them, and she was out of breath.

“Father, please, was I too late? Are they gone already?” she said.

Yurima went to his daughter’s side and took her elbow. She was still in her mourning clothes, but her hair was loose and long as though she hadn’t had time to put it up and rushed out in a hurry.

“The barge left, Kasumi. Why?” Yurima said.
“Oh no, I waited to long! I should’ve said something sooner. Oh no, oh no!”

Gendoru frowned at her distress. “My Lady, what’s the matter? Did you have business with Madara?”

Kasumi was on the verge of tears as she clung to her father’s yukata.

“Kasumi? What’s the matter?” Yurima asked. “What’s going on?”

“I...”

Yurima pulled her hands off of him and held her wrists in his hands as he searched her eyes. “Tell me. What are you keeping?”

Kasumi bit her lip and looked between Gendoru and him. Her tears began to fall. “I’m sorry, Father, I was so afraid, and I didn’t know how to tell you. I wanted to say something, but I didn’t know how.”

“Kasumi, I order you to speak. Now.”

She took a shaky breath. “I... I’m with child.”

To his credit, Yurima didn’t bat an eyelash. “Whose child?”

She averted her gaze, and he shook her by the wrists.

“Answer me when I speak to you. Whose child are you carrying?”

Kasumi looked up at him. Her bottom lip shook in grief and fear. “Izuna. It’s Izuna’s child.”

Gendoru gaped in shock, and words were lost to him. The barge carrying Madara away was no bigger than a thumbnail against the horizon now. Kasumi was weeping and telling her father about how much she and Izuna had been in love, how he’d asked her to marry him, how she’d wanted to surprise him with her pregnancy after the attack on the Senju camp.

Her cries faded against the roar of the whirlpools, and soon Madara’s ship was no longer visible on the horizon.

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